“And she loved brown people”: 
Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff’s Affirmation of 
Arab Jewish Identity in Jacob’s Ladder

by Joyce Zonana

I begin this essay about Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff’s neglected 1951 Egyptian Jewish American autobiographical novel Jacob’s Ladder with a small incident from my own Egyptian Jewish American childhood. I was eight years old, visiting my mother’s relatives in São Paulo with my mother and brother. While my parents and I had immigrated to the United States from Cairo early in 1951 when I was eighteen months old, the extended family—my mother’s parents, younger sister, and two brothers—had remained in Egypt until 1956, when, along with so many others, they hastily left their homeland in the wake of the Tri-Partite Invasion (the “Suez Crisis,” during which England, France, and Israel attacked Egypt in response to Gamal Abdel Nasser’s nationalization of the Suez Canal). Unable to obtain visas to enter the US, they settled in Brazil. Now, in the spring of 1958, we were with them on a long-anticipated lengthy visit.

Living with my relatives in São Paulo allowed me to rediscover the milieu my family had left behind in Cairo: the sweet circle of women and children sewing and cooking and laughing together, the bold gestures and loud talk of the men who joined us daily for lunch and dinner after their forays into the city. I marveled at it all, soaking in the wild mix of languages—English, French, Italian, Arabic, Portuguese—and the happy interplay of generations. Spending time with my elderly grandparents was especially precious: I loved to watch as my nearly blind Nonna gracefully peeled onions, to stand beside my gentle Nonno as he meticulously sorted stamps for his voluminous collection.
Most thrilling of all, though, was the week I spent with my mother, aunt, cousins and brother in Santos, the seaside resort a few hours from São Paulo. My mother was at her most relaxed, happy to be in the sun with her sister. Over and over, the two women delighted to note how the town’s curving corniche resembled the one in Alexandria, how their children’s carefree days on the beach reminded them of their own summers at Ras-el-Bar in the Nile Delta. With my brother and my cousins, I swam and walked and played in the sand, buoyed by an unaccustomed sense of freedom and safety.

The shock came when we returned to São Paulo, just as we were settling down for lunch in my aunt’s large apartment. As I entered the room, dressed in a short skirt, eager to tell my grandfather about our beach holiday, he pointed at my knees and told my mother that I must wash them. How could she let her daughter come to the table with dirty knees? Humiliated, I retreated to the bathroom and scrubbed my knees with a stiff cloth. When I returned, my grandfather again pointed to my knees and addressed my mother in French: “Elle est sale!—She is filthy!” Roughly, I scrubbed myself again. To no avail. When I re-entered the dining room, my grandfather exploded: “Elle a l’air Arabe—She looks Arab!” he berated my mother. “You should not have allowed her to spend so much time in the sun!”

“Elle a l’air Arabe!” The words stunned and mystified me. Why was it bad to look Arab? Today I understand that my grandfather saw my sun-browned skin as a challenge to his effort to have our Middle Eastern Jewish family pass as European—in Brazil as well as in Egypt. But in 1958, at the age of eight, all I knew was that I should somehow be ashamed that I looked Arab, and that to be Arab was to be dark, dirty, and outcast—barred from the family table. And yet, this was the same family that relished Arabic food, spoke words of endearment and entreaty in Arabic, swooned and sometimes even danced to the rhythms of Arabic music. What was wrong with looking Arab if one in fact stemmed from an Arab country?

The term “Arab Jew” has been most memorably explored and affirmed by Ella Habiba Shohat in her 1992 essay “Dislocated Identities: Reflections of an Arab Jew” though that term—or its interesting and perhaps more accurate analogue, “Jewish Arab”—has been claimed (and contested) by many writers and scholars before and after. In her brief autobiographical essay, Shohat calls into question the Eurocentric, Zionist opposition of Arab and Jew, noting that “Americans are often amazed to discover the existentially nauseating or charmingly exotic” (8) possibilities of what they had previously considered to be an oxymoron. Because of this reaction, she writes, Oriental—Mizrahi
and Sephardi—Jews are subject to a “profound and visceral schizophrenia” (8). Elsewhere, Shohat carefully analyzes the “lethal binarisms” (Taboo Memories 332) that set Arab against Jew, as she explores the “physical, political, and cultural rupture” (334) that has elided the “embeddedness of Jewish life in . . . Muslim culture” (343). Similarly, David Shasha, editor of the online Sephardic Heritage Update, has devoted an entire issue to the term. “If Jews cannot be Arabs,” Shasha asks, “what happens to our culture?”

Our food, our music, our religion . . . is all predicated on the foundation of Judaism . . . but also on the civilization created after the Muslim conquests. Once the Arab substrate is eliminated, all we have is a Judaism that has lost Maimonides, Moses Ibn Ezra, and Israel Najara. (9)

Jews from the Middle East have much to gain in reclaiming their Arab identity and heritage, and Europeanized Jews, including Americans, have much to learn from Arab-Jews. Jacqueline Kahanoff, I will argue here, is one of our best teachers.

Many writers about Egyptian Jewish society in the twentieth century have noted the complex identities of Jews living in Cairo and Alexandria, where—before 1948—the opposition was not so much between “Jew” and “Arab” as between “European”—or “foreign,” “Western,” and “modern”—and “Egyptian,” “native,” “Eastern,” and “traditional.” Ultimately, within this context, many Egyptian Jews came to identify themselves as Western. Nevertheless, Jacques Hassoun, an Egyptian Jew who immigrated to France in 1954, insists that “the Jews of Egypt should not be indexed with a singular definite article” (172), noting that they had

to cope with the contradictions of belonging to two worlds. Caught in this duality, they appeared to exclaim, like Abdallah al-Yahudi, the beggar of Tatwig Street in Alexandria: “See my galabia, I am Egyptian! See my jacket, I am European!” (169)

Among Egyptian Jewish writers living in the US and writing in English, Andre Aciman, Gini Alhadeff, Lucette Lagnado, Jean Naggar, Colette Rossant, and Joyce Zonana have all explored the ways in which Jews in Egypt saw themselves as both European and Arab or Egyptian. Jean Naggar, who grew up in one of Cairo’s wealthiest Jewish families thinking of herself as Italian, maintains that the “language that meant home,” “what most defined my childhood self,” was Arabic (366–67). Similarly, Lucette Lagnado, in The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit, records her father’s heartbreaking lament, “‘Ragaouna Masr’—
Take us back to Cairo” (163), as their ship leaves Alexandria in 1963. Later, resisting a New York Ashkenazi social worker’s efforts to have him conform to Western norms, Lagnado’s father proudly affirms, “We are Arab, madame” (207). Yet for Lagnado’s mother, “To compare someone to an Arab peasant was her most searing put-down” (228–29).

Liliane S. Dammond’s *The Lost World of the Egyptian Jews: First Person Accounts from Egypt’s Jewish Community in the Twentieth Century* offers numerous examples of these divergent and at times conflicting Egyptian Jewish identities. One woman, whose family of Greek descent lived in Alexandria, recalls, “In Egypt, we considered ourselves European. At home we all spoke French, sometimes English, but no Arabic. . . . There was no great need to speak Arabic” (65). In contrast, a woman with Syrian ancestors reports, “We always spoke Arabic at home” (260); “We lived like sisters and brothers with our Muslim neighbors” (263).

Most recently, Andre Aciman’s novel *Harvard Square* explores in detail the conflicted identity of a young Egyptian Jewish graduate student in the United States. Set in Cambridge, Massachusetts, during the summer and fall of 1977, ten years after the Six Day War and concurrent with Anwar Sadat’s historic visit to Israel, *Harvard Square* details the brief but intense friendship between its diffident graduate student narrator and a volatile and voluble Tunisian Muslim cabdriver named Kalaj. Viewing Kalaj as his “blood brother,” the narrator is drawn to him by their common North African background and affiliation to France (127). Yet he worries that their friendship might compromise his efforts to pass—as an American and as a PhD candidate—at Harvard, and he vacillates between fully embracing his Arab double and rejecting him. In the end, the desire to get ahead triumphs; even while feeling “unbearable shame and unbearable sorrow” (279), the narrator abandons his “dearest soul” (277) just on the verge of Kalaj’s deportation from the US. Clearly the narrator’s betrayal of Kalaj is a self-betrayal, yet it is the choice upon which his American identity is built. In this deeply disturbing novel, Aciman offers us a parable of assimilation, showing us the cost—and the reward—of an Egyptian Jewish American man’s decision not to acknowledge his Arab self.

Yet what Aciman’s novel does not reveal—and what none of the other Egyptian Jewish American works offer either—is the historical grounding for the conflicted identities they portray. Liliane Dammond’s collection of oral histories goes further than the memoirs and novels in offering a nuanced picture of Egyptian Jewish life in the early twentieth century, but the stories she transcribes are brief and fragmentary. For a full portrait of what Jacqueline
Kahanoff called “one of the most complex and interesting” (“Culture” 118) Jewish communities in the world, we must turn to her autobiographical novel *Jacob’s Ladder*. Devoted to telling “our own story, in our own words” (“Culture” 118), Kahanoff’s novel—published simultaneously in the US and in England—is the first full-length Egyptian Jewish work published in the United States, appearing well before the memoirs and novels produced by a later generation of Egyptian Jews, most of whose narratives are colored by their experiences of Arab nationalism and anti-Zionism in an Egypt transformed by the creation of Israel in 1948 and the Free Officers’ Revolution in Egypt in 1952.

Born in 1917 into an upper-middle-class Jewish family in Cairo, Jacqueline Kahanoff was educated at the French Mission Laique School in Cairo. Her primary language was French, though she acquired “an excellent command of English from her early exposure to the language at the hands of her British nanny and governess” (Starr and Somekh xiv). From an early age, she chafed against the limitations of her family’s “minority framework”; as a high school student, she was drawn to Marxism, aligning herself with Egyptian nationalism and striving “towards something universal” (“Childhood in Egypt” 11). In 1940, at the age of 22, she married and left Egypt for the US, “the gate to freedom,” hoping to be able to write “from afar” about the Egypt she both “loved and hated” (“Europe” 112). Kahanoff lived in the US for ten years, earning a master’s degree in journalism at Columbia University and studying at the New School. Although she had published a few sketches while an adolescent in Egypt, “it was in America that [she] received encouragement” (“Culture” 117), winning second prize in a short story contest sponsored by the *Atlantic Monthly* and earning a fellowship from Houghton Mifflin to complete *Jacob’s Ladder*. In 1954, after a few years in Paris, she moved to Israel, where she became known for her work celebrating Levantinism in opposition to mainstream Ashkenazi Israeli denigration of Sephardi/Mizrahi Jewish identity. Throughout her career, Kahanoff wrote in English, having her works translated into Hebrew for publication in Israel. She died of cancer in Israel in 1979, where, according to Deborah Starr and Sasson Somekh, the editors of an important collection of her writings, she continues to be considered an important public intellectual (xii–xiii)—although Shohat, in a private communication, reminds us that she was never seen as a critical or radical Mizrahi voice.

Kahanoff has been both praised and blamed for her formulation and promulgation of Levantine identity, defined as “a potentially successful cross-breed of two or more cultures . . . able to fuse elements of various civilizations into new dynamic patterns, characteristic of the Middle Eastern people”
On the one hand, Ktsiaa Alon celebrates her for depicting “multiculturalism in all its glory,” and Ammiel Alcalay uses her as a key figure in his arguments for a native Arab Jewish identity in opposition to the “modern myth of the Jew as pariah, outsider, and wanderer” and the “postmodern myth of the Jews as ‘other’” (1). On the other hand, this very postulation of a Middle Eastern “space in which the Jew was native, not a stranger” (1) has been seen as authorizing Israeli Jewish colonialism vis-à-vis Palestinian Christians and Muslims. Gil Z. Hochberg, for example, claims that Kahanoff’s essays elide the Arabic language and thus her Arab identity, enabling her to become “a colonizing Israeli” despite her initial position in Israel as a “colonized Arab-Jew” (240); Starr and Somekh, even while making Kahanoff’s essays and short fiction available in English for the first time, fault her for a “disconnect from Arab culture” (xxv), and appear to dismiss Jacob’s Ladder as a work reflecting “an innocence, nostalgia, and touch of the exotic” (xix).

While I cannot hope to settle the debate about Kahanoff in this essay, what I hope to show is that her representation of native Middle Eastern Jewishness and Arabness is far more nuanced than both her advocates and her critics contend. A close reading of Jacob’s Ladder, which was published under her maiden name, Jacqueline Shohet, reveals a writer bravely struggling to come to terms with the contradictions within her society, exploring the self-division and even self-betrayal at its heart. Her autobiographical novel takes us deeply into the consciousness of a sensitive child working to make sense of her family, her city, her country, and her religion. And while most of the Egyptian Jewish American memoirs and fictions we have focus on the 1940s or the first decades after the Egyptian Revolution in 1952, supporting what Mark R. Cohen has called the “neo-lachrymose conception of Jewish-Arab history,” or what Shohat (Taboo Memories) previously termed the “master narrative of universal Jewish victimization” (215), Jacob’s Ladder offers an intimate look at Egypt between the two world wars, when the Jewish community flourished.

Kahanoff puts the issue of European versus Arab or Middle Eastern identity for the Jews of Egypt at the very center of her novel. The story she tells is not always a pretty one, revealing as it does the racism and elitism that marked certain portions of the Egyptian Jewish community in the early twentieth century. And Kahanoff paid the price for telling it. Writing in 1973, she recalls that Jacob’s Ladder upset her parents “immensely,” largely because it was so “sociologically honest” (“Culture” 118). As a consequence, she “never finished another book” (118). Out of print and completely obscure in the US—I could not find a single copy in any of New York City’s public or university
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...libraries and had to order my edition from a used bookseller in England—it has only recently (2014) been translated into Hebrew and published in Israel.

*Jacob’s Ladder* places us directly into the consciousness of an Egyptian Jewish girl, Rachel Gaon, following her from 1919, when she is five years old, until 1929, when she is fifteen. As such, it is a coming-of-age story, an autobiographical *Bildungsroman,* with all the virtues (directness, honesty) and many of the flaws (overwriting, shapelessness) of that genre. Rachel’s mother, Alice Smadja, is the daughter of a Jewish merchant from Tunis; her father, David Gaon, is the son of a Jewish merchant from Baghdad. In these particulars, Rachel’s family makeup echoes that of Kahanoff, whose maternal grandparents, the Chemlas, immigrated from Tunisia, and whose paternal grandparents, the Shohets, came from Baghdad. The Smadjas and the Gaons, like the Chemlas and the Shohets, are typical of the many Jewish families who, in the latter half of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century, moved to Egypt from various places in the Ottoman Empire (along with smaller numbers from Europe and Russia), seeking economic opportunity and—in some cases—greater political freedom.

As numerous scholars have pointed out, three key factors transformed Egypt in the second half of the nineteenth century into “a new Eldorado” (Barda 75) especially welcoming to new immigrants: the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, the British occupation of the country in 1882, and the rapid development of the cotton industry. Drawing on the work of Joel Beinin, Gudrun Kramer, Jacob Landau, and Michael Laskier, Rachel Barda estimates that while in 1798, at the time of Napoleon’s invasion, some six or seven thousand mostly indigenous Jews lived in Egypt, by 1882, after the *jizya* tax was abolished in 1855, thirty thousand Jews lived in the country. The numbers continued to increase dramatically: by 1918 there were sixty thousand, and in 1947, there were some seventy or seventy-five thousand (78). The influx of Jews to Egypt was part of a much larger wave of immigration: while there might have been 15,000 foreigners in Egypt in the 1850s, by the 1880s their numbers had grown to 100,000; after World War I, there were more than 200,000 (74).

What these new immigrants found in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Egypt was a nation eager to modernize, turning to France and England for expertise and guidance. Muhammad Ali, who ruled the country from 1805 to 1849, had decreed “that all outward manifestations of xenophobia were to be suppressed” (Barda 74). Sumptuary laws and social restrictions governing minority groups were abolished, and foreigners were protected by his enforcement of the “capitulations,” ancient Ottoman regulations that gave special
economic and legal privileges to foreigners. As Barda puts it, “for reasons of personal safety, economic privileges, and social standing, the status of foreigner became a very desirable commodity, and Jews and non-Jews alike sought it very actively” (74). In 1882, British troops arrived in Egypt, quashing a nationalist military rebellion that had sought to eliminate foreign influence in the country; from that point onward until after World War II, the country was in effect governed by Great Britain. Although the formal British Protectorate, established at the start of World War I in 1914, was abolished in 1922, the British still retained control of the Suez Canal, Sudan, and the military, assuming responsibility for the “protection” of foreigners and local minorities, including Jews (84). Thus, although Jews had long lived and flourished in Egypt, conditions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries encouraged the immigration of Jews from elsewhere, many of whom turned towards Europe for cultural identification.

While both sides of young Rachel’s family are Arabic-speaking Jews from the Ottoman Empire who moved to Cairo in the late nineteenth century in order to take advantage of its economic and social opportunities, Kahanoff draws sharp distinctions between the Tunisian and Baghdadi branches of the family, a distinction that at times collapses into a conflict between the child’s mother and father, and sometimes even into conventionally “feminine” and conventionally “masculine” ways of being in the world. Although Starr and Somekh claim that Rachel’s conflict with her British governess, Miss Nutting, is the “primary” conflict in the novel (xix), I argue that it is instead the conflict between the Smadjas and the Gaons, who represent two different ways of being Jewish in Egypt—one foreign or “European,” the other native Middle Eastern or “Arab.” The blue-eyed, fair-haired, and fair-skinned Tunisian Smadjas, living in Cairo’s elegant European downtown, are an emotional, voluble, sometimes chaotic, not particularly observant clan, descended from two brothers, Nathan and Joseph, who “had climbed out unaided from the squalor of the Tunisian mellah,” the walled Jewish quarter in Tunis (Jacob’s Ladder 24–25). In contrast, the dark-skinned, dark-eyed, dark-haired Gaons, severe and restrained in their adherence to Jewish tradition, live on a “narrow lane” in an older, more traditional Cairo neighborhood, a place steeped in “timelessness,” where “grave voices” exchange greetings of peace in Arabic, and where no woman—Jewish or Muslim—walks out in public without being draped in a habbara—a full-length robe and head covering (3).

Rachel’s maternal grandmother, Hnina, is descended from Italian Jews who settled in Tunis. Her grandfather Nathan (referred to by the Italian
endearment, “Nonino”), is a “florid” (22), affable man, a department store owner who enjoys an easy camaraderie with everyone he meets, and who throws the pits of olives—which he eats with relish—into the Chinese vases on the dining room sideboard. Yet Nathan’s youngest daughter, Sandra, at twelve, is already ashamed of her father.

When she married and had her own home, she would not allow people to do such things, nor to yell from one room to another. Throwing herself on her bed, she began to read a French novel, longing for the elegant world it described. (29–30)

Alice, Rachel’s mother, is Nathan’s oldest daughter. She, too, is “intoxicated by French culture” (“Culture” 123), returning from a visit to Paris with a “case of books” (Jacob’s Ladder 113), and often represented as avidly reading Proust.

While Nathan and his brother Joseph are illiterate, Alice and Sandra are the product of colonial French schools that shaped the values and aspirations of so many North Africans seeking admission into the middle classes of their countries. And although that education at times causes his daughters to be ashamed of him, Nathan—whose memory of the mellah remains vivid—supports their new refinements: “Why shouldn’t our children live like educated people?” he asks. “Did we give our girls a good schooling for them to live like Hara Jews?” (211). Nathan here uses the term hara—literally meaning ‘neighborhood’ in Arabic—as a stand-in for Haret-el-Yahud, the traditional Jewish neighborhood in Cairo, where many lower-class Jews still lived in the early twentieth-century.

In her portrayal of the Smadja family, Kahanoff is faithful to what is known about the Jews of Tunis. Toward the end of the novel, Rachel’s grandmother Hnina explains that in Tunis, there were three classes of Jews:

the Tunis, who are the natives, the Granas, who came from Spain long ago, and the Ghornayim, the most refined and wealthy, who were treated as Europeans, not as natives. They looked down upon the Tunis, although they do it less today, now that everyone gets a French education. (344)

Hnina’s classification of Tunisian Jews accords with what contemporary sociologists and historians have ascertained about the Twansa, with ancestors in Tunisia for centuries or millennia; the Grana, whose ancestors fled Spain or Portugal during the Inquisition; and the New Livournai, who arrived in the nineteenth century and were treated as Europeans (Walters 261–62). The
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Twansa and the Grana tended to live in the gated mellah, “a crowded, miserable world cut off from a frightening exterior . . . in a universe apart, on the one hand rich and reassuring, based on an illusion of protection in its isolation, and on the other, deeply shameful, since it expressed the misery of its inhabitants” (Guy Degas, as cited in Barbe 110).

Albert Memmi, a Tunisian Jew born in 1920, has given us unforgettable images of what he has termed the “terrors of the ghetto” (94) in Tunis, images that help us to understand why Nathan Smadja and his daughters would want to distance themselves from it. Interestingly, Memmi uses the European term, “ghetto,” to name the mellah, although North African Jewish quarters did not typically conform to the European conception of the “ghetto.” Still, in his autobiographical novel The Pillar of Salt, Memmi writes of the mellah’s “offensive stink,” “foul fluids,” and “mountains of garbage where the sunlight hatched swarms of green and black flies” (20). More importantly, he details the devastating social consequences of coming from the mellah. Thus his fictional persona, Alexandre Mridakh Benichou, explains why he has dropped his Hebrew middle name:

In this country, Mridakh is as obstinately revealing as if one shouted out: “I’m a Jew!” More precisely: “My home is in the ghetto,” “my legal status is native African,” “I come from an Oriental background,” “I’m poor.” But I had learned to reject these four classifications. It would be easy to reproach me for this, and I have not failed to blame myself. But how is it possible not to be ashamed of one’s condition when one has experienced scorn, mockery, or sympathy for it since childhood? (94)

What is crucial here is that Memmi’s protagonist disavows his “native” self not because of persecution by Muslims, but in the context of a French colonial society that has taught him to be ashamed of his origins. Similarly, Nathan Smadja rejects these four classifications—ghetto, native, Oriental, poor (we might add here “Arab”—and works to give his daughters and grandchildren in Cairo the advantages he did not have in Tunis.

Chief among those advantages is the speaking of French rather than Arabic. Tunisia became a French colony in 1881, and by 1896 all education in Tunisia was conducted in French. But even before that, in 1878 and 1882 the Alliance Israëlite Universelle established its first schools in Tunis for boys and girls, respectively. The Alliance Israëlite Universelle, founded in Paris in 1860, had taken upon itself the task of promoting “the emancipation and the moral progress of Jews” around the world. As Keith Walters puts it, the AIU
Tunisian Jews—and particularly women—took readily to the education provided by the AIU, finding in the acquisition of French what Pierre Bourdieu has defined as symbolic, cultural, and even economic capital (Walters 271). Speaking French became one of the quickest ways out of the mellah of the mind. Again, as Rachel’s grandmother Hnina puts it, “now that everyone gets a French education” (Jacob’s Ladder 344), all Jews are less likely to be scorned.

In contrast to the Smadjas, Rachel’s paternal grandparents, Jacob and Hattouna Gaon, remain as proud speakers of “solemn Baghdad Arabic, with its mixture of ancient Persian words” (5). They dress in traditional Arab robes—Jacob in white cotton and Hattouna in gray silk—and husband and wife are never seen in the same room together. In the Gaon home, people eat with their hands, dipping “round flat wheel[s] of warm whole-wheat bread,” into bowls and scooping out the food (66). We may note the contrast here with Edward Said’s recollection of a “Europeanized Eastern Jew” at Cairo’s Victoria College who berates an Armenian boy for dipping his bread into gravy: “Ne mange pas comme les Arabes” (184). Struck by the severe grace and purity of her grandparents’ home and garden, “overflowing with jasmine and honeysuckle,” Rachel thinks of Jacob and Hattouna as a “king” and “queen” (Jacob’s Ladder 63). Writing about her own paternal grandparents in a later essay, Kahanoff recalls that they “were the only people I knew who were in total harmony with themselves, inwardly and outwardly, who accepted themselves as they were and did not want to be other than they were” (“Childhood” 4).

Indeed, as Joel Beinin writes in his “Foreword” to Nessim Rejwan’s The Last Jews in Baghdad: Remembering a Lost Homeland, “Nowhere were Jews more deeply rooted and culturally assimilated than in the Tigris-Euphrates valley,” where they lived for centuries in “profound . . . symbiosis” with their neighbors (xi). Rejwan’s memoir, with its celebration of Jewish life in Baghdad, stands in sharp opposition to Memmi’s recollections of life in Tunis. Calling early twentieth-century Baghdad a “Jewish city,” Rejwan insists that in Baghdad, “the Jew-Arab opposition we constantly encounter today was never used either in writing or in daily discourse” (7), and he demonstrates his thorough integration into the larger community’s life even while maintaining his Jewishness.
The Gaon sons—Moses, David, and Samuel—speak French, having been educated at the AIU school established in Baghdad in 1864. But because, as Beinin points out, “the Jewish communities in Baghdad rejected the Alliance’s policy of adopting French as the sole language of instruction” (xiii), they do not give up their first language, Arabic. Rachel’s father, David, having mastered the dialects of village chiefs throughout Egypt to whom he sells the imported textiles of the House of Gaon, remains more comfortable in Arabic than in French. Thus he worries about his ability to communicate with his daughter: “A native tongue was like a home, he thought sadly, and his Semitic heart lived in exile, unable to find the fitting French expression” (Jacob’s Ladder 12).

Unlike the Smadjas, recently emerged from the mellah and ashamed of their origins, the Gaons proudly look back to a long tradition of success in Baghdad, to a golden age when the Jews thrived under the caliphate. Their name, “Gaon,” which means “excellency” in Hebrew, is “the title accorded to the Jewish spiritual leaders and scholars who headed Talmudic academies that flourished, with lengthy interruptions, from the 7th to the 13th century in Babylonia and Palestine” (“Gaon”). Indeed, when she is twelve, Rachel learns from her father that:

The name “Gaon” was handed down from those who had founded in Baghdad the university to which Jews from all over the Diaspora came to receive instruction; thus they, the Gaons, had helped to preserve the unity of Israel. (Jacob’s Ladder 349)

Rachel contrasts the rich history of her father’s family with the French history inculcated by her teachers: “At school, she had been taught to say, ‘Nos ancetres les Gaulois’, and had had doubts about her ancestors because they were not Gauls” (349). Now she knows that “she would rather be a Gaon than a Gaul” (349). But this knowledge—like Frantz Fanon’s ability to break his identification with “the civilizing colonizer” after also having constantly recited “our ancestors the Gauls” (126) as a child—is hard-won.

Not surprisingly, the marriage between David Gaon and Alice Smadja is replete with tensions—tensions that begin even before the wedding. Vainly, Alice tries to keep herself from thinking about “the cultured young architect with whom she had been so nearly in love”; ruefully, she recalls that she had been “too shy, too proud, to wangle invitations to balls where she would have met him” (51). David, “handsome, generous, and kind,” reminds her of “Arabian Nights’ merchants,” while she would have preferred “princes of the Contes de Perrault” variety (51). In their daughter Rachel, Alice recognizes that
David has given her “something as fine as Hattouna’s Eastern brocades”; still, like a French couturier, she wants to fashion the child “into a model of Parisian elegance” (51) with European language and European manners. Although David insists that his own mother, Hattouna, without any formal education, has “manners, the only kind that matter” (116), Alice ignores him. “It’s that French literature which poisons our lives” (207), David remarks bitterly at one point.

When Rachel is five, at the opening of the novel, her parents travel to England for several months in order to negotiate between David’s father, Jacob, and his oldest son, Moses. In England, Alice feels “clumsy and unsure” (85) of herself, imagining that people are laughing at her. She resolves that her daughter must have an English nurse, and later an English governess, so that she will never experience the same discomfort. A French education is not enough: since the British are ruling Egypt and setting the standards for high culture, Alice wants her daughter to have “the best advantages,” in order to “defend [herself] in the modern world” (116). David protests, fearing that the entire family will be subject to “the contemptuous eyes of a stranger” (113), but Alice, enlisting the support of David’s brother, prevails. Their daughter, as if in illustration of Bourdieu’s concept of embodied cultural capital, will learn to “speak English without a trace of an English accent, without Arabic words creeping in” (170).

To Alice’s chagrin, and to the reader’s amused delight, the nurse she hires—Miss O’Brien, called “Nanny”—is Irish rather than English, and understandably less strict in enforcing British superiority to natives than Alice might wish. When Miss O’Brien first arrives in Egypt, she faithfully follows Alice’s instructions and the advice of the other nurses, keeping Rachel away from “all that smacked of native life” (167), covering her face with a veil and making sure that everything she touches is disinfected. For Rachel, who wants to “roam about, to talk to people” (165), “to see things in their real colours,” and to breathe “even the bad smell of animal droppings” (164), Nanny’s restrictions feel “like punishments, worse than being spanked or standing in a corner” (165).

To her credit, Miss O’Brien recognizes the cruelty of the regime she is responsible for enforcing, and eventually she tries to temper her employer’s demand, though she succeeds only in alienating Alice, preparing the way for her replacement by the very proper, very strict, and truly cruel English governess, Miss Nutting. The damage has been done. Under Nanny’s tutelage—and even more so under Miss Nutting—Rachel comes to see the world as divided into “pink” and “brown” people. The “pink” people who speak English are allied against the “brown,” among whom she counts herself and a young Egyptian
beggar with whom she has come to identify (167). Even as a child, Rachel recognizes that the distinction is not exactly about skin color, though she still uses it as a signifier for the contrasts she sees in her society.

Nonino and Aunt Renee’s skin were fairer than Nanny’s but it wasn’t the same thing, they must be brown inside, and she loved brown people, not the pink and pale ones. (167)

The “pink and pale ones” are the “governesses, British soldiers and policemen, neither man nor woman, but authority, discipline, jails, barracks, all that civilized the life out of people and turned them into joyless, well-behaved automatons” (359). Refusing to be ashamed of her brown, native self, Rachel resists, imagining “huge counter-crusades, during which her world invaded” the pink one, and “utterly destroyed it” (359).

These fantasies lead her to be pleased when she encounters rioters shouting “Independence! Freedom for Saad Zaghloul!” the leader of Egypt’s nationalist Wafd Party, demanding independence from Great Britain. She longs to “rush along with them, smashing things, even though her father had said blood would flow in the streets of Egypt if the British went away” (222). Later, braving the reproofs of her brother and Miss Nutting, she actually joins her voice to those of a group of rioters who are passing her Garden City home, throwing flowers and shouting with them, “Egypt for the Egyptians” (364).

Rachel’s healing antidote to the pink people who want to rule her and other Egyptians comes in the form of Amina, the Syrian Christian wet nurse Alice hires for her son Daniel, born when Rachel is seven. In Amina’s generous brown breasts and regal bearing, Rachel finds the maternal warmth and self-acceptance her own mother has failed to provide. Drawn to Amina’s “splendid abundance” (182), Rachel sits at her feet in quiet “adoration” (183). Amina, she decides, is “like the Arab women, like the rose and the jasmine” (184) that flower in her paternal grandparents’ garden. Amina becomes for Rachel a symbol of Egypt as nurturing mother—“um al-duniya, the ‘mother of the world’” (Ghosh 80)—capable of absorbing and reconciling all differences.

At the beach in Alexandria, Rachel succumbs to this fantasy of peace.

Amina and the beach were one. The soft warm sand was like the comfort of her breast . . . and the sea . . . was like a mother gathering her children. There was about the sea and beach the same mystery that radiated from Amina’s full brown body, and Rachel surrendered to the sensuous joy, snug against the sand, her eyes closed, lulled to half-sleep by the murmur of the waves. (Jacob’s Ladder 202)
Rachel’s “physical well-being” becomes transmuted into “a finer ecstasy” in which “all sounds blended into one harmony, all colors dissolved into light” (203).

Given Rachel’s identification with “brown” rather than “pink” people, with Egypt rather than with the occupying British, with Amina rather than with Alice, it is not surprising that her first Passover—the Jewish celebration of the ancient Hebrews’ departure from Egypt—should provoke complex feelings. Passover of course figures prominently in the memoirs and fictions of other Egyptian Jews. Jean Naggar recalls that as a privileged child in Egypt, she viewed the Haggadah as a “fairy tale” that “held no actual relevance” (49) for her. Still, she pointedly uses the ancient Hebrews’ trials in Egypt as a symbol for what happens to her own family during the Tripartite Invasion. In Out of Egypt, on the eve of his family’s reluctant departure from Alexandria in 1967, fourteen-year-old Andre Aciman refuses to read aloud from the Haggadah. When an aunt asks him, “What kind of Jews are we?” he answers bluntly: “The kind who don’t celebrate leaving Egypt when it’s the last thing they want to do” (333). Similarly, Lucette Lagnado—even while branding Nasser as a “modern-day pharaoh” (259)—admits that “no matter how loudly we sang” during her exiled family’s Passover Seder in Brooklyn, “our holiday had become not a celebration of the Exodus from Egypt but the inverse—a longing to return to the place we were supposedly glad to have left” (263). In my own memoir, I write of my difficulty reconciling two images of Egypt: the “place of oppression and pain” fled by the ancient Hebrews or the place of “sunshine and ease” reluctantly left by my parents (Dream Homes 88). It is only Kahanoff who makes the deeper connection, refusing to separate Jewish from Egyptian suffering.

For Rachel, who celebrates her first Passover when she is eight at the home of her paternal grandparents, the holiday grants her entrance into both the past and the present of her Egyptian Jewish identity, creating a link between them. As she learns biblical history from her father in the days before the holiday, she marvels that “she, and so many in her family, bore the names of their ancestors, and were here, in this same Egypt where some of these events had occurred” (Jacob’s Ladder 231). Rachel lives the Passover story “not as a tale of long ago, but as a miracle which was happening to her here, now” (236).

Below her window flowed the River Nile, lined with the reeds among which Pharaoh’s daughter had found the baby Moses. From her window, she could see the Pyramids . . . [which] became the symbol of her people’s struggle . . . messengers of God’s word. (231)
Previously confused about her Jewish identity when trying to account for it among her Christian schoolmates, Rachel suddenly decides that she is “no longer sorry she was not a Catholic . . . for she knew that when the Messiah came, it would be for them all” (232).

Kahanoff sets Rachel's first Passover at a time when Ramadan, Easter, and the Jewish holiday coincide. The Jewish festival becomes part of a citywide, even national celebration, a symbol of the possibilities of a unified, multiethn- nic, and multi-religious “Egypt for the Egyptians,” recalling her experience of ecstatic harmony at the beach:

In mosque, church, synagogue and home, each lived his own religious passion, but in the streets, people lived in a common frenzy, by which Egypt welded their diversity into a unity peculiar to itself. (235)

Feeling as if she “could burst from the wonder which flowed through her city” (235), Rachel mingles with the colorfully dressed crowds thronging the streets; she revels in the decorated market stalls “bent under the weight of holiday foods’ and filling the air with the aromas of “roasting meat, frying cakes, fruit, spices, and bread fresh from the ovens” (234). In this way, Kahanoff makes of Rachel's first Passover a feast of union rather than of separation, not so much about departure as about arrival. Yet the child Rachel cannot ignore the concrete message of the Haggadah, and—after her ecstatic identification with life in Misr—she is profoundly “shaken by the violence of the Passover ritual” (238). She suffers with the Egyptian firstborn smitten by God's wrath and begs her father to answer her agonized question: “Is it wrong that I should love Egypt as my country?” (239).

That Rachel's distress about the suffering of the ancient Egyptians was in fact Kahanoff's is attested to by the fact that, throughout her writing ca-
reer, Kahanoff returned again and again to the violence against the Egyptians inscribed and celebrated within the Passover liturgy. In “Such Is Rachel,” the award-winning short story she published in Atlantic Monthly in 1946, she puts her distress into the voice of her main character's younger brother: “It’s horrible,” the boy tells his sister, “God couldn't have done those things . . . . it’s all so cruel” (29). Similarly, in an autobiographical essay published in 1959, Kahanoff recalls that as a child, she fantasized about the story having a different ending: “We and the Egyptians would be free together, and no one would set us against each other” (“Childhood” 7).

In “Passover in Egypt,” published in 1965, Kahanoff offers an extended nonfiction account of her response to her first Seder. She recounts how, before
the Seder, her father tells her the story of the ancient Hebrews in Egypt, and Kahanoff wonders:

Were the Arab Egyptians the same as those who lived in Pharaoh's time? They couldn't be, or the Jews would not have returned to Egypt. But if we had made peace, why did Jews still celebrate Passover and pray for the return to the Promised Land? I asked my father questions about it, but his answers weren't clear at all. (15)

Thinking about her friendship with Kadreya, a young Muslim girl, the young Kahanoff wonders: “Was Kadreya my enemy because she was an Egyptian? Or was it different now that Egyptians were Moslems?” (16). Kadreya, when told by Kahanoff the stories about the ancient Egyptians and the ancient Jews, refuses to believe her: “It's not possible,” she protests. “I swear that not my father, or his father, or my grandfather’s grandfather would do such things to your father, his father, or his grandfather’s grandfather. I love you; you are my friend” (16).

Kahanoff assures Kadreya that she loves her too, “but it's all written in a book called the Haggadah. Father also says Palestine is our Promised Land. So perhaps I’m not Egyptian like you” (16). Kadreya sobs, and Kahanoff is distraught. But when she actually attends the Seder, her distress intensifies: “I couldn't tell her about the Ten Plagues that had devastated Egypt. . . . I was also ashamed to tell her that we had returned to Egypt after we had reached the Promised Land” (18). Unable to speak, Kahanoff withdraws from the friendship.

In her very last published piece, “Welcome, Sadat,” Kahanoff once again highlights the significance of the Passover story for her sense of self, claiming that in her earlier representations of the holiday, she had failed fully to reveal the “anxiety, and even the terror” she had experienced in childhood (239).

Most people summon up the “Exodus from Egypt” once a year; I bore it within me every day of the year, riddled with doubts concerning the Lord's grace and love. Why should innocent fellahin have to pay such a heavy price for the Hebrews to be set free, while it was certainly in the Lord's power to demand of Pharaoh to listen to Moses and let the Hebrews go. It seemed to me that the matter was not only cruel but a huge waste. Ever since that first Seder I always made sure not to take part in the saying of the “Ten Plagues,” and when the time came to read out loud Dayenu I would pray silently, “Enough, that's really enough! If only such things would never happen again!” (240)
Viewing Anwar Sadat’s visit to Israel as the fulfillment of a dream, “that this time, in our own time, the end [of the Haggadah] would be different,” Kahanoff celebrates the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel and imagines that now “everything can start . . . anew” (242).

The conclusion of Jacob’s Ladder also represents a new beginning, embodied in a “huge Seder” (422) in which the Gaon and the Smadja families are united for the first time in the home of Rachel’s parents. In the days before the gathering, Alice, who has never hosted a Seder before, finds that she must turn to Ahmed, the Gaons’ longtime servant, for guidance. Because Alice is so flustered, it is fifteen-year-old Rachel who works steadily beside Ahmed, learning “from the old Moslem all that she as a Jewish woman needed to know” (424). The Seder is a great success, resembling, in Rachel’s mind, “a wedding feast, with its wine, its flowers, its promise of a life to come” (426).

But the groundwork for this wedding feast, the true marriage of David and Alice, the Gaon and Smadja ways of viewing the world, had been laid a bit earlier in the novel, during Rachel’s terrible bout with diphtheria. Wracked by fever and close to death, Rachel is anxiously watched over by her parents. To “help her to fight for her life” (335), David ventures in his halting French to tell his daughter the story of his family’s perilous journey by caravan across the desert from Baghdad, when Jacob was sixty. “You are also in our caravan,” David tells Rachel, “and one day you, too, must help to guide it and to protect it from all dangers as your grandfather did” (337). Immensely moved by her father’s narrative, Rachel is calmed, and at last able to sleep, her fever broken. That night she dreams of caravans, winding their way “to a pool of clear water, where the Messiah awaited them” (337).

In the hours that follow, Alice keeps vigil beside her daughter, also deeply moved by her husband’s story, which she has never heard before. She recognizes that it is David, “more than the doctor,” who has saved their daughter’s life, and she acknowledges that the child is “his.”

She felt something released in her as all the memories of her own childhood, so carefully locked away, flooded over her in a great rush, giving her back not the feeling of cramped, over-burdened days, but a sense of pride and richness in a duty well performed. (342)

The internalized shame of the mellah has given way, suddenly, to pride in her own history, her own Arab Jewish identity. When Rachel wakes, Alice, “as if impelled to recapture her own past” (342), begins to tell stories of her own childhood, singing an old Tunisian lullaby in Arabic to her daughter,
translating it for her and remarking that she “didn’t even know” (343) she remembered it. Rachel begs her to sing the sad song again, saying she prefers it to the French lullaby she heard as a baby.

Again, Alice is touched: “I was always a little afraid that you wouldn’t be interested in my life,” she confesses, and “might even stop loving me. I never thought you’d care about such things” (343). And then, in a moment of unguarded truthfulness, of complete self-acceptance, she calls Rachel “benti,” the Arabic endearment for “daughter”: “It was the first time that she heard the word benti cross her mother’s lips,” Rachel realizes, and she, too, is “deeply moved” (343). Now that she understands the “hardships of her mother’s childhood,” Rachel understands why her mother had turned her over to a British nanny and governess; instead of resenting her, she feels a “protective tenderness” (343). When her uncle brings her four little dolls from Palestine—“two Jewish Kibboutzniks, a man and a woman with little Russian blouses embroidered at the collar, and two Arab ones” (349)—she marries the Arab man to the Jewish woman and the Jewish man to the Arab woman. Her uncle calls her an “incorrigible dreamer” (349), but this is the dream, of a unified Arab-Jewish identity, unashamed and proud, that undergirds Jacob’s Ladder, and that makes it a stepping stone to a brighter vision than the ones that cloud our twenty-first century imaginations.


And she loved brown people