Inextricably Bonded

Israeli Arab and Jewish Writers
Re-Visioning Culture

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it is, Yehoshua’s observation of the developing Arab Hebrew culture amounts to an acknowledgment of the Arab’s “threatening” presence in the Israeli cultural environment. However grudging, the recognition of the Arab novel by a canonical—perhaps even canonized—Israeli Jewish writer signifies the acceptance of the Arab and his fiction by the dominant culture and its canons.

The emergence of the Arab Israeli Hebrew writer confronts the Zionist cultural establishment with the ambivalence of its self-definition. One need only recall Holtzman’s characterization of early Hebrew literature, which laid the foundation for the state’s Hebrew culture, as a body of writing that liberated itself from the religious constraints of Diaspora Judaism and its rabbinic literature, defined itself in terms of secular nationalism, and by and large adopted the modernist—and, later, postmodernist—perspectives of Western culture. In its self-identification as a secular Hebrew nation reborn in the image of Western modernity, the Zionist mainstream culture could not envision the emergence of the phenomenon of Arab literature in Hebrew. Thus, the mainstream Jewish Israeli culture has been faced with the unsettling impact of this literature not just on its exclusionary ideological orientation; the emergence of the Arab perspective threatened to shed a critical light upon the Zionist self-image.

Resentfully, yet quite accurately, Yehoshua identifies the source of Zionist discomfort—perhaps even anxiety—with regard to Israeli Arab Hebrew writing: “They [the Arabs] even try to strike us with the [Hebrew] language. They . . . use [our] sources to teach us some lessons from our legacy [in order] to show us how wrong we are and how we are betraying our own past and our own spiritual values by doing to them what we are doing.” The combination of guilt and indignation apparent in Yehoshua’s tone indicates the moral challenge of Israeli Arab Hebrew writing. The implications of the Arab story, which undermines the Zionist moral self-image, present the establishment with a particular problem of reception. In the next chapter I demonstrate that reception of this critical representation of Zionist hegemony is possible thanks to interpretive neutralization, which defuses dissent and facilitates the incorporation of Arab literature into the Hebrew canon.

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Israeli Arab Fiction and the Mainstream

Dissent and Strategies of Canonization

The Challenge of Hebrew and the Issue of Translation

The phenomenon of Israeli Arab writers and their dissenting fiction presents the establishment with a specific issue of reception. In this case canonical appropriation or co-optation cannot, of course, root itself in a Jewish/Zionist brotherhood, as was the case with left-wing Zionist writers. Instead of Israeli Jewish texts that protest the oppression of the Arabs, the cultural establishment is presented with texts authored by the victims of this oppression. The works of these writers—Atallah Mansour, Emile Habiby, and Anton Shammas—are quite unsparring in their negative representations of Israeli domination. As we shall see, they denounce Zionism as an ideology of colonialist dispossession, charge Israel with bias and discrimination against its Arab minority, and expose the brutality of the conquest and the occupation.

Narrated by victims, the exposure of the ruthless underside of the Zionist project is difficult to accept. At the same time, the decision of the Arab to write in Hebrew, the language of the hegemony, denies the possibility of evasion. Ineluctably, the Hebrew text confronts the Israeli mainstream with a twofold challenge. First, its subject matter presents the Jewish majority with the Arab minority’s perception of the moral failings of the Zionist project. Second, its Hebrew language dismantles the Zionist exclusionary claim to Hebrew culture. Yet, as
this chapter demonstrates, neither the minority's testimony of oppression nor its claim to Hebrew culture precluded the incorporation of this small but significant body of fiction into the Israeli literary canon. At this point one should note that despite the extent of criticism of the Zionist state in their writings, the three writers have for many years been highly respected and well known in mainstream cultural circles.

Atallah Mansour is the author of the first Hebrew novel written by an Arab. In a New Light (1966) was favorably received and was soon translated into the English. Mansour has worked for many years at Ha’aretz, the most respected Israeli newspaper, where he writes mainly on Arab issues in Israel. Anton Shammas, who now lives in the United States, worked as a journalist for prominent Israeli newspapers and literary magazines. He is a published poet both in Hebrew and Arabic, but it was the publication of Arabesques, his first novel, in 1986 that gained him instant fame in Israel. Shammas gained international recognition when, once his novel had been translated into English in 1988, it appeared among the best books of the year in the New York Times Book Review. Emile Habiby, an eminent politician and man of letters, has authored short stories and three novels. Originally published in Arabic, the novels—The Secret Life of Saeed the Pessoptimist (1974), Ikhtayyeh (1985) and Saraya, Daughter of the Ghoul (1991)—were translated into Hebrew by Shammas, who was Habiby’s very close friend.

Habiby, who died in 1996, was a well-known, highly controversial political figure in both Arab and Jewish milieus. He was a founding member of the Israeli Communist party, a long-time Communist Knesset member, and editor-in-chief of Al-Ittihad, Israel’s leading Arab Communist weekly. Habiby wrote in Arabic, and his first novel, The Pessoptimist, made him famous throughout the Arab world. In 1990 in Cairo he was awarded the State of Palestine Certificate of Merit and the Medal of Jerusalem for Culture, Literature, and Art by Yassir Arafat, then chairman of the PLO. Two years later in Jerusalem, at an Independence Day celebration, he received the Israel Prize for literature from the Israeli minister of education and Israel’s prime minister. The awarding of Israel’s highest prize is incontrovertible evidence of Habiby’s canonical status on the Israeli cultural scene, even though there were many Israelis and Arabs who opposed his nomination. Habiby’s acceptance of the Israel Prize gained him an almost unanimous condemnation from Arab intellectuals, quite vehement criticism from Israeli Arab intellectuals, and, on a more limited but no less hostile scale, a dramatic protest from Israeli right-wing politicians.

These responses demonstrate the extent to which Habiby’s official acceptance in mainstream Israeli culture was politicized in both Arab and Israeli spheres. The following anecdote further elucidates the political significance of Habiby’s achievement in the context of Israel’s relations with the Arab minority. When asked about the Israel Prize award, Habiby related that his literary career started as a response to the denigrating comment made by Yig’al Alon, the then minister of education in the Israeli cabinet: “Had there been a Palestinian people, it surely would have had a literary legacy.” It was at this moment that, as Habiby used to admit in his interviews with Israeli journalists, “I became determined to create in this country a Palestinian literature that would outlive both me and him.” Though Alon retracted his comment, his unfortunate lapsus linguae in effect characterized the official negation of the Palestinian national identity prevalent in the history of the state in the years preceding the first intifada, or Palestinian uprising. The most notorious was the dismissive remark by Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir: “There was no such thing as Palestinians. . . They did not exist.”

In view of such public statements that recognized Palestinian Arabs neither as a culture nor as a nation, Habiby’s prize reflected a drastic shift in Israel’s perception of the Israeli Arab. The prize signified official recognition of a member of Israel’s Arab minority as an Israeli writer, a symbolic event that placed Israeli Arabs on Israel’s cultural map. Nonetheless, the tenor of Habiby’s recollection of the encounter with Alon and his frequent retelling of the event shows that he neither forgot nor forgave the insulting comment. At the same time, his desire to affirm the cultural identity of the Palestinian people did not abate.

In one way, Habiby’s claim to have created Palestinian literature sounds like an unfounded—perhaps even arrogant—hyperbolic remark. As has been documented in two fairly recent studies, Palestinian literature existed in Israel before Habiby embarked on his magnificent multivolume storytelling effort. From another perspective,
however, Habiby’s argument sounds quite plausible. Considering the extent of defiance directed against Israel’s hegemony in Habiby’s fiction, one must admit that the writer and his work created a new challenge for Israeli literary reception. It is true that Mansour had already confronted the Israeli establishment with a Hebrew novel in 1966. However, the art and scope of Habiby’s oeuvre, as well as its timing—it appeared after the 1967 Six-Day War and extended beyond the first intifada in the late 1980s—have challenged Israel’s cultural self-definition in a fundamental way.

Habiby’s determination to create Arabic-written Palestinian literature in Israel and then deliberately have it translated into the language of the Zionist oppressor leaves no doubt about his cultural and national self-identification as an Israeli Arab. The highly critical oeuvre in Hebrew clearly targets an Israeli Jewish readership. In this sense, the political significations of Habiby’s literary work reflects a demand for the recognition and acceptance—no matter how critical—of the Arab minority on the Israeli Jewish cultural scene.

Habiby’s search for self-affirmation as an Israeli Arab is puzzling. Why would he insist on claiming his place in Israeli society, especially in view of the quite predictable opposition to his perception on the Israeli scene? Why would he engage in a search for Israeli recognition that, when finally granted, would affect his reputation in the Arab world and cause him the emotional pain and distress of denunciation and repudiation by close friends and associates?

The interesting example of the African writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, who translated his own work from the African language Gikũyũ into English may offer an insight into Habiby’s case. Here is how this Kenyan writer, who customarily writes in English, explains his decision to write his book in his native tribal language: “In choosing to write in Gikũyũ, I was doing something abnormal.” Kenyan writers write in English, and the decision to write “in the language that the people use” was a symbolic political act of anti-imperialist struggle. The novel Devil on the Cross, whose central character is a woman, focuses on the twofold struggle against the patriarchal structures of Africa and neocolonialist exploitation. In its original language the novel challenged Western domination, its aesthetic, and—as the choice of the language demonstrates—Western politics of the canon.

In another surprising symbolic gesture, Ngũgĩ translated the novel into English.9

In his fine discussion of the significance of Ngũgĩ’s translation, Patrick McGee affirms that the translation “epitomized . . . the politically self-conscious relation of African writing to the hegemonic culture in Europe. . . . [It showed] that cultural, linguistic hegemony is never total—that it has the principle of reversibility inscribed in it.” In other words, what the writer’s translation amounts to is an act of resistance to the colonization of the native culture through the use of the imperial language. The translated text is intended for the English-speaking reader; however, the information provided on the title page—“Translated from the Gikũyũ by the author”—communicates the author’s affirmation of his native tongue as his primary language, a decision that challenges the domination of a Western Eurocentric aesthetic.

Ngũgĩ’s twofold defiance of the dominant system lies in the political aspect of the decision to write one of his books in his native tongue and subsequently to translate the book into English as a political act. In contrast, Habiby, who always wrote in his native tongue, defied the dominant Israeli mainstream through the political act of translating his oeuvre into Hebrew. While their approaches differ, each of these writers’ translations contends against forms of cultural colonization. Ngũgĩ’s translation resists the colonialist ideology of the “mission civilisatrice” geared to “primitive” societies. It opposes the British intention to divest the colonized populations of their indigenous identity by reshaping the community in the image of the West. In contrast, as we have seen, the Zionist ideology constructed the invisibility of the Israeli Arab minority by means of political, economic, and cultural exclusion. As the imperial language, English was the instrument of appropriation and acculturation of the colonized nations. As the language of Jewish national revival, Hebrew became an ideological barrier that separated and segregated Israeli Jews from both the Arab and the Diaspora Jew.11

Thus, the defiance of each of the two writers addresses different ideological targets. Ngũgĩ’s original text in his native tongue represents a symbolic act of liberation of his ethnic tradition from the dominant culture of the West, while the translated story communicates
the possibility of “de-acculturation” of the native heritage. Ngũgĩ’s translation posits the text as any other translation for the benefit of a readership that cannot read the original. In this sense his translation into English affirms the original culture that the colonizers wished to replace with their own. In contrast, Habiby’s translation represents a symbolic act of reaffirmation of the Palestinian culture that the exclusionary Zionist weltanschauung wished to ignore. In its Hebrew translation the story claims the recognition of Arab presence, tradition, and history. Indeed, in his response to those Arabs critical of his acceptance of the Israel Prize, Habiby claims that the awarding of the prize made Israel realize that “it cannot be rid of us” and that the presence of Arabs is “a fait accompli.”

The translations by the two writers therefore respond to different forms of cultural colonization. Of course, the ideological concept behind the “mission civilisatrice” of the European colonial system differs from the Zionist doctrine of the “empty land.” Nevertheless, the choice by both writers to translate their works into the language of the hegemony represents a desire for recognition of the story by the dominant power. By translating his work, the writer engages the dominant culture in his tale of oppression. Whether to disentangle themselves from the colonizing influence or to gain access to the hegemony, both writers wish their story to reach those who attempted to erase it.

The insistence that the story of the dominated be included in the dominant consciousness—even if this involves switching from the native language to the language of the dominator—indicates that the precolonial situation cannot be restored for either the colonized or the colonizer. While the colonizer may wish to ignore or suppress the story of the colonized, the story liberates itself from the imposed silence in the dominant language, as evinced by both Ngũgĩ and Habiby. The emergence of the story proves that the process of colonization has bound the dominating and the dominated in a common fate and has affected them both.

In my earlier discussion of Israeli Jewish writers I noted the extreme reluctance to recognize the story of the victim. In particular, Yehoshua’s plan to preclude Israeli Arab participation in Israel’s mainstream culture demonstrates the dominator’s fear of Arab “visi-

bility.” Surprisingly, a voice urging rapprochement and interaction between Jews and Arabs belongs to an avowed critic of Zionism. A prominent Palestinian poet, Mahmoud Darwish has certainly been no proponent of Israel. Nonetheless, in an interview with an Israeli journalist, Darwish, who was born in pre-state Palestine and who received his formative education in Israel, confirmed the impossibility of the disengagement between the two peoples: “The Israelis are not the same as they were when they came, and the Palestinians are not the same people either. Each dwells inside the other. . . . The other is a responsibility and a test. . . . Will the third emerge out of the two? This is the test.”

Ostensibly, the Israeli Arab story in Hebrew seems to be staging a situation conducive to the creation of the “third.” It therefore seems reasonable to expect that the Arab story addressed to the Israeli public would, despite its critical tone, be told in a conciliatory manner. Such an approach would have created a more positive attitude toward the plight of the Israeli Arab minority. A nonconfrontational story might have led to a revision of the history of the victor, which would recognize the history of the victim. A revision of the past might have engendered a new history of mutual recognition.

This apparently rational and optimistic scenario is far from reflecting the Israeli Arab fiction. The story that this fiction tells represents anything but a reconciliation with the dominating majority. Recall Yehoshua’s indignation at the Arabs, who “show us how wrong we are and how we are betraying our own past and our own spiritual values by doing them what we are doing.” Indeed, the degree of defiance and condemnation in the narratives of the Arab writers seems to call into question the possibility of creating a “third.” The following recapitulation of the narratives will demonstrate the extent to which the stories must remain unpalatable to the Zionist reader. As we shall see, these narratives communicate virulent criticism of the state and represent a vituperative and unspared indictment of its policies of degradation and exploitation of the Israeli Arab minority. They also openly mourn the defeat, dispossession, and exile of the Palestinian people. In this sense the Israeli Arab fiction invariably speaks with the acute bitterness of unrelied pain, incontrovertible loss, and unforgivable degradation. Before considering the strategies
of the canonical reception of this fiction, I first wish to look more closely at the challenges with which the Arab narratives confronted the establishment.

**The Challenge of the Victim’s Story**

Mansour’s early novel *In a New Light* takes aim at the institution of the kibbutz, the quintessential representation of the Zionist socialist ideal. By exposing the hypocrisy of the kibbutz members, Mansour’s story destabilizes the moral foundations of the Zionist movement. Not unlike the young forest in Yehoshua’s story, the kibbutz is founded on the ruins of an Arab village destroyed in the 1948 war. The kibbutz members unconsciously exploit and manipulate the destitute Arabs, who live on the outskirts of the land they had previously owned. Mansour’s protagonist, Yossi, is an Arab orphan who witnessed the murder of his father. Traumatized, Yossi has erased his Arab identity and wishes to make the kibbutz his home. He also engages in a love affair with a kibbutz member. The socialist, egalitarian ideology of the kibbutz is severely tested when it is revealed that Yossi is an Arab. For political reasons—the elections are close and the kibbutz does not want to tarnish its socialist image by a public scandal—the kibbutz members eventually endorse Yossi’s application for membership on condition that his national identity be conveniently ignored. Ironically, the disaffected Yossi begins to see the world “in a new light.”

In Habibi’s novels the Israelis fare even worse. In fact, in their conversations with Habibi some interviewers observed that his fiction had conspicuously failed to attribute any redeeming features either to the State of Israel or its Jewish citizens. While the journalists never obtained a satisfactory explanation from the author, a look at Habibi’s plots seems to confirm their observations. There simply are no “good” Israeli Jews in Habibi’s novels, whereas blatantly cruel, stupid, and prejudiced Jewish characters appear by the dozen in each novel. Though critical of his Palestinian characters as well, Habibi accords sympathy only to the Arabs, never to Israeli Jews.

In *The Pessoptimist* the protagonist, Saeed, an Israeli Arab who has “sold out” as an informer, has an opportunity to view the Israeli Secret Service from the inside. His vituperative satirical representa-
as a reminder of the sin of those who have abandoned her. The motif of a betrayed lover signals the sense of guilt of the Israeli Arabs, who submitted themselves to Israeli domination.

The novel Saraya represents the least satirical and most poignant indictment of Israel as a military power. It condemns Israel's fascination with war and the atrocities the state committed against the Arabs. The story opens in the summer of the 1983 war in Lebanon. The narrator arrives at the realization that for Israelis each war has its particular moment of glory and joy in victory, but when the sounds of war reach him, they are "like voices that arise from an untrod forest on a moonless night, or like a hiss of terrified ghosts escaping into the forest." This chilling realization leads him to the understanding that all the stories he told after 1948 have, in fact, been attempts to decode the sounds of each war, for these sounds vary from one war to another. This insight into his own writing occurred when he heard a "radio reporter... claim that the thunder of Israeli cannons and the moans of the wounded Arabs sounded like a 'magnificent symphony.'" This lyrical novel is also a recollection of his lost, magical childhood and his former love for Carmel and Haifa. The stories, partly true and partly imagined, reemerge from the past. These are lamentations of the irrecoverable loss of the Palestinian life as a result of the Israeli conquest. A prominent motif deals with severed family ties. Even though the refugees in Lebanon were finally allowed to visit family members in Israel, the severance was too traumatic and the separation too long for the uprooted existences to come together. The most traumatic event is the departure of the narrator's mother, who prefers to be with her family in exile rather than with her son, who has become a Communist politician. In a very real sense the novel is the narrator's poignant elegy for a world that was brutally and unaccountably taken away from him.

Shammas's Arabesques is an audacious text both in terms of form and content. While the form presents a sophisticated confluence of genres, the content presents the Israeli reader with a complex political challenge. The narrative weaves together two stories. "The Tale" is a recollection of family history in terms of its myths, legends, a magical childhood, and the beloved family home. It is also the story of the powerlessness of the defeated community and the emerging consciousness that "the tale... does not have sufficient power to restore the earth pulled from under our feet." This power dissipated with the defeat of 1948. The other story, "The Teller," focuses on the existential predicament of an Israeli Arab intellectual in the State of Israel. In this tale the narrator describes the humiliation of the Arab as a second-class citizen, as represented by the patronizing view of the Arab in Israeli literature by writers such as A.B. Yehoshua (thinely disguised in the novel as Yehoshua Bar-On). He despairs over the loneliness and alienation of the Arab in the hostile Israeli environment and deplores the Israeli Arab's uprootedness from his native culture and tradition. The interweaving stories in Arabesques center on the two most serious transgressions of Israel's exclusionary politics and mores. The first is the narrator's love affair with Shlomith, an Israeli Jewish woman, the wife of an army officer. Even though the love affair has ended, the narrator's longings for his lost Israeli lover permeate his narrative. The second represents the narrator's obsessive search for his older cousin, Michael Abyad. Abyad, the narrator's alter-ego, model, and mentor, is also a member of an anti-Israeli terrorist organization. The search for Michael and the eventual meeting with a Palestinian cousin in Iwawa constitute subversive acts against the state. Both clandestine connections—the Israeli lover and the terrorist cousin—signal the impossible situation of the Israeli Arab suspended between two worlds, that of the Israeli mainstream and that of the Palestinian freedom fighters. The impossibility of belonging to either endows the tale with an unbearable sense of displacement and alienation.

The taboos of ethnic purity and state security that Shammas's narrator so openly addresses and transgresses represent the complexity of the issues that the Arab minority faces in the Jewish state. The narrative of victimization and oppression in Arab Israeli fiction defies the ideological mainstays of the Zionist enterprise, such as the separatist tenet of the "empty land," and denounces the moral standing of the Zionist movement. These difficult issues faced by the Israeli Jewish readership lead back to the question of reception. As was previously mentioned, despite their explosive content, which repudiates the dominant ideology and the policies of the state, the texts and their writers were recognized by Israel's mainstream culture. Having demonstrated the prominence of Mansour, Habibi, and Shammas as well-established journalists, poets, and nationally and internationally
known writers, I wish to examine the strategies of critical reception, or “master codes,” that facilitated the incorporation of their dissenting texts into the Hebrew literary canon.

Arab Fiction and Israeli Culture: The Codes of Reception

This brief preamble is intended to highlight the problematic position of Israeli Arab fiction. In the case of Jewish dissenting fiction, the critical establishment attributed the deviation from Zionist norms to Western trends of existentialism and postmodernism. The literary representations of Arab suffering by Jewish writers were abstracted as metaphors of the existentialist struggle against an incomprehensible human fate, the futile search for the meaning of life, and universal victimhood and displacement. Because their faith in the Zionist writers’ loyalty to the Zionist idea was unshaken, Zionist critics could afford to be permissive and tolerant toward the defiant “new wave” writers. From their position as staunch Zionists with Western proclivities, the critics looked with benevolence—even pride—upon the misguided “prophets to the House of Israel,” clearly affected by the zeitgeist of postwar left-wing existentialist Paris. With their representations of angst and malaise, the “new wave” Israeli writers were entering the mainstream Western culture.

These interpretive “master codes,” grounded in ethnic and ideological kinship with the writers, could not be applied to Israeli Arab fiction. However, since the latter was written in Hebrew, it could not be ignored either. But, then, neither could the establishment ignore the radicalness of this literature’s indictment of the state, its ideology, and its policies. Since the Arab perspective dispelled such fundamentals as the invisibility of the Arabs and the humanistic idealism of the Zionist movement, a different critical strategy was needed to neutralize the disruptive Arab narratives.

I wish to argue that in order to keep the Zionist political and moral image intact, the literary establishment reversed its interpretive “master codes.” Rather than attributing Western liberal perspectives to the texts, as they did in the case of Israeli Jewish fiction, the critics looked at the Israeli Arab fiction from the perspective of Western liberal humanism. That is to say, when faced with the Arab story, the critical establishment changed from the national Zionist position to a humanistic-liberal orientation. The approach of enlightened tolerance, which validates all stories in the name of democratic liberties, legitimized the story of the Arab. Through the lens of humanistic universality the establishment could abstract the bluntness of Arab antistablishment dissent and incorporate it into the canon.

Jacques Derrida’s comment on the disempowerment of literature in Western democracies helps to elucidate the interpretive code that made the acceptance of Arab fiction of dissent possible. According to Derrida, “The critique-political function of literature, in the West, remains very ambiguous. The freedom to say everything is a very powerful political weapon, but one which might immediately let itself be neutralized as a fiction. This revolutionary power can become very conservative.”19 Derrida suggests that the “freedom to say everything” with impunity ironically divests free speech of its political power—or even of its factuality—turning everything said into the subjective and, therefore, fictional. If, in the name of freedom of speech, anything can be said and everything is acceptable, it is impossible to discern fact from fiction. Everything can therefore be labeled as “a fiction,” that is, an imaginative, subjective representation of a particular situation. In this sense, the freedom to say anything gives license to fictionalize everything. Fictionalization disconnects political or historical events from their concrete time and place because it infuses them with the sense of fictionality. In this way the prism of fictionality relieves the reader of the responsibility of shaping opinion with regard to the moral transgressions represented in the text.

Consequently, Western liberalism allows one not only to say everything but also to accept everything with equanimity. Thus, canonization of a dissenting story, on the one hand, reaffirms the democratic value of reception and, on the other hand, neutralizes the particular reality of the story. Acting as the vehicle of equality and freedom of speech, reception silences the dissenting outlook of the story. Since every story is given the same measure of trust and recognition, nothing is true or false anymore. In this sense the story of the Arab is recognized as any other story would be. Considered one of many other possible representations of history, the Arab story of
Dissenting Literatures and the Literary Canon

victimization and injustice can be accorded recognition that, paradoxically, will neutralize and silence the protest of its dissent.

A brief note about Shammas that appeared in the main evening newspaper aptly illustrates the process of neutralization. The congratulatory note mentions the inclusion of Shammas’s work among the best books of the year in the New York Times and claims it as a credit to “Hebrew Israeli literature.” The note goes on to say that “everybody knows that Shammas, a native of Fassuta, is a Christian Arab—his novel, Arabesques, is most clearly autobiographical. He also has annoyed many people with his [political] opinions as to what [kind of state] Israel should become.” The unidentified author admonishes the reader that “this [Shammas’s controversial opinion] does not detract from the fact that Arabesques is written in Hebrew and therefore Anton Shammas is a limb of limbs of Israel [ever m’evrei], and therefore an integral part of Hebrew literature created in the State of Israel.”

Let us look at this journalistic note in terms of the rhetorical strategies employed to appropriate the novel and include it in the corpus of Hebrew literature despite the controversy it caused in Israel. With disarming openness the reporter acknowledges the origins of the writer and his unpopular political views. At the same time, the anticipation of opposition in “this does not detract” and the affirmation “limb of limbs” (a very powerful Hebrew metaphor that denotes an extraordinary degree of filiation) are clearly intended to outweigh the national and political differences, which might place Shammas outside the normative profile of an Israeli Hebrew writer. The semantics of the text are intended to show the openness and tolerance of the Israeli establishment. While it recognizes Shammas’s ethnic origin and his dissident ideas, the establishment claims his work for the Israeli canon. The inclusion downplays and thus neutralizes the writer’s critical ideas concerning the state and its ideology. After all, the system that recognized the Arab writer who has defied it so harshly cannot be totally evil.

M.D.’s circular argumentation downplays Shammas’s political antagonism, contending that Shammas belongs to the Israeli fold. Other reviews of the novel follow the same path; practically all dismiss the political message on aesthetic grounds. Claiming to be unbiased and impartial readers, the critics tend to dismiss the politically problematic parts of Arabesques—especially those that appear in episodes of “The Teller”—as writing of inferior artistic quality. Like M.D., critic and reviewer Yael Lotan argues that Arabesques is “an organic Hebrew Israeli novel.” She extols the beauty of “The Tale,” comparing the narrative of the family saga to that of Marcel Proust. Ironically, even though she maintains that nobody “should be telling the writer how to tell his story,” she unwittingly goes on to postulate that segments of “The Teller” should have been left out since they “do not connect organically with the other parts of the story.” The ultimate attempt to neutralize the novel’s political, historical, and geographical signification emerges in Lotan’s conclusion, in which she admonishes the readers to “see the book as it is—as if they were reading, for instance, a South American novel.”

Similarly, an evenhanded position emerges in the interpretation of Heda Boshas, a respected book reviewer. Boshas favorably compares “The Tale” to the magic of Fellini’s films. Though she is receptive to Shammas’s political views, Boshas finds that the “conceptual world of the novel is not political but rather literary-poetic.” She minimizes the politically dissenting sections, claiming that although they are “brilliant pieces of journalism,” they are “simplistically symbolic, lacking the magical fireflies of the other chapters.”

It is of interest to note that both critics seek legitimation for their enthusiastic praise for Shammas’s nonpolitical writing by invoking canonical Western artists, such as Proust and Fellini. In fact, Dan Laor finds Shammas’s association with Proust the main—perhaps the only—redeeming feature in the novel. “The failure of Shammas’s Arabesques,” he writes, “consists first and foremost in the writer’s lack of determination [and] consistency to write a novel that would focus exclusively on . . . his Galilean childhood village, Fassuta.” According to Laor, Shammas can be compared favorably to Proust in his childhood recollections, yet he has failed to explore fully the force of memory, the wellspring of the novel. This failure is due to the unnecessary focus on political issues. Like the other critics, Laor is critical of “The Teller” episodes, which, according to him, clearly detract from the artistic value of the novel. “For whom and why is all this needed?” he asks rhetorically with reference to “The Teller.” Laor then elaborates: “Why would Shammas decide to give his readers his ‘Diary’ at this particular time and confess . . . at length to his identity crisis . . .
which he attributes to his being ‘an Arab poet from Israel’ who writes in Hebrew and tries to establish himself in Hebrew literature.” Beneath Laor’s concern for the artistic coherence of the novel one notices the critic’s ambivalence — verging on resentment — at Shammas’s self-exposure as an alienated Arab in mainstream Israeli society. His opinion that the confession of the identity crisis is superfluous is revealing. It shows the depth of Laor’s anxiety about the subversive use of Hebrew by an Arab writer who “tries to establish” the story of his alienation in mainstream Hebrew literature.

Yael Feldman’s critical article seems to display a similar anxiety by literally distancing Shammas’s story from the reality of Israel and locating it in the reality of the Arab world. Feldman claims that the main interest of the novel’s subversive aspect is not the oppression of the Arabs in the Jewish state but rather the persecution of Christian Arabs, the inhabitants of Shammas’s native village, by Muslim Arabs at the time of the great Arab revolt in 1936–39. Feldman argues that Shammas would never have dared to write it in Arabic, but he has dared here, in Hebrew, . . . to force open a memory, in a minor key, the memory of the Arab Christian minority, by tracing its roots to an internal Arab conflict.” In Feldman’s view, for Shammas the Hebrew language has become the language of liberation that set free the forbidden story of an internal Arab conflict. Feldman attributes the raison d’être of the choice of the Hebrew to the secrecy of the religious conflict between Arab Christians and Moslems in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Palestine. I would argue that, while interesting, this reading places in relief a secondary theme in Arabesques and thus downplays its main thematic concern, namely, that of the history of Arab defeat in 1948 and the post-defeat estrangement of the Arab minority in the Israeli mainstream.

Not all critics are prepared to either evade the political issue or disguise it under aesthetic considerations. In an ambitious essay Hannan Hever tackles the subversive meaning of the novel by resorting to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s theory of minor literature. In Hever’s opinion, Shammas enters the exclusive domain of the Hebrew culture and destabilizes the existing status quo of Jewish domination and Arab submission. Hever contends that “as an Arab writer, breaking into the linguistic and literary citadel of the Israeli Jews, Shammas calls into question their claim to exclusive possession of the language of traditional Zionism.” Divesting the language of its past tradition and exclusivity, Shammas seems to be working toward “a truly democratic society.” Advancing the liberal notion of progress toward fellowship of human beings, Hever sees Shammas’s appropriation of the language as “a utopian unification of the language of Arabs and Jews . . . capable of bringing about a better future.”

At the same time, however, Hever is quite conscious of the fact that the utopian notion of Israeli Arabs and Jews coming together through language would signify transgression of accepted boundaries. He admits that the possibility of such a drastic change “makes it difficult for Israeli Jews to identify easily with him or adopt him as one of their own.”

The extent of the difficulty Shammas’s text represents for Israeli Jews emerges in the review of Arabesques by Dan Miron, an eminent scholar of Hebrew literature. In contrast to Hever, Miron blames the novel for having failed to present a universal, humanistic vision of harmony and empathy. Shammas, Miron tells us, “failed to turn the remembered experiences into a kernel of a more general and unified outlook.” The roots of the writer’s failure lie in his “emotional, cultural, and literary problems, which have not been resolved.” This psychological predicament leads the writer to adopt a destructive attitude that lacks empathy for both his family and his readers. As this critic sees it, Shammas “consistently destroys the personalities of his people” in order to demonstrate “his superiority over the poor and naive relatives that he has left behind in the village.” Miron claims that this negative attitude toward his own people “purposely and maliciously prevents his readers, the Jews who destroyed the tranquility of the village, from enjoying the story.” In a revealing comment Miron complains that Shammas boasts about his “too perfect, too smoothed out Hebrew, not without the intention to ‘provoke,’ because he wishes to show off to his Israeli Jewish counterparts his so much greater mastery of their Hebrew language.” In conclusion, Miron postulates that the writer “stumbles and falls [because] he has not yet digested and internalized his several years’ long bitterness, nor has he as yet liberated himself from the spiritual barrenness of [the Israeli Arab minority, which feels] displaced and alienated.”

It is, of course, doubly ironic that Miron’s rancorous appraisal of Shammas as a mean-spirited writer identifies the essence of the
The novel and, at the same time, reveals the Israeli bias more clearly than any of the other critics. The novel is indeed about the undigested bitterness of life-long humiliation, alienation, and displacement. Moreover, it is an audacious attempt by an Israeli-Arab intellectual to adopt the Hebrew language in order to gain recognition in the dominant cultural milieu. But the derogatory tenor of Miron’s astute observations reveals the “master codes” of his interpretation. One observes here a liberal, humanistic position that seeks its own reflection in the work. Whereas other critics feel that the universalist motif in the family saga portions of Arabesques outweighs the political and moral issues in the novel, Miron refuses to evade the political issue. Rather than dismissing the politically disagreeable parts as aesthetically wanting, Miron dismisses the novel altogether for its lack of a tolerant, benevolent, and dispassionate view of humanity. He predicates his acceptance of the story upon a liberal message of reconciliation, one that would have neutralized the story of alienation with a note of hope.

The interpretive reading of shared humanistic liberal values between critic and writer emerges prominently in critical interpretations of Habiby’s work. The critics acknowledge the aesthetic value of Habiby’s writing and go to extremes to “humanize” his merciless, bitterly satirical representations of the state. Habiby emerges in these critical readings as an old, wise man who looks with benevolent impartiality upon the folly of human beings, be it Jews or Arabs. By emphasizing correspondences with literary masterpieces of humanistic satire, such as Voltaire’s Candide and Jaroslav Hašek’s Good Soldier Schweik, critics universalize his message, thereby blunting the sharpness of Habiby’s defiance of the present-day situation.

Thus, Sasson Somkekh, an eminent scholar of Arab literature, emphasizes Habiby’s Voltairean characteristics and contends that Habiby has also “shaped a new Arab literary style . . . in which the elements of the old tradition figure prominently . . . but that also draws upon modern European and American literature.” Somekh downplays the political theme, arguing that “the best quality [of The Pessoptimist] lies in Habiby’s literary strategies, so that the book is funny and irresistible and the ‘message’ gets through the back door.” Immanuel Sivan, a noted scholar and expert on the Middle East, praises Habiby’s Arabic. As Sivan sees it, through his incompa-

rable mastery of the language Habiby “softened, distilled and refined the description of Arab life in Israel under military rule.” Sivan notes that “even more stunning is his avoidance of the linguistic ideological trap of the Communist Al-Ittihad, which Habiby edited.” While several scholars praise Habiby’s use of genre and language as well as his avoidance of politics, Shulamith Hareven, a well-known writer and essayist, extols the “still small voice” of irony, compassion, and humor that distinguishes Habiby’s rich literary work from arid political writing. Hareven sees Habiby’s works as completely immersed in the humanistic tradition. She claims that “in Habiby’s writing a human being is precisely that, a human being, rather than a symbol or a message, and the ability to contain the human being in the human framework is the indubitable sign of a humanistic writer.”

Hanan Hiever has noticed the tendency of left-wing Israeli critics to “legitimate Habiby by concealing the political character of his writing.” In his reading Hiever presents Habiby’s universalism as a strategy that the writer employs to enter the Israeli canon. As he did with Shammas, Hiever examines Habiby from the perspective of Deleuze and Guattari’s critical apparatus, namely, he uses their model of minority literature, which, they insist, invades and subverts the majority culture. Hiever claims that Habiby conceals his controversial political message under the guise of a humanist. The critic surmises that the “thematic patterns” of “self-criticism” and the importance of women in Habiby’s fiction appeal to the left-wing reader’s ideological horizon because they follow the “general humanistic norms, which are typically Western and universalist.” He maintains that the universalist norms are further emphasized by Habiby’s criticism of the Arab League, which balances the criticism directed at the Jewish state. In Hiever’s view, the subversive allusions in Habiby’s fiction are meant to “undermine the universal narrative.” The writer’s dissenting orientation shuns prominence, preferring to communicate its message stealthily in the form of “fragmented and incomplete” narrative pieces and insights.

I wish to suggest that Hiever’s sophisticated interpretation—which tries to present Habiby as a writer who disguises his subversive interests under a humanistic guise in order to enter the canon—is a misreading of the Israeli Arab writer. Ironically, Hiever’s reading discloses the critic’s “master code” of Western humanism. The
example of the balance that Habiby strikes between his criticism of the State of Israel and of the Arab League is indicative of Hever’s need to see Habiby as a humanistic author. It is impossible not to notice the extent to which the few instances of general criticism directed at the Arab League in Habiby’s writing are outweighed by his relentless and vituperative condemnation of Israel. It is hardly possible even to suppose that any Israeli Jew who was raised to believe in the Israeli army’s “purity of arms,” that is, the humanitarian attitude of the Israeli military toward the Arab civilian population, could accept Habiby’s denunciations of the Israeli army’s politics of victimization as “typically universalist.”

The following episode from Pessoptimist illustrates Habiby’s utterly undisguised condemnation of the Israeli state. The governor of the Israeli Secret Police found in the field “a peasant [Palestinian] woman . . . in her lap a child, his eyes wide in terror.” When she hesitated to answer his questions about her whereabouts, the governor “pointed his gun straight to the child’s head and screamed, ‘Reply, or I’ll empty it into him!’” When she confessed that she was going back to her village of Berwah, the governor yelled, “Didn’t we warn you that anyone returning there will be killed? . . . Go anywhere you like to the east. And if I ever see you again on this road I’ll show you no mercy.” The woman and the child turn east and Saeed, who narrates the story, observes the “amazing phenomenon” that “the farther the woman and the child went from where we were . . . the taller they grew . . . [until] they had become bigger than the plain of Acre itself. The governor still stood there. . . . Finally he asked in amazement: ‘Will they never disappear?’” Saeed then transcends the boundaries of fiction and makes the historically plausible observation that the child might have been the poet Mahmoud Darwish, a native of Berwah. To prove his conjecture Saeed quotes from one of Darwish’s poems written fifteen years later: “I laud the executioner, victor over a dark-eyed maiden; Hurrah for the vanquisher of villages, hurrah for the butcher of infants.”

I feel that the Berwah episode exposes the implausibility of a type of critical reception that attempts to read Habiby’s message in light of universal humanism. It would be hard to categorize this episode under the general rubric of war atrocities. It would be equally hard to fictionalize the Berwah episode in accordance with Derrida’s notion of fictionalized factuality, namely, that fiction and factuality are, in effect, indistinguishable. The humanistic generalization as well as the confluence of fact and fiction are belied by the historical accuracy of the event. The location is real and the event of the expulsion of the Palestinian peasants is factual. There is, of course, the moment that mythologizes the undiminished stature of the victims. But the text reaches beyond this poetic moment to document the historical, factual existence of the exiles. The reference to Mahmoud Darwish, a real person and a bona fide exile, and the inclusion of his poetic commemoration of the event point to Saeed’s efforts to authenticate his testimony. The concreteness of this horrific victimization of a mother and child leaves no room for the attenuating humanistic-universalist guises that Hever seems to impose on Habiby’s invective. As I see it, the story is unequivocally contemptuous of the barbarity of the oppression; it is also unrestrained in its derisive depiction of the oppressor.

The positive reception of such extremely negative representations of Arab Israeli reality puzzled Arab writers. Indeed, in his autobiography Mansour writes that at the time he found the favorable reception of his novel In a New Light quite disturbing. He recalls that after the publication of the novel, the prestigious newspaper Ma’ariv publicly invited him to join the Hebrew Writers Association. The writer recalls that he found it hard to believe that “no one had taken offense at my attack on Israeli society [in the novel].” He asks himself, “What had made my reviewers actually welcome my criticisms?” Mansour speculates that the novelty of a Hebrew novel by an Arab and the “more relaxed climate of 1966” might have contributed to the positive reception. Most important, he also feels that “the novel was handled by the regular book reviewers, who were mostly liberal intellectuals with a guilty conscience.”

Indeed, a perusal of the reviews of Mansour’s novel reveals a positive reception. In general, the Israeli Arab writer is identified as a moralist who confronts Israeli society with its failings. The reviewers treat the novel as a humanistic text that passes an objective judgment on Israeli Jewish society, exposing the transgressions of the universal ideals of morality and justice. The oppression of the Arab
interpreted as a representative example of the general failure of Israel’s socialist foundations. In concurrence with this code of interpretation, Mansour is presented as the prescient other, the outsider, who holds up the mirror of truth to a society that has strayed from its ideals.

For instance, Yona Bahir agrees with Mansour’s derogatory representation of the Jewish majority as “characterized by chauvinism, arrogance and the practically automatic assumption that the Arab is a stranger and an enemy.” According to this reviewer, Mansour “should have aimed his arrows at more significant targets [than the kibbutz] that demonstrate the inequality between the two peoples, such as the existence of an Arab ghetto in a democratic, peace-loving country as ours.” According to Ora Ardon, the novel proves that “the revolution of concepts and sentiments that the [Zionist] founders dreamed did not materialize.” Ardon draws attention to Israel’s ethical and ideological failure, which Mansour exposes when he “judges the Israeli society according to its own values. . . . In contrast with what we would have expected, it is not the relationships between Jews and Arabs that preoccupy the author . . . but rather the attitude of the Jewish community toward its own ideals.” Iza Perlis reinforces the image of Mansour as a moral guide who carries a message of peace and harmony. She asks her readers to follow the example of Mansour, whom she quotes saying: “As an Arab writer who writes in Hebrew, who lives in Arab society and writes for the Jewish community, conditions compel me to act as a bridge between the two nations. . . . I feel that to annoy readers means, in many cases, to prompt them to think. If I have managed to do so, my purpose has been accomplished.” Perlis responds to Mansour with a concluding self-critical comment: “These courageous words will teach us not to hide behind ‘objective reality.’ . . . We could have prevented much suffering and insult, bitterness and disappointment, had we been able to see both ourselves and the other in ‘a new light.’”

In retrospect, it is possible to argue that the critical response to Mansour’s first novel in Hebrew by an Israeli Arab presaged the subsequent critical reception of Israeli Arab fiction. The type of reception that claims the Arab texts for the canon consistently refuses to grapple with the failures of morality and justice at the very core of the Zionist idea, which this literature denounces. Rather, as the Israeli establishment critics prefer to see it, this literature denounces the failure to live up to the ideals of Western humanistic liberalism that Zionism represents. In this sense, paradoxically, the Arab writer becomes a social critic and a moralist who confronts the “new” Jews with their inability to implement their mission of bringing “light to the nations” or, in other words, to become the paragons of progress, justice, and humanism in the “old-new land,” as Herzl envisioned it.

In the critical appreciations of his work, Mansour, the first Arab Hebrew writer, emerges as the defender of Zionism and its socialist ideals of equality for all. This view of the Arab writer as a moralist was reinforced a few years later with regard to Habibi. Through a complex and painful process of reception—recall the negative responses to his Israel Prize—Habibi emerged as a wizened old man who, in the tradition of Western humanistic satire, regards with equanimity the “human folly” of both Arabs and Jews. In a similar way, adherence to the ideals of universal humanism determined the readings of Shammas’s Arabesques. Whether accepting or condemning, the “master codes” behind the critical appraisal of Shammas’s novel