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Returning to Ben Hamo: Dror Mishani and the Demon of Israeli Literature

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Abstract This essay returns to Yehoshua Kenaz's famous belly dance scene in his novel *Infiltration* (1986), its incredible reception against the backdrop of ethnic shifts and ruptures in Israel, and especially the reading it received in Dror Mishani's remarkable and forgotten research on representations of Mizrahim in Israeli literature from 2006. Although I offer an in-depth interpretative reading of the dance scene, my main arguments concern the reception of secondary scholarly literature itself, in the long turbulent relationship between Israeli and Jewish Studies and its confrontation and suppression of racial frictions among Jews. The rupture concerns the relation between words and body; between the spirit and the flesh.

Keywords Israeli literature. Postcolonial Studies. Queer Studies. Decolonisation of Jewish Studies. Yehoshua Kenaz. Dror Mishani. Abdellatif Kechiche.

1 Introduction

In her seminal memoir on the days she spent in her ancestry lands in Africa, studying the routes of the transatlantic slave trade to the Americas, Saidiya Hartman mentions some of the behavioural habits of the Africans on board, two thirds of whom, according to a study from the 18th century, used to die just out of melancholy (Hartman

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2007, 252). Abductees who were sent to the New World to become slaves, lost any will to live on the ship and stopped eating, a danger also to the machinery of trade. Other than threats and physical abuse, one of the methods used to incite their appetite again was dancing: "Dr. Thomas Trotter […] advised dancing as a therapeutic measure against suicidal melancholy" (Hartman 2007, 252).

In what follows I return to one of the most famous scenes in Israeli literature, Rahamim Ben Hamo's oriental belly dance in Yehoshua Kenaz's *Hitganvut yechdim* (Infiltrating one after the other, 1986, later translated *Infiltration*, 2003), in order to shed some light on Mizrahi relations and perceptions, between body, matter and words. Kenaz's seminal novel pertains to racial or ethnic ruptures of Israeli society, and its reception with time became a narrative of confrontation and suppression on the domestic, intra Jewish colonial tensions. I will return to Dror Mishani's disconcerting study of Mizrahi representation, which was perhaps doomed to oblivion after marking the eighties as a fault line that haunts, like the demon, Israeli society, its media, high politics and literature right until today. If the Mizrahi haunts, if the Mizrahi man is a demon, it is only because he is there as displacement: for the effeminate European Jew, who fails the imperative of national resurrection.

2 Criticism and Its Reception

The thirty-year-old Dror Mishani published *Be-khol ha-'inyan ha-mizrahi yesh eize absurd* (In the whole Mizrahi affair, there is a certain absurdity) in 2006, the first monograph on Mizrahi literature in over twenty years. Only Lev Hakak preceded him, publishing two books on the matter during the 1980s that did not gain much attention (1981, 1985). Since then, only one book has come out that deals comprehensively with Mizrahi prose, authored by Yochai Oppenheimer, an Ashkenazi scholar at Tel Aviv University (2014). Oppenheimer's book did not receive a review beyond an essay I published in *Theory and Criticism*, where I survey the publication of four books that served a comprehensive and very timely overall look on Mizrahi literature (Ben Yehuda 2016): two monographs by Oppenheimer (this one and another on Mizrahi poetry; Oppenheimer 2012); and two by Ketzia Alon (two studies she published on Mizrahi poetry in 2011 and 2014). I wrote on Oppenheimer's intervention with relative enthusiasm because at that time (2014), any work dedicated to Mizrahim was considered a breakthrough. However, my reservation was that Oppenheimer, and Alon too, in her work on poetry, followed the way laid out for them by critical research in Israel in sociology, cinema, and history, that understands the

Mizrahi struggle as part of a class struggle, in light of developments preceding the 1977 political shift.

In general, discourse in Israeli humanities and social sciences has been entrenched – and it is safe to assume it still is – mainly in the injustices of Mapai which, although foundational, are somewhat dated now from the perspective of a nearly eternal Likud rule. For both Alon and Oppenheimer, after much work that has been done in sociology and history, Mizrahim represented a political alternative to mainstream statism of Zionism, because they themselves were Arabs, that is, the enemy. In seeing Mizrahim as really alien to Ashkenazim, academic Israeli discourse was immersed in the figure of the Arab-Jew as a way to engulf the ethos shared by the fathers of the State of Israel, who rebuked everything that is Arab. In being alternative to mainstream Israeli ethos, I thought both Alon and Oppenheimer were missing the essence of Mizrahi trauma that was the denunciation of the self, something which can barely be leveraged as an alternative, and very much reminds us of the Jews in Europe in the last centuries, for which the term 'self-hatred' was prevalent and accurate.[1]

The critic I expressed in *Theory and Criticism* was something I repeated in countless forums: there is something in the Arab-Jew discourse, shared by some of the people closest to me, that is fundamentally orientalist. First, it clings to one of the basic paradigms that Edward Said pointed out in his monumental *Orientalism* (1978), which glorifies the Arab past at the expense of its present. Second, it places Middle Eastern studies in a niche. The research project I was trying tirelessly to promote, albeit with very little success, chose two different parameters: first, I wanted to step out of the niche and read canonical Western literature from a Mizrahi perspective (something I began with the dissertation I wrote on Kafka and Agnon), and second, I viewed contemporary Mizrahi identity not as a leftist alternative to Likud or the historical Mapai, but as an area of wound, of trauma, thus embedded in relationships of adaptation and hybridization, much like my own case as a queer-Mizrahi-German-speaking researcher, who hope to say something about milestones in Zionist history like Bialik and Agnon.

Not very alien to 'self-hate', the fundamental paradigm for me was that of 'histhaknezut' (passing as Ashkenazi) whose validity, it is important to internalize, applies to everyone, both 'Ashkenazim' and 'whites': everyone is entrenched in the same project of becoming a (white) man, meaning someone who knows how to control his emotions,

1 I was trying to use the theoretic term of "Jewish self-hatred" on Mizrahim while discussing Shimon Balass's critic towards the relatively influential Iraqi Jewish community in Israel (Ben Yehuda 2020).

someone who understands restraint, and thus also expresses good taste, moderation, precision, and powerful minimalism. Mishani's book, written while he was a doctoral student who never completed his degree, has been neglected over the years, likely due to chilled critical reviews by Hannan Hever, another Ashkenazi professor – more senior and influential than Oppenheimer – who has dealt with Mizrahi issues (Hever 2008). Oppenheimer too, mentions Mishani only in passing, without giving much thought to his remarkable argument. Instead, he focuses his analysis, after Deleuze and Guattari, on Mizrahi representations of the body (a core theme in Mizrahi literature) again as an emancipatory vocation vis à vis the Zionist restrain body (Oppenheimer 2014, 110). The Zionist body is a transparent and repressed sum, while the Mizrahi body is made of many different body parts which together are always in a process of becoming, dissolving and uniting again and again (Oppenheimer 2014, 110). This theoretic angle has many merits for close readings, which the scope of Oppenheimer's survey does not always allow, and it must be thoroughly unravelled alongside Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnival, but in terms of delving into Israeli ethos and politics, it failed to leverage the body into a convincing approachable reading.

Mishani's intervention was even more overlooked in the collection of essays devoted to the work of Yehoshua Kenaz that was published two years later (Strass, Dotan 2016) although it contained Mishani's own essay of 2002 on Mizrahi representations in Kenaz's work. It seems that what Mishani had to say in his neglected and modest book – it does not exceed 200 pages and has no pretension of surveying the entire bulk of Mizrahi representations; on the contrary, it reads only the mainstream and quite hegemonic novels of Kenaz, Amos Oz and A.B. Yehoshua – perhaps even escaped his own conscious over the years. It is plausible that Mishani genuinely forgot Mishani, or perhaps there was more to it. He left academia and became one of the most successful Israeli writers and I believe his classic read in Mizrahim – better say 'Mizrahiness' – can use an example to the rare moments in literary historiography where the history of reception pretends more to criticism or secondary literature than to novels and poetry. One of the famous examples of this is the reception of Sigmund Freud's theory of trauma during his own lifetime, not only by his peers, but by himself,[2] which could allow us to assume something about Mishani. Like the return of the repressed, I offer here returning to his thesis about the Mizrahi body as a belated repressed embodiment of the Jewish diasporic body in Europe, something which Israeli discourse was not able to

2 The classical study on Freud's anxiety from his own findings is Judith Herman's (1992).

confront. Mishani's thesis that Mizrahi body representations in the work of the aforementioned canonical authors is a latent return of demons, those that Zionism wished to leave behind in the figure of the diasporic Jewish body in Europe, could perhaps be in itself something that Israeli academic discourse compulsorily repressed yet again, in the almost twenty years that have passed since Mishani's book was published.

3 The Real Great Question is the Ashkenazi One

The 'absurdity' in Mishani's title (a quote from A.B. Yehoshua), related to the Mizrahi 'issue' (*'inyan*, affairs, a Mizrahi 'business') is a way to explain the obscurity and intangibility of Mizrahim in discourse: there is something about Mizrahim that doesn't let go, yet is always pushes to oblivion. In an interview, Mishani referred to the events preceding the book's release in 2006, when Amir Peretz was the first Mizrahi elected as head of the Labour Party. According to him, Peretz, in his victory speech, sought to bury the demon (*hashed ha-'adati*), but in doing so, he actually gave it life. The Israeli public is always reluctant to differentiate between Jews and treat them separately in terms of race or ethnicity. Statistics are always hard to come by and just prior to October 7, 2023 sociologist Sigal Nagar-Ron was able to bring forth a reform in defining Mizrahim as part of the Israeli census. The census abolished any trace of North African or Islamic States' Jews, due to the assumption that in the second generation of emigrants, this information is entirely obsolete (Nagar-Ron 2021). After Hamas onslaught of 2023, Israel was gathered together under a call for unity and togetherness, thus even the word 'Mizrahi' seemed to have perished. Racial differentiation among Jews is a taboo, although it was the underlying tension of the near civil war that erupted following the announcement of the judicial reform in January 2023.

Since Hamas's onslaught there were many example for this. Shaul Mofaz, the second of only five Mizrahi chiefs of staff the IDF has ever had, proposed in October 2023 that Israel release all Palestinian political prisoners in exchange for the abducted civilians, but was dismissed by a cabinet of five men, four of whom Ashkenazim. To assign Mofaz politics a kind of 'Mizrahiness' is very much contestable, but to overlook his marginality against the backdrop of his ethnic affiliation is a form of silencing. Just now, more than a year after the break of the Gaza ongoing carnage, I was amazed to see the recoil with which a post written by Zvi Ben Dor Benite (November 2, 2024), a respectable Mizrahi intellectual, who, in his obituary to the death of theater and cinema actor Yaacov Cohen, related to him as *sahkan mizrahi* (a Mizrahi actor). Ben Dor Benite's Facebook friends

were having difficulty and rebuked him for mentioning Cohen's very obvious association in Israeli domestic politics. For them, Cohen is just "an Israeli actor".

Mizrahim today are a group defined by many traits, and many of them of families who, after many generations in the State of Israel, are still very much distinct as non-Ashkenazi. I am completely aware that readers might find this too essentialistic, but in that regard I wish here just to stick to numbers, as critics of essentialism suggest also a form of silencing. In dubbing 'Ashkenazi scholar' when relating to Hever and Oppenheimer, I simply refer to a form of cultural apartheid that is still ongoing in Israeli universities, especially in the humanities. If dealing here with this 'Mizrahi business' and its 'absurdity', that is, in the ongoing obsession with the demon exactly in trying constantly to eradicate it, I wish to use a different vocabulary and not refer to 'Mizrahi' writers but to 'Ashkenazi scholars' instead. Thus, the first Mizrahi candidate of the labour party was himself seeking in 2006 to dissociate from the very discourse that erupted around him.

Talking of Mizrahim is still a form of provocation and even repulsion, but, as intimated, the fundamental reason of Mishani's oblivion is that like Michael Seltzer, who wrote in the sixties the book *The Aryianization of the Jewish State*,[3] he reads Mizrahi literature and representations through an Ashkenazi lens. In other words: he speaks about Mizrahi identity from the perspective of the Ashkenization process of the mainstream Israeli society originating in Europe. This is why, in Mishani's book, the Mizrahi body appears as one that actualizes the repressed Jewish body as such. Mishani argues that Mizrahim became Mizrahim through discourse, simply to allow Ashkenazim to be perceived as Europeans. In order to create a new Jew, Ashkenazim needed an old Jew, and thus they channelled everything they themselves had absorbed in Europe, whether from Western-German Jews or from Christians, towards the descendants of North Africa and the Middle East. Just as Ostjuden were transformed into Mizrahim (then it was more common to say 'Asians'), over time, those orientals turned the descendants of Islamic countries into the 'new' and only Mizrahim. Once there was a 'new' Jew, you had to have someone embodying the old, in what Yehuda Shenhav (2006) dubbed *hadata* (religionisation): the making of Mizrahim as a form of remaking religion, thus leaving the secular signifier applicable to Ashkenazim only. In the many Mizrahi studies platforms that were opened in recent years, scholars are trying to grapple with the term Mizrahi Jewry, without addressing the much more acute transformation, to which one can easily assign the

3 For a survey of the Book's reception see Ben Dor Benite 2005.

adjective 'revolutionary', which is the becoming of Ashkenazim. These new Jews here in Israel are distinguished from Ashkenazi Jewry, which pertains also to Americans and their own socio-economic implications, and from Mizrahi Jewry and Mizrahim in Israel that were there only to absorb the many tribulations and deliberations coming from Europe. The real great question is the Ashkenazi one, and perhaps just because of that the demon becomes a demon: in circumventing the Mizrahi demon, academia and its allies tries to circumvent the creation of ashkenazim in Israel, which is something much more related to one self.

4 Men's Object: The Coming of the (Animalistic) Queen

It's no surprise that the focus of Mishani's work is the body, as that was the main sight upon which the father figures of New Judaism managed their labor, healthcare endeavors of vitalizing the 'old dry bones', from the biblical Ezekiel to Pinsker, Nordau, Herzl and Berdichevsky. To understand the relationship between words and the body – two incommensurable things (Butler 1997) – we must return to one of the foundational scenes in Israeli literature: the strange, sensual dance of Rahamim Ben Hamo, one of the recruits in *Infiltration*. Ben Hamo, a Moroccan immigrant to the young State of Israel of the fifties, embodies a blend of East and queerness, representing a sexual performance that does not conform to the patriarchal order. He is part of a group of young recruits with minor physical disabilities during their basic training at an Israeli army camp. Almost all have some sort of imperfection vis à vis the desired military body, and many of them, perhaps the majority, are Mizrahim. Ben Hamo is the only one among them who comes up blatantly as homosexual. He is small, rounded, feminine and unabashedly desires other men. The two remarkable scenes associated with him are perhaps the most remembered from this epic novel, probably also due to Dover Kosashvili's film adaptation (*Infiltration*, Israel, 2009): the belly dance scene and the one in which his mother and sister are coming to visit him in the base, bringing a magnificent basket filled with food which he knocks over with his leg, and then weeps on his mother's lap begging for her forgiveness (Kenaz 1986, 211-12). Interestingly, albeit missing from critics (and in this case Mishani among them) it is the Sabbath that accompanies both scenes, something that brings a break not just in terms of temporality, but also from the military, masculine and Zionist imperatives ("the Holly Sabbath Queen" as the story refers to it in the indirect speech of Nahum, the religious soldier of the unite, see Kenaz 2003, 96). When Ben Hamo dances, the many Mizrahi soldiers around him encourage him to continue, and address him in the female form "come to us sweetheart, come to us!" (Kenaz

2003, 94), a very uncanny reminder of "come, O bride, come" which Jews sing at the very same moment to the Shabbat, whose female impersonation is very much eroticized in the known *lekha dodi* (go, my beloved) piyyut (liturgical poem) of Moshe Elkabetz.

As Mishani rightly identifies, the first-person narrator in the novel perceives no bodies but those of Mizrahim; all other soldiers, despite their physical blemished presence, are transparent –unnoticed by the narrator's gaze (Mishani 2006, 70). The encounter with the queer Mizrahi body, which embodies both animalistic and feminine traits (Mishani rightly refers here to the performance of drag; Mishani 2006, 76), is what generates the fully anxious intellectual gaze of the storyteller:

> The expression of concentration on his face grew more acute, and *the chains were us, his spectators*, our faces observing him, our eyes barring his way. His body writhed and twisted, fusing to surrender to the hostile forces trying to paralyze him, straining to snap the chains and escape far away from here. The Arabic song, so ugly to me in its tearful tone, its wet, guttural consonants, its dissonant trills, its repulsive *moans*, took possession of the room and everyone in it.
>
> No longer a beggarly outcast, its foreignness and ugliness were transformed into a source of strength. The laughter and *catcalls* died down. We stood in a circle around the dancer and the singers, watching silently, not knowing what all this had to do with us. Rahamim Ben Hamo danced *as if possessed by a demon, increasingly liberated from the forces connecting him to us*, increasingly given over to the demon inside him; he closed his eyes and writhed like a rearing *snake*, his *hips* and *thighs* and *belly* and *chest* and *neck* and *arms* and *head* all at the mercy of a strong inner tide sending waves rippling through every inch of his body. His eyes were closed and his face looked as if he was on the point of tears, or in the throes of some terrible, *ecstatic expectation*. Zackie fell silent and only the drumming on the tin can was heard, with Sammy accelerating the beat.
>
> Rahamim opened his eyes and glanced at Zackie as if to obtain his permission forgoing on with the dance although the singing was over. He went on dancing with his *eyes open*, and there was a different expression now in those big, black, stupid *eyes*, beaten and long suffering and resigned, an expression such as I had never seen before […] Suddenly a throttled cry escaped from his lips. A shriek of *pain or pleasure*, and then another, and his face flushed darkly, and as his body went on writhing he stretched out his hand as if in a cry for help, as if the intensity of the *pain or the pleasure* that was producing one moan after the other from his mouth was too much for him to bear. The ugliness of the *animal-like* writhing

> and the moans that accompanied it, of the savage beating on the drum, was so powerful, dark and fascinating that it hardly seemed ugly at all. (Kenaz 2003, 95-6)[4]

Although Mishani does not explicitly state it, it does not take much to understand that Kenaz here describes, through his first person narrator Melabes, a young Ashkenazi soldier-to-be, perhaps the earliest and most complete depiction of what Israeli discourse cannot stop returning to: he describes here the ethnic demon, *ha-shed ha-'adati*.

Ben Hamo's dance, narrated by the observing, analytical narrator who is both fascinated and repelled, is indeed the demon; it appears just as such, in line with a long tradition in literature of first-person narrators observing the exotic East. In Thomas Mann's famous *Death in Venice* (1912) for example, this East is simply Venice, the southern city whose waters turn into a swamp of diseases and pedophilic-homosexual desires. The demon, always fluid, has many figurations. For the narrator in Mann, the acclaimed poet Christoph von Aschenbach, it is not only Tadzio, the Polish youth which makes his fixation, but the entire 'orient', whose literal fluidity is an expression of excessiveness, of overflowing emotions, desires and disease (the other side of sex). These are objects of marvel, of 'marvelous possessions' if we relate to an important study on the first encounter of Europeans with the Americas (Greenblatt 1992). The narrator as observer needs its object in order to render his own position as a man, human being, and not an animal, but also not a woman, in his ability to use words as something that tames a lustful and silence surrounding.[5] Note that in *Infiltration*, the narrator specifically mentions that they, he as narrator and the rest of the unit, were not only the gaze which observes the dance, but more than that: the chains, the hold of which the demon releases itself right in front of our eyes.

The pain and pleasure intertwined in Ben Hamo's marvelous and terrifying dance express a body surrendering to its corporeality; that is, it lacks the regulatory constraint identified by Freud with the Überich (often translated as the superego). This immersion in corporality, reveals dance in its ecstatic, rare moments, but more so, associate with what humans are becoming in the act of love, in making sex. And this scene, with its ingratiating and terrifying rapport between a subject (the narrator and the rest of the group) and

4 All italics in the text are by the Author of the chapter.

5 For a study of this position of an observer who has words with which he creates his masculinity as a synonym to his humanness (a man who is hu-man) in particularly while observing animals, see Ben Yehuda 2022.

its seductive and bewitching object (Ben Hamo) is a very rare moment of sex, which aligns also with the coming of the Shabbat in Sefardi congregations, as prayers recite *The Song of Songs* (which some scholars view as stemming from old Egyptian sex poetry). This is not a sexual dance that remains within the realm of dance, but rather a clear surrender to the act of sex itself, in a kind of unfathomable freedom, which deeply unsettles the worldview of the young men at the moment they offer their bodies to the pressures (or chains) of the national order, the moment of their initiation to the army. Thus, they observe their object becoming a subject in its own merit, and they, perhaps, paralyzed in amazement.

5 The Liberating Moment in Becoming Body-Parts

The belly dance itself, normally referred to in Arabic as *raqs sharqi*, oriental dance, is a source for many post-, anti- and decolonial confrontations right to this day. It is not just a classic in Israeli literature in its self-assessment as part of the West, but a classical symbol of the encounter with the Arab orient in modern times, from Napoleon's occupation of Egypt to Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Until today, women of all ages, in small wealthy suburbs in the West, are taking classes in oriental dance because this dance in particular signifies liberation due to its very blunt feminine traits, its use of makeup, its celebratory approach to a robust, or not entirely skinny feminine body (the fixation on the belly is because of its remarkable presence), and of course its movements, which are, like in Kenaz, animalistic and pertain to different body parts (hence 'belly', or 'hands', or 'looks/gaze', the main part is usually the hips; see Fenster 2019, 40). It seems that this dance in particular is a counter gesture towards the restrained lives of western womanhood, and interestingly, in Israel, ordinary women who attend the studio, complain about the lack of contact with 'real' oriental Arab women, in this case in the Palestinian communities all around them (Fenster 2019, 49).

Kenaz's lengthy scene, perhaps one of the longest descriptions of dance in world literature, is a reminiscent again of the observant subject of a somewhat unfamiliar and desired object. Melabes' lengthy description reminds the dark vast spaces of Africa and Asia, in the careful and magnet-like depictions in Joseph Conrad's legendary *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Darkness represents womanhood, a continent which awaits light to penetrate it by European manhood. The almost compulsory close ups that the fixation on body parts allows, is in itself subversive in its negation of a complete and unified whole (after Oppenheimer's reading with Deleuze and Guattari), but more than that, it is part of the colonial use of metonymy as a stereotype with which whites identify blacks (Bhabha 2004). Subjects/objects

of the colonial global south are normally depicted by this focus on one particular body part (mostly their hands, but sometimes their mouth, teeth or hips), because their representation fails to signify a whole (which will be transparent, as much as spiritual). Subjects of the global south have bodies, because they don't pertain to the spirit, which western theology associates with its knightly and well-mannered *gentle*, and thus supreme, *men*.

Against the backdrop of multiculturalism in a postcolonial age (the State of Israel is special, because one could argue that the postcolonial era began there in the fifties or earlier, in times of anti-colonial struggles anywhere else; again, it opens up the question of Ashkenazim as both Jews and New),[6] a remarkable belly dance scene is the climax and the end of Abdellatif Kechiche's acclaimed film *The Secret of the Grain* (2007). It is one of the most celebratory representations of the year-long immigration to France from its former protectorates in North African countries. Here, the clash between Christian French and the community of multilingual immigrants of first and second generations, reaches its dramatic fulfilment in the great celebration of 'couscous and fish', the supreme dish with which the protagonist, the 60-year-old Slimane (Habib Boufares), tries to persuade the authorities and local investors to support his new restaurant. Of course, everything is ready apart from the couscous grains themselves, and as he tries to appease the angry guests with alcohol, while going back to his former wife's kitchen to search for the missing main part of the dish, his close friend and the daughter of his current partner, the still-adolescent Rym (Hafsia Herzi), tries to gain time by appeasing the native French guests with a spontaneous belly dance accompanied by a traditional Maghrebi orchestra. The screen time of the dance is truly unique (there is another separate film, which consists only of the dance scene and lasts 45 minutes), and in cross-cutting we see how the sexual movements of the youth are flattering the penetrating audience, while the aged man literately loses his breath in chasing kids who stole his bike and mock him.

A colossal depiction of generational and gender difference, as Rym is both very young and a woman, Kechiche uses a similar gaze on her belly, which, like in Kenaz, unsettles, but this time not the narrator and the group of young soldiers, but us, the audience. We are astonished by the young woman's incredible act of agency (at the same time as the generation of her parents completely lack any), in using her sex and at the same time dismantling the possibility of a pedophilic consumption of it. While focusing on extreme close ups of her fleshy belly, hips and breast, we also watch in cross-cuts not

6 If Ashkenazim are simply Jews, and not New, Palestine was in fact never conquered by an alien Western invader.

only the French guests but also the Maghrebi music players, all quite elderly and in a position of being hypnotized but also embraced at their own passivity. In fact, that passivity – in front of a body that celebrates its being a body (its being parts: belly, hands, hips etc.), that celebrates its immersion in desire – is something that both the film and the novel share. What happens in the liberating moment of sex and of becoming body parts, in this shameless enacting of desire – wishing to be consumed and in that also consuming – isn't just the acknowledgement of the body, but more so, the admission of the demon. The ethnic demon is there just as a form of admitting, that beyond so many veils (and the oriental traditional belly dance uses many veils) there is flesh.

6 Mediterranean Aryans: Minimalism and Excess

It is important to note two interesting observations on the Kenazian gaze that were consolidated in this seminal novel of Israeliness. In her contribution to the aforementioned collection of tribute to Kenaz, Keren Dotan argues that *Infiltration* was able, by means of the first person narrator and his penetrating gaze, to render a new Israeli subjectivity that confront and rebukes the "sin of eurocentrism" (Dotan 2016, 352). The subject that is been consolidated by way of narrating, is also a new cultural and national subject, created anew after its collapse in the aftermath of the rise of Mizrahim and multiculturalism (Dotan 2016, 352). Interestingly, it is almost the same argument Ariel Hirschfeld pointed out almost twenty years earlier, four years after the novel was published. For him, the narrator Mlabes was the first confrontation in Hebrew literature with its anxiety with the orient. Mlabes' "spiritual ability to observe" creates a "contrapuntal humanism", which requires particular voices that unites but not in unison, something which projects on the entire Ashkenazi ethos, that, after Kenaz/Mlabes, is able to contain pluralism (Hirschfeld [1990] 2016, 458). Precisely that spiritual achievement of the novel, leads Mishani to argue that it is the outcome of a denial of corporeality, of the repressed body of the Jew (Mishani [2002] 2016, 478).

The failed moment of initiation to the army and the national project, is also the initiation to and in words, and that is perhaps what is missing from Dotan and Hirscheld's contributions. Precisely this big and new conscience, the new critical subject that is able to confront and even contain its own demons, is a literary vocation of a man: someone whose humanity is based on his denial of corporality, associated with womanhood, queerness and animality. In being spiritual he is beyond flesh, and with that also subjugates those who are left with flesh alone, their bodies being commodity, governed and

consumed. Mishani's sensible reading shows that Ben Hamo's dance is not merely, as critics perceived, a display of ethnic polyphony in Hebrew literature, but rather an expression of anxiety regarding what has been repressed (Mishani 2006, 25). Mlabes' anxiety is the anxiety of New Jews from their own Jewishness. The national body, regulated in such a way that it lacks visibility in the text, experiences through this sensory awakening, a return of the Jewish body as such – something present, animalistic (between the movements of the snake and the braying of the donkey), stinky, sweaty, and very much sexual (thus feminine). If body is matter and presence, the national imperative is transparent and clear, it wishes to be unnoticed at all.

This relationship between an observing Ashkenazi narrator and a ravishing Mizrahi figure, between words and body, also found prominent expression in the literature of the 1980s in Amos Oz's novel *Black Box* (1987), which was yet another attempt to introduce some form of multicultural ethnicity into the fabric of Israeli literature, until then very monolithic and European. *Black Box* became the best-selling novel in the history of the State of Israel, as well as a symbol and a resonant low point in the career of a prominent champion for the Labor movement. In this novel, the narrator, through the figure of the Ashkenazi woman, expresses desire and disgust towards the Mizrahi male body, which symbolizes Arabness and religiosity – two aspects most identified in Israel with the East. Here, too, Mishani identifies the repressed body of the Ashkenazi Jewish diaspora: The horror and revulsion evoked by the presence of the actual body of the Mizrahi in the text does not stem from his 'Mizrahiness', but rather from the fact that within the body of the Mizrahi – the small, hairy, dark body, the kippa-wearing man who exudes odors of urine and garlic – there returns to the text the suppressed bodily history of the European Jewish male, the diasporic body before it was transformed in national writing into a "Bedouin Viking", a "cheetah tiger", a "brutal hunter", or "Tarzan, King of the Jungle" (Mishani 2006, 119).

Oz juxtaposes the body of Michel Sumo, Ilana's second husband, who is Mizrahi, against the body of her son Boaz, from her first marriage to Dr. Gideon, an Ashkenazi. Boaz's body symbolizes the renewal of the *sabra* identity in Palestine-Israel. The "Bedouin Viking" explicitly responds to earlier depictions of the muscular Zionist body as envisioned by Max Nordau, which was also intertwined with the local indigenousness of the Mediterranean region, representing an Aryan embodiment (Boaz is also compared to Siegfried, the heroic son in the Germanic myth of the Nibelungen, with which Herzl associated, see Boyarin 2007) of desert masculinity, of the mythical (biblical) Jew before entering the rotten decadent era of modernity. While Mishani does not explicitly mention it, the identification of Sumo with garlic aligns with the most pronounced stereotype of Jews among Germans in the eighteenth century (Gilman 1986, 162). During

this period, Germans elevated themselves to a higher status, by trying to associate with the Enlightenment, intellectualism and good taste, while speaking the standardized High German. Garlic, with its strong odor and demanding flavor, symbolized excess in terms of corporeality (sensual and essential materiality), which the universal, spiritual European image, influenced by the Paulinian gesture of the spirit, sought to distance itself from.

It is true that Central European cuisine is indeed poor in resources, but this natural fact was transformed by Germans into 'naturalness', something transparent and proper about Europe as Europe (minimalist, refined) precisely because it is not 'Jewish', hot and spicy. A similar process happened two centuries later in Israel, as Ashkenazim suddenly 'discovered' that their Jewish food was 'grey', refined at best and boring at worst. Yet, this is also very much a creation of a new Jew which does not necessarily correspond to reality. Eastern European cuisine, heavily influenced by the Ottomans, is a rich and even robust cuisine, especially when compared to German cuisine. But, wishing to become Germans, Israeli Ashkenazi Jews shifted garlic away from themselves towards Levantines, Jews and Muslims alike.

7 The Demon and the Eighties

Mishani always maintains the word 'Mizrahi' in quotation marks, which might explain why his work is so groundbreaking: Israeli academy, in writings of Berkeley alumni like Hannan Hever or Michael Gluzman, is committed to imagining the Mizrahi as truly Mizrahi, an Oriental figure standing in opposition to an Ashkenazi establishment that is also fundamentally different. They were not the first to do so. Even in *Infiltration*, 'us' (Ashkenazim, that is Europeans who listen and practice classical music) and 'them' (Mizrahim, that is completely oriental, especially in their music, cuisine and emotional behavior) is a self-given (see for example Kippod's dystopic vision of a Mizrahi usurpation over the state; Kenaz 1986, 348-9). Just a generation away (the soldiers in Kenaz's novel were born in the thirties) Jews who were born at the turn of the century in the Pale of Settlement were remote from the West, both as a projection and as reality. They were remote from the modern western sophisticated image as any other periphery from the metropoles of London and Paris. But for Kenaz, as well as Hever, Gluzman and many scholars who follow suit, Ashkenazim are Europeans while Mizrahim are Arabs (thus also the popularity of the hyphen Arab-Jew, extremely contested by Mizrahim themselves).

The view in dichotomies that eschews 'Asian Jews' in Europe, allows for the belief that the European Jew is truly European. Yitzhak Laor was in fact the only critic I know of who was able to point

out that the ethnic wave in Israeli literature of the eighties, and especially Kenaz's 'ethnic Other' in *Infiltration*, were representations of a displacement for the actual colonization of the self (Laor [1995] 2016, 237-8). The too-easily dichotomist view became with time – apart from Mishani and Laor – entirely uncontested in the scholarship of Israeli literature, and more broadly in Israeli sociology and Jewish studies worldwide. It is as if Aziza Khazzoom's famous title *How the Polish Peddler Became German Intellectual* (2008) was obliterated as a question, because the Jew as part of western elite seems a natural given. True, Oz's Boaz is blond and tall, just like Amoz Oz, who, despite being short, was also fair, blue-eyed, and had 'Aryan' features, but these attributes are first and foremost in the hands of those who write them. Mizrahim in Israel, once they were forced to settle in the periphery and work in large factories, indeed became something new, they created Mizrahim, but alongside this transformation, a far greater revolution occurred: the transformation of some Jews into becoming Ashkenazim. Suddenly, 'real', new Jews emerged, whether in high-tech, in the courts, in law offices, as private expensive doctors or in modern Hebrew literature which is, like the Jew, new. The former seems always already religious and oriental and the latter always already modern and European.

Traditionally, the history of Hebrew literature is divided into the literature of Hazal, medieval literature, and New Hebrew literature. Mishani reminds this very new literature, that it is also a project: The Zionist project, which means the colonization of the Jew by himself. The more visible colonization of Palestinians and Mizrahim merely facilitates this.[7] All the occupants of academic chairs in Israeli campuses, whose socio-economical uniformity is notorious by now, are committed to an esteemed Jewish-Arab dialogue because that is how they position themselves as new (modern) and enlightened.

The colonization of the Mizrahi and the Arab, in its way, allows for the imagining of the Jew as Western and enlightened, through which his own colonization is perpetuated. Hence, critical Mizrahim constantly return to the 1970s while tending to pause in the 1980s. This fundamental decade was also marked by a shift in the ethos of war that was also conceived in ethnic-racial terms: an Ashkenazi rational approach that emerges for no other choice at hand – *milhemet*

7 We are waiting for a serious critical engagement with the political work of David Grossman from that time, in his two reportage volumes on Palestinians: *The Yellow Wind* of 1987, dealing with Palestinians of the occupied territories, and the less known volume *Sleeping on a Wire* (*Nokhḥim nifkadim*) of 1992 which deals with Palestinians with Israeli citizenship. Jews are represented in both volumes (mostly by Grossman's Arab interviewees) as belonging to a modern and western society, while Arabs are seeing as traditional and backward. Again, the state of the new Jew is there as a given, uncontested and without historical context.

ein brera – and obscene violence, bloodthirsty, and latently Mizrahi and Jewish in the case of the First Lebanon War and the First Intifada. While literary scholars avoid that fundamental shift and the long Likud years that followed it, sociologists such as Nissim Leon, Nissim Mizrahi and Avishai Ben Haim embark on those evolving currents, but focus mainly on Shas or the oriental Jew as a religious observant Jew, which they also accept uncontested as a given.

In the relationship between words and body, and between literature and high politics, that of the Knesset and the government, Mishani marks the 1980s as a major turning point and refers to ideas expressed by Dan Miron, perhaps the most prominent literary critic of that time. It should be noted: Zionism, as Benjamin Harshav taught us, is an ideology that created a language that advanced a society that became a state (Harshav 1993, 89). This is the immense power of Hebrew literature, which preceded practical or political Zionism by decades. Harshav mainly referred to the pioneering settlement emerging around the second wave of immigration in Eretz Israel-Palestine, but there is no doubt that from the turning of the centuries and far into the State of Israel itself, Hebrew literature and Zionist politics were intertwined in a truly uplifting manner, in accordance with the European humanistic model (of National Authors that corroborate not only the nation but even the state). The peak of this process is probably Natan Alterman's poetry, which was a brilliant expression of the Zionist movement in its encounter with the era of the welfare state and the social democratic era (Miron 2019). However, immediately following the political shift of 1977, and even more so with the elections of 1981, the First Lebanon War, and the isolating ethos of the Israeli left that crystallized the paradigm of "shooting and crying",[8] this ideal relationship between literature and politics began to be shaken. Miron was sensing that right away. He articulated poignantly how the Likud political shift was accompanied by a taste of rebellion from the part of the Israeli public against Hebrew literature and its establishment, a rebellion that displaced it from its position of influence and hegemony, and left it with a 'void', a 'deepening sense of absence', and a profound experience of emasculation (Mishani 2006, 86).

Mishani argues that Miron spoke of the Mizrahi-Ashkenazi tension without explicitly stating it. Again, the demon keeps being a demon whose presence should be left in the bottle. Although ethnic differences among Jews were already present in the language of Israeli journalism of the eighties, the language of literary discourse, which was more conservative and cautious in its colors, was clean

8 The literature on this term is vast, especially in studies of Israeli film. For a relative up-to-date survey see Ben Yehuda 2023.

of ethnic differences and tensions: it marked its boundaries using neutral language that tried unsuccessfully to disguise its real anxiety, careful not to articulate the (un)said (Mishani 2006, 86-7). Thus Mishani's 'sin' was double: he wasn't just very critical of the discipline of Hebrew literature (showing of its conservatism even vis a vis journalism), he was not shying away from the demon (talking about race among Jews), but he even reminded Ashkenazim of their own race, which is oriental too.

We see how the demon, which was likely created almost consciously in the 1980s (at the first decades of the state, ethnic tensions were much more bluntly articulated as is so evident in *Infiltration* and in Nagar-Ron's studies on the census), has a much stronger relevance in the field of culture and literature. The 'absurdity' Mishani has in his title, was something that was consolidated in the relation of a phenomenon – a demon, a body, a smell, matter – to the words around it which in fact try to circumvent it. Thus, if its presence as a demon continues to this day, during the great judicial reform and the total appropriation of the Mizrahi struggle by the Israeli government, in academia, and especially in literary circles, ethnic denial was and still is very much prevalent.

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