Grandfathers, Fathers and Sons in Contemporary Mizrahi Poetry

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Abstract   This essay examines the representation of grandfathers and fathers in contemporary Mizrahi poetry through the poetic works of Almog Behar, Mati Shemoelof, and Shlomi Hatuka. It investigates how the poetic narratives of these writers shape these masculine figures and whether they function as models in the construction of Mizrahi masculinities. Throughout this paper, it can be observed that the poets' desire to save their grandfathers' histories and migration experiences from oblivion permeates their verses, leading to a deeper identification with the emotions and experiences of their grandfathers than those of their fathers.

Keywords   Mizrahi poetry. Grandfathers. Fathers. Migration. Mizrahi masculinities. Third generation poets.

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 Fathers and Grandfathers in Mizrahi Literature. – 3 Grandfathers' Languages and Longings. – 4 Fathers' Prisons and Jailers. – 5 Conclusions.

1 Introduction

Categories are useful tools for organizing and structuring research, yet they rarely capture reality in all its complexity, especially when addressing human experiences. For this reason, it is important to define what is meant by Mizrahi poetry in the context of this study.

While the meaning of the term 'poetry' is relatively straightforward, the concept of *Mizrahi* is more nuanced. In the Israeli context, Mizrahi ('Oriental') is a label originally applied by European Jews to designate non-European Jews, particularly those who migrated to Israel from

Arab and/or Muslim countries. Before the establishment of the State of Israel, being both an Arab and a Jew was one possible identity among others. However, in the Israeli context, this hybrid identity became an oxymoron (Shohat 1999, 6). As the term Mizrahi suggests, it represents an 'orientalist' definition of Arab Jewish identity, which is often viewed as inferior and exotic, particularly from the point of view of the Israeli Ashkenazi elite who played a key role in founding the State of Israel (Khazzoom 2003).

Mindful of the challenges involved in classifying literary production according to the origins of its authors, this study defines 'Mizrahi poetry' as the work of poets who explicitly choose *Mizrahiness* as one of the identities shaping their cultural and personal expression or the work of poets who write about Mizrahim or Arab Jews and their experiences in the State of Israel. As Eli Hamo, a Mizrahi social activist, was quoted in the manifesto of the Eastern Joint Initiative – Mizrahi Palestinian Partnership: "'Being *Mizrahi* is not an ethnicity, it's a form of consciousness' […]. His implication was that this is a matter of choice" (in Behar 2017, 229). In this sense, labels and classifications are indeed useful for organizing thoughts, but they are also elective: they are fluid, contextual, and subject to change. Moreover, I use the term Mizrahi in the sense articulated by Ella Shohat, who argued that:

> The term began to be used only in the early 1990s by leftist non-Ashkenazi activists who saw previous terms such as *bnei edot hamizrah* ('descendants of the oriental ethnicities') as condescending; non-European Jews were posited as 'ethnicities,' in contradistinction to the unmarked norm of 'Ashkenaziness' or Euro-Israeli 'Sabraness,' defined simply as Israeli. (1999, 13)

This shift underscores how Mizrahiness is not only an externally imposed category but also a matter of self-definition, especially in the field of social activism.

What marks a poem as Mizrahi, while also being part of Hebrew or Israeli literature, are the echoes of the Middle Eastern or North African cultures that resonate in its verses through imagery, vocabulary, or cultural references. Referring to the first generation of writers coming to Israel from Arab or Islamic countries, Sami Shalom Chetrit observed that

> What was special and new about the arrival of those writers on the Israeli literary scene was not only their Mizrahi origin but also the subject of their works, which dealt with the life of Mizrahim in Israel and the crisis of their migration to Israel. (Chetrit 2004, 181)

The experience of migration to Israel represents a crisis for many Jews, regardless of their origin, due to the Zionist idea of the 'denial of the diaspora', which aims to create a new Israeli Jewish national identity. However, the arrival of Jews from the Middle East and North Africa to Israel and their first experiences in the country were, in general, different from those of Jews who came from Europe, and it became a literary topic. It can be observed in the literary works of first-generation migrants. For example, Shimon Ballas (Baghdad, 1930-Tel Aviv, 2019) titled his first novel, written in 1964, *HaMa'abarah* (The Transit Camp). The novel was set in one of the transit camps most of the Jews from Arab countries had to live in during their first years in Israel.

As Yochai Oppenheimer (2012) and others[1] have argued, not only is the collective experience of migration from Arab countries a recurring theme in Mizrahi literature, but the language used by these authors also introduces a new element into the field of Hebrew literature through the presence of Arabic words or structures. In an interview with Ammiel Alcalay, Ballas stated: "I think that I am probably trying to bring my Hebrew closer and closer to Arabic" (1996, 68).

In Mizrahi poetry, the presence of Arabic language can be seen, for instance, in the verses of Erez Biton (Oran, 1942-), who is considered the father of Mizrahi poetry and has inspired many poets of the following generation. He was awarded the Israel Prize of Hebrew Literature in 2015, becoming the first Mizrahi poet to receive the award. In his famous poem *Summary of a Conversation*, Biton wrote: "What does it mean to be authentic, | to run through the middle of Dizingoff and shout in Moroccan Jewish dialect: | *Ana min el-Maghreb*, *Ana min el-Maghreb* | (I'm from the Atlas Mountains, I'm from the Atlas Mountains)" (1996, 264; transl. by Ammiel Alcalay). Words in the Arabic dialect of the Jews of Morocco resonate in the poem because they were shouted in one of the most central streets of Tel Aviv, a symbol of the economic and cultural power of the Ashkenazi elite.

These verses demonstrate how Mizrahi poetry, and Mizrahi literature more generally, not only deals with the topic of migration and its crises and consequences – a topic that can be found in many Israeli literary works – but also brings to the Israeli literary stage traces of Arabic language and culture, a culture that was marginalized because of its link with the new 'enemies' of the State of Israel.

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1 Cf. Chetrit 2004; Levy 2009; 2014; Alon 2011; Mendelson-Maoz 2014; Shely-Newman 2019; et al.

These main features are evident in the poetry of both first-generation Mizrahi poets who migrated to Israel from the Middle Eastern and North African region and Mizrahi poets who were born in Israel.

For the purpose of the current study, which considers the representations of the masculine figures of grandfathers and fathers, I have decided to analyze poems written by three poets belonging to the 'third generation' of Mizrahi writers: Almog Behar (Nethania, 1978-), Mati Shemoelof (Haifa, 1972-), and Shlomi Hatuka (Ranat Gan, 1978-).

Behar is a prolific author whose work seeks to preserve the Arabic roots not only of his mother's family but also of Judaism and Israeli culture more widely. As a researcher, he has explored the links between Arabic and Hebrew languages and cultures and has published academic studies on Arab Jewish poets such as Erez Biton, Amira Hess (Baghdad, 1943-), and Ronny Someck (Baghdad, 1951-). He is also one of the founders of the Judeo-Arabic cultural studies program at Tel Aviv University.

Shemoelof is an Israeli writer now living in Berlin. He is deeply engaged with Mizrahi identity not only in his literary works but also through his social and literary activism – for example, as a co-founder of *Guerrilla Tarbut*, a social movement and publishing house that released poetry and promoted political causes with art performed in public spaces. Shemoelof and Behar collaborated on many of these projects, which often involved both Hebrew and Arabic poets.

Hatuka is the author of three books of poetry published by Tangier, the publishing house he established with the aim of giving voice and representation to those whose voices have been excluded from the cultural stage, and also to create a cultural home for activists. His Yemenite family's roots emerge in his poetry and in his social and cultural activism. He co-founded the association Amram (The Yemenite, Mizrahi and Balkan Children Affair), which seeks to raise awareness about the disappearance of children from Yemen, the Balkans and the Middle East during the first years following the establishment of the State of Israel.[2] More recently, he has hosted a program on the Israeli Public Broadcasting Corporation (Kan) and continues to challenge the underrepresentation of Mizrahi voices in Israeli culture.

The three authors share a commitment to social and cultural activism related to the Mizrahi and Arab Jewish struggle for equality in Israel, as well as a personal and poetic connection with their family histories and roots. The latter quality makes their poetry particularly significant for exploring the figures of their grandfathers and fathers as models of Mizrahi masculinities.

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2 About this subject, see Inbari 2024.

2   Fathers and Grandfathers in Mizrahi Literature

In "The Politics of Paternity and Patrimony", Professor Nancy E. Berg has observed that "Modern Hebrew literature was once characterized as a literature of fathers and sons, reflecting the patriarchal nature of the society" (2006, 100). Her analysis focused on literary works primarily written by first-generation migrants, describing their engagement with Zionist ideology and the modern reinterpretation of Isaac's sacrifice (*akedah*) in Israeli literature. Later, Professor Yochai Oppenheimer (2011) extended this discussion by exploring father-son relationships among the second generation of Jews from the Middle East and North Africa, drawing on Freud's Oedipal framework.

Building on these insights, this article shifts attention to the third generation of Mizrahi poets and considers how masculinity is constructed through their depictions of grandfathers and fathers. The use of the concept of the 'third generation' is well supported in *Echoing Identity* (Shemoelof et al. 2007), given that the subtitle of the book refers to a metaphoric Mizrahi language chosen by third-generation writers as their literary language: *ha-dor ha-shlishi kotev mizrahit*, which can be translated as 'The third generation writes in Mizrahi'.

While the poets examined here were born in Israel and did not themselves immigrate, they have nevertheless "inherited" the memories of displacement from their grandparents and identify with that generation's experiences.

Oppenheimer describes this dynamic as an "adoption of the diasporic discourse" (2011, 179), which is in opposition to the Zionist narrative and its emphasis on forging a new Israeli national identity. In his article "In the Name of the Father", Oppenheimer analyses Almog Behar's short story *Ana min al-yahoud* (2008b) as a case in which the return of the repressed – according to a Freudian reading – is dramatized. The protagonist's Arabic accent, which suddenly appears in his voice, reveals a genealogical connection to his grandfather. Here, the grandson literally identifies with the grandfather, whose voice continues to resonate through him.

In the poem *Our History*[3] (2009, 56), Behar reflects on the role of writers in relation to the histories of previous generations, and he assigns a prominent importance to poetry as a tool for giving voice to silenced memories as well as the Arabic language:

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3 Unless otherwise specified, all translations are my literal (not poetic) renditions of the original texts.

> If historians do not write history
> We, the poets, will write it. Together we will gather
> The pearls of our fathers' time, we will gather
> The gems of our memories, which were drowned
> In the ocean of shame, and we will expose them clearly to view.
>
> History that was the place of the big loss
> Of our parents, history that is again not ours,
> History that was stolen, that without it is impossible
> To write high poetry, history that forced us write
> Thousands of poems of resistance against the history of the
>   [thieves and not
> A poem to our families, it will become the place of victory.

And it ends with a clear statement in which the poetic voice reveals who is considered to be the thief of history and which is the language of the silenced histories:

> We will travel together to the belly of Zionism,
> Thief of the great history, until perhaps we put an end
> To the family silence, until we teach our children to speak
> Arabic.

In the third verse of the poem, "the pearls of our father's time" refers to the 'ancestors' (*avot*), the previous generations, and it is a quote from Mati Shemoelof's poem *Truly* (2006):

> In the bar mitzvah I was so afraid of the security guards of the
>   [melting pot
> that I gave them, in a deal without argument,
> the gold necklace of my pride.
>
> Today I am gathering the pearls of our fathers' history
> Far away from the local jewellery stores
> And I am collecting the gems of memory that plunged the lost
> into an ocean of shame. (Shemoelof 2006, 11)

Behar's poem was dedicated to his friend Shemoelof, and it represents a poetic dialog with him. The poems of both the authors refer to personal and family history and to more ideological and collective themes. Zionism is present in both poems. In Behar's, it explicitly represents the "theft" of the histories of silenced Jews, while Shemoelof describes the poet's surrender to the Zionist idea of the "melting pot", which erases memories from the diaspora. In both poems, the idea emerges of recovering and saving from oblivion

the histories that were excluded from the Israeli canonical narrative through a process of postmemory (Hirsch 2008; Miccoli 2016).

In addition, Almog Behar highlights the importance of Arabic as a language that was silenced in his generation but that is essential to be transmitted to future generations.

In symbolic terms, Raz Yosef has argued that:

> The Oedipal struggle of Mizrahi men is not against the Mizrahi father, because he was taken down by Ashkenazi Zionism from the position of patriarchal power and considered defeated, passive and castrated. The struggle is against the 'white' colonial father – David Ben-Gurion. (2004, 41)

This broader cultural confrontation with Zionist hegemony is evident in the work of Behar, Shemoelof, and Hatuka, whose verses often challenge dominant historical narratives and reclaim erased familial and communal experiences.

3   Grandfathers' Languages and Longings

Almog Behar's first published book opens with the poem *Grandfather and Grandfather* ([2008a] 2017, 14-16; transl. by Dimi Reider). This highlights the central importance of Behar's relationship with his grandfathers' histories – the family's past, his roots – in his poetry. The poem not only serves as a personal introduction to the poetic speaker but also explicitly expresses his intention to be like his grandfathers, to recover their history, and, in doing so, to recover the history of an entire generation: "And I for years have been practicing them | Walking with my hands enjoined | behind a forever-upright back. | For years, I've been practicing | to be a wave-breaker | for my grandsons" (2017, 16). The bond that Behar creates with his grandfathers through poetry traces a genealogical line of masculine identification that, in turn, reflects a desire for his future and for future generations.

Moreover, he explicitly expresses a wish to recover the memories that the waves broke, and he evokes his fear of losing "all the other languages", referring to the diasporic languages spoken by his grandfathers, apart from Hebrew, which is the only language Behar learned to speak as a child: "For years I've been practicing drawing flowers | With Hebrew words | Fearing I'll lose | The colours of all the other languages" (2017, 16).

In Shemoelof's verses, "all the other languages" become the "many languages" that King Salomon spoke, similarly to the poet's father, and the traditions that were lost, like the words in an old dictionary:

They say that you knew as many languages as King Salomon
but I don't remember you speaking
Farsi with my grandfather who extended his hand to me
and I kissed it.
Today I understand that this kiss is a very specific word in a
                                                                    [dictionary
that was lost in the past century. (Shemoelof 2024, 9)

In Mizrahi poetry written by third-generation poets, the presence of these languages – especially Arabic, but also Farsi and others – represents an important (and often broken) link with their grandparents' generation.

In the section of the poem *Grandfather and Grandfather* dedicated to Behar's maternal grandfather, titled *Ezra Gahtan (1904-1986)* ([2008a] 2017), the poet writes that this grandfather had the "longings of a refugee" (*ga'aguei palit*) and that he came from a "different world" (*olam aher*) or, as he himself said, *husa laares* meaning "abroad". He pronounced *hutz la-aretz*, with an Arabic accent, emphasizing his feeling of strangeness, given that the Arabic language and Arabic origins are not part of the State of Israel's national identity[4] and indeed are often considered to be characteristics of the nation's perceived enemies.

When I was a child
My grandfather's hands
were held back.

And on the picture with my mother
Now in her bedroom
The suit of his life
Sews his body
into the longings of a refugee
Two and eighty years long
was his life's journey
From the palms on the banks of the Tigris
And to the old fountain
since demolished
at the end of the promenade leading
To the Netanya beach.

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4 Oren Yiftachel clearly states that "Following independence in 1948 Israel began a concerted and radical strategy of Judaization (de-Arabization)" (2000, 736), demonstrating how Judaization and Arabness are positioned as opposites.

A memory is a tear in the flesh of the present
And in the picture his daughter is smiling
Her hand on his shoulder
and he keeps his face severe
the old fountain is behind them
and the horizon is the Mediterranean tub
that has no respect for rivers.

In the backdrop, some ornamental palms
planted by the municipality
and in his flesh the saplings of a white mustachio
and a black tie
marking him to be of a different world.
And in a moment he'll open his mouth
Say "abroad"
And mean Eretz Yisrael. (Behar 2017, 14-15)

The strangeness of Mizrahi Jews is expressed in poetry not only through the use of Arabic, but also through physical gestures or attire, such as the hands of one of the grandfathers in Behar's poem, which are held back in a passive stance, yet also in the attitude of someone who refuses to hide himself. In fact, Behar observes that "the suit of his life | sews his body | into the longings of a refugee" and notes the "black tie | marking him to be of a different world". These dress codes are very different from the images of the Israeli pioneers or of the 'new Israeli Jew' who came to Eretz Israel to work the land. They are clearly related to the feelings of nostalgia, distance, and strangeness.

In one of Mati Shemoelof's poems, *I Wish I Could Go Back Between the Knives of Time* (2019), we encounter the figure of the grandfather, who "never came back" because "the past has its own time | the time has its own past". In this poem, as in Behar's, we can observe elements that characterize the Arab Jewish identity in Israel, particularly the Arab aspects: in Shemoelof's poem, the grandfather played backgammon and drank arak. Furthermore, he wore "a worn wedding suit" that reminds us of Behar's grandfather's "black tie". These are symbols of distinct dressing customs, of a different culture, and of a "different world".

Hadar neighborhood in Haifa waited for my grandfather in a
                                    [worn wedding suit
And in honor of his retirement they gave him two worn
                                         [backgammon dice
And poured him a glass of arak.
And my grandmother told me how she was sitting at the bus
                                    [station with no roof

In the Ein lelo Hayam[5] neighborhood,
And she worried, but he never came back from there, as he was.
The past has its own time
The time has its own past
The time has its own past
Allah ma'ak, grandfather Shlomo. (Shemoelof 2019, 38)

At the end of the poem, the poet blesses his grandfather in Arabic: "*Allah ma'ak*, grandfather Shlomo", contributing once more in saving his family's culture and language "from the ocean of shame".

Instead of rejecting or hiding these Arab elements, third-generation Mizrahi poets are attempting to reclaim the physical traits tied to "Arabness" from previous generations and make them their own.[6] The poets reference their relationships to their grandfathers by symbolically borrowing their moustaches and beards. We see this, for instance, in Shemoelof's verses, where he declares: "Israel, once I was a Jewish-Arab, and now | I only have an untidy mustache" (2019, 60). Similarly, Behar describes his grandfather's "white mustachio" (2017, 15). He also writes about the beard of *Ana min al-yahoud*'s narrator at the end of the story:

> I am not here not there, not East not West, not my voice now and not the voices of my past, and what will happen in the end. I walk through the streets mute and also somewhat deaf. This time only my appearance worries the police, my thick beard and my stubbornness not to utter a word. ([2008b] 2017, 160; transl. by Vivian Eden)

A significant link between the first and the third generations of immigrants from Arab countries is a shared sense of strangeness in Israel, an experience made visible through the physical features of their literary characters.

Therefore, in the representation of masculinities, grandfathers emerge as male figures of strangeness, longing, and loss, figures that Almog Behar, Mati Shemoelof and other Mizrahi poets seek to reclaim as positive and significant – as part of their personal and collective roots – wishing to bring them "clearly to view" (Behar 2009, 56) on the stage of poetry.

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5 Ein Hayam is a neighborhood in Haifa with both an Arab and a Jewish population. Its former name was Wadi al-Jimal. Here, the poet makes a wordplay: instead of *Ein Hayam* ('spring of the sea') he wrote *Ein lelo Hayam*, meaning 'spring (or 'eye') without the sea'.

6 In the cases we are considering here, there is a connection between the physical features mentioned and ethnicity. It represents a difference in relation to what Yochai Oppenheimer argues in his article "On the Becoming of the Mizrahi Male Body" (2014), which is based on an analysis of Mizrahi fiction.

These descriptions diverge from the image of Mizrahim or Arab Jews portrayed by the Israeli Black Panthers[7] or by Mizrahi soldiers. In the article "Is 'Hegemonic Masculinity' Hegemonic as Masculinity? Two Israeli Case Studies", Dafna Hirsh and Dana Grosswirth Kachtan contrast the concept of hegemonic Ashkenazi masculinity, suggesting that "especially in the physical contexts of agricultural labor and military combat, the perception of Arabs and Mizrahi Jews as less civilized than Ashkenazi Jews allowed to associate the former with desirable masculine qualities" (2017, 5). They focused their research on the construction of masculinity among early Zionist ideological workers and on military masculinities and ethnicity in Israel. At least in those specific contexts, they observed that Arab men are associated with valued masculine qualities and Arab and Mizrahi Jewish men are defined as more masculine than Ashkenazi men.

However, this perception does not seem to be present in contemporary Mizrahi poetry, at least in the works of the authors discussed in this paper. It appears that Mizrahi poets' views of their own or of their families' Mizrahi masculine references differ from how Ashkenazi Jews perceive Arabness or Mizrahiness in relation to masculinity.

In the case of Mati Shemoelof's poem (2024, untitled), hegemonic patriarchal masculinities, represented by grandfather Shlomo and the secretary of the kibbutz, present a different attitude through Arabness, even if it does not mark a qualitative difference regarding masculinities:

> Your mother's sewing machine "Singer" is a time machine, that
> [doesn't stop
> Rattling and mumbling,
> One day it appears in a showcase in Rosenthaler Platz.
> At night you dream about your grandmother who walks one
> [morning
> Holding your one-year-old mother's hand,
> picking spice plants, on the Israel-Jordan border
> in the territory of one of the kibbutzim.
> A Jordanian *falah* passed the Jordan river and she blessed him
> [*as-salam 'aleikum*
> At night the Ashkenazi secretary of the kibbutz came to
> [grandfather Shlomo, and
> asked him
> To tell her not to speak with the enemy.
> But he does not agree to cut into little pieces
> the wide map of the Middle East
> in which we live, before and after the border. (Shemoelof 2024, 97)

7 About this Mizrahi social movement, see Bernstein 1984 and Chetrit 2004.

Through the opposite images of sewing together and cutting into little pieces, this poem presents Mizrahi Jews as those who maintain links not only with their own Arabness but also with their Arab neighbourhoods, in contrast to Ashkenazi Jews from the kibbutz, who sever all ties with them. These attitudes represent a paradigm of Israeli ethnocracy (Yiftachel 2000), reflected both in human relationships and in the marginalization of ethnicities and masculinities.

4   Fathers' Prisons and Jailers

In Mati Shemoelof's verses, when he writes: "[...] but I don't remember you speaking | Farsi with my grandfather" (2024, 9) the figure of the father can be seen as the missing link between generations. In general, the parents of these poets, the second generation of migrants, didn't transmit their inherited culture or languages to the following generations.

The Oedipal rebellion of the children against their fathers can be observed in the Mizrahi poetry of third-generation authors as a rejection of the more passive or assimilation-oriented attitudes of their fathers, and in the identification with their grandfathers' or grandparents' feelings of longing and loss, from which arise their aim to "rewrite" history through their "histories", as described earlier.

In Almog Behar's *A Poem for the Prisoners* ([2016] 2017, 26-7; transl. by Matan Kaminer), we witness a conversation between the poetic speaker and his father. In this poem, Behar is competing with his father's and his father's neighbours' way of thinking. He attempts to open their eyes and reveal the "big jail" in which all of them (and all of us) are imprisoned. Here, the father represents a more traditional way of thinking, or a more submissive attitude towards the world in which we live. Behar seeks to challenge this through poetry, even though he acknowledges the difficulty of changing reality in this way.

> I wrote a poem for the prisoners and showed it to my father.
> Said he: What good will poems do the prisoners, and who are we
> to doubt the justice of the jailor, judge and lawmaker?
> Said I: The prisoners of whom I write are us.
> Daily I go back to my cell, await a distant jailor's call.
> At his command I'll place my hands in manacles, and if he asks
> I'll strike the window-bars and beg for freedom.
> Said he: This is all dreamy poet's talk, but you, my son,
> Stand this day well clear of jailhouse doors. I did not beget sons
> for prison, son,
> I'll send you to the Faculty of Law, perhaps, if you desire.
> You might become a judge, instead of poems you'll write sentences
> To ease the world's pain. I answered: Father, as I am your son,

I did not beget progenitors to cower afraid. The jail, you see, is
bigger than us both,
It closes now upon us, and the jailor recommends
That you refuse to notice your incarceration, that you ask
To never leave the confines of your cell. Said he: Well then, we all
Are prisoners of God, my son, all bondsmen of His word,
His laws, pronouncements, righteous all, and not a one among us
Has not sinned, do you forget? Said I: This prison, father,
Was erected by men, and daily we assist them
In their work, we build new wards, we set up cameras,
And soon enough they'll have no need of guards, they'll all be fired
And then we shall all guard ourselves. I shall not attend any
Faculty of Law, but then I've already decided
To give up poetry. Said he: Decided what? But I've
Announced up and down the halls of our prison wing
That my son writes songs for liberation day; our neighbours, son,
Are learning now to sing your songs. Said I: I hear you, father,
But those are not my songs they sing, those songs were written
by the guards,
From now on I'll write sentences to rival theirs,
Verdicts to rival theirs. From my cell I'll write letters too, to you
and mother, in which I'll reveal
That liberation will not come until your grandchildren have
gone, long is the struggle Longer than a poem can say, all poems
fail. (Behar [2016] 2017, 26-7)

In his struggle for a fairer world, against the power that makes us
all prisoners, the son finds a more acquiescent father, a father who
worries for his son but seems unaware of the lack of freedom in which
he lives. Through this conversation between father and son, Behar
questions the power of poetry to fight injustice while simultaneously
drawing a comparison between two generations, one embodying a
more idealistic vision of the world and society and the other a more
pragmatic view.

It is notable that in Almog Behar's work, the grandfather returns
to give his grandson his accent in order to reclaim his own presence,
whereas the father attempts to silence, or at least to weaken, his son's
poetic struggle.

In Shlomi Hatuka's *Family Tree (Roots Work)* (2015), we find
the figure of a resigned father, one who lives in another kind of
prison – the prison of the home and of the television, a machine of
unattainable dreams that generates frustration and reminds him of
his failures. This is a significant poem to highlight the relationships
between generations, genders, and social classes. It is based on a
real exercise that most Israeli students undertake in schools, an
educational project where each student documents their personal

family heritage, known as "Roots Work" (*avodat shorashim*). Through his poetic work, Hatuka highlights the discriminations suffered by his Mizrahi family and, in doing so, addresses broader social and historical discriminations.

> On my mother's side
> I am the third generation of housemaids
> Who cleaned the Ashkenazi stairs
> And polished their mirrors,
> On my father's side
> I am the second generation of a young man who aspired to be a
> [singer
> But was condemned to be the audience
> (In our house the living room was a prison
> And the television an instrument of torture:
> On the other side of the tempered glass a loud crow was out of tune
> Taunting him from a branch),
> On my grandmother's side
> I am the grandson of Shulamit
> Who paid a little girl as a tax to the Jewish Agency
> And on my grandfather's side
> I am the grandson of Salah Seleyman
> Who built his kingdom in the synagogue
> Because they left him no other space
> Those who cut off his ringlets
> And did not give him a place to find his faith
> Those who stole his books,
> Those in whose family tree
> No matter how high you climb
> You will never find
> God. (Hatuka 2015, 15)

In these verses, feminine figures, such as those of the mother and grandmother, take precedence over the masculine ones. In all of Hatuka's poetry, it seems that the mother plays a more positive role than the father. She is a working woman, a housekeeper for wealthier Ashkenazi families (and here, the social separation and discrimination should be noted), but she is also a strong and positive figure who does everything she can for her family. In another of Hatuka's poems, *The South or, The Gospel of Matthew* (2015), the poet has a short dialogue with his mother:

[…] "Mom, retire, you have no strength
in your arms anymore…"

"And who will retire me,
ya ibni?… I thought you would be
a judge, or a doctor…"

"…Mom,
you have no strength in your arms anymore…"

For all the workers,
for all those who make sacrifices,
for all the roots
that go on in pain and darkness
but know that, thanks to them, the tree will be big and beautiful:

the stars are dead
the roots are alive.
[…] (Hatuka 2015, 19-22)

It is evident here as well that strength and perseverance, despite difficulties, are represented by the figure of the mother. This poem also highlights the importance of social discrimination and of family roots in Hatuka's poetry, embodied in the mother.

The figure of the father, on the other hand, carries a different connotation. In the poem *Family Tree*, the father represents the failure of the second-generation immigrants, who once had aspirations in the host society, but were, in different ways, rejected by it. In Hatuka's poetry, the father does not play a central role either in society or in the family. He is represented as a spectator, as a passive victim of television and its distorted portrayal of life, as well as a resigned, and perhaps unaware, victim of social and ethnic discrimination.

Hatuka's portrayal of the father is reminiscent of that of Samir, a Moroccan emigrant described by Alice Elliot in the book *Arab Masculinities*: "Samir had started spending increasing amounts of time at home, watching television" (2020, 97). Elliot uses this case study to demonstrate that migration from Morocco to Europe (in this case to Italy) does not necessarily represent a transition to manhood, but rather can reveal a precarious need to repeatedly confirm one's masculinity within his original family. Samir symbolized a failed integration into the host society, and when he went back home, he was unable to engage in any work.

In the same way, Hatuka's father's inactivity seems to question his role as a (masculine) role model for his son, representing a failed attempt at integration or assimilation.

Two relevant concepts to consider here are Raewyn Connell's notions of "hegemonic masculinity" and "marginalized masculinities", which change depending on the context and represent "the configuration of practices generated in particular situations in a changing structure of relationship" (2005, 81). In Hatuka's poetry, the figure of the father serves as a non-hegemonic example of masculinity in relation to gender identity construction in Israel; he represents Mizrahi masculinity, characterized by the specific challenges faced by marginalized masculinities from economic, social, and ethnic perspectives. In fact, the hegemonic masculinity in Israel is considered to be the Ashkenazi one, or at least the image of the New Israeli Jews who broke all ties with the diaspora (see Raz Yosef 2004). This form of masculinity is related to the fight for the land, to agricultural labour, and, more generally, with European physical traits and culture.

Despite the points raised above, it is important to introduce the concept of "cultural repertoire" as defined by Hirsh and Kachtan. They argue: "By 'cultural repertoire' we mean more than a set of discourses and representations. We use the term repertoire to refer to a structured set of models for organizing human action and perception" (2017, 15), and continue by stating that: "we need a concept of masculinity as a cultural repertoire, of which people make situated selections" (2017, 17). This definition allows the idea of "hegemonic masculinity" to shift in a way that is more related to context and decision. In contemporary Mizrahi poetry, the elements that characterize fathers and grandfathers can be seen as part of the repertoire of Mizrahi masculinities' models. From this, each individual – and in this case each poet – makes a conscious or unconscious selection to describe their masculine models as they perceive them.

Regarding masculine roles, in Hatuka's poem about family roots, the figure of the father is portrayed as more passive, lazy or resigned than that of the mother, while his grandfather is represented as a victim of the discriminations that followed his migration to Israel. While it is true that all members of his family reflect the consequence of discrimination of some form, his mother and father react differently to their situation. In contrast, the histories of his grandmother and grandfather represent the injustices associated with their migration. His grandfather's experience is portrayed as the result of the discrimination he faced under the secularism of the Zionist state to which he was relocated. Here, the notion of theft emerges in the critique of hegemonic Israeli culture, which is seen as attempting to erase the traces of diasporic cultures, as well as diasporic masculinities.

Migrant Mizrahi men are portrayed as victims of state policies. Hatuka's grandfather, for instance, was not permitted to wear his

ringlets, symbols of his religiousness, and he could not bring his books, which were emblematic of his (religious) culture, to Israel with him.

Mizrahi women were victims as well. Hatuka's grandmother lost one of her children after arriving in Israel. Until a few years ago, when documents on the affair were published, the family believed that the child was kidnaped. This belief shaped Hatuka's life both as a social activist within the Amram Association (The Yemenite, Mizrahi and Balkan Children Affair) and as a poet who is deeply committed to the importance of postmemory and of rewriting Zionist canonical narration.

Therefore, a sense of responsibility or a kind of 'care work' – as Piera Rossetto suggests[8] – can be observed in Hatuka's relationship with his grandparents' heritage, as well as towards the mother. However, this sense of care does not extend to the character of the father, who represents a failure of integration and a failure to transmit the family's heritage. In fact, in the poem that opens Hatuka's second poetry book, *Island* (2020), the figure of the father is associated with the moon, darkness, absence, and to some extent, violence. This reflects a rejection of the father, in contrast to the mother, who is portrayed as the sun, light, and a positive force. Hatuka's father represents most of the characteristics associated with a patriarchal construction of masculinity:

> It is possible to describe a family
> Saying that we are sparkling little stars
> The sun is the mother
> And the moon –
> Related to the dark
> Threatening to disappear
> Coming back as a fist – Is
> the father.

Hatuka goes on to compare the figure of the father with Icarus, who escaped from the island of Crete – the same island Hatuka left behind. Like Icarus, who flew too close to the sun and saw his wings melt, Hatuka's father appears to have lost his connection to his homeland and, perhaps, to the people he loved. We also learn that he lost his dreams, including his wish to become a singer. It seems that his desire to fly too high or to go too far caused him to lose what he once had: the bonds of love.

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8   Piera Rossetto, "Broken Masculinities. Writing the Mizrahi Father", paper presented at the International Workshop *In the Name of the Father? Writing Jewish Masculinities across the Middle East and North Africa*, Venice, 28-29 October 2024, Ca' Foscari University of Venice – Department of Asian and North African Studies.

> In the plane I remember to myself not to be dazzled
> By the spotlights, so that will not melt
> The tender bonds of love,
> So that I will not repeat the mistake of Icarus, I mean, of my father.

Lastly, in a classical Oedipal-themed poem, while drawing on the imagery of the prison, the figure of the father is portrayed as the jailer against whom the son must rebel:

> Father approaches the road
> Like a jailer. One has to rebel
> Against the father, to see the world.

Using the imagery of prison and rebellion against the father's generation, although in different ways, Shlomi Hatuka and Almog Behar distance themselves from the figure of the father to get closer to the figure of the grandfather and to relate to that generation's histories of migration and their culture.

Mati Shemoelof's case is different. He lost his father, and has dedicated many poems to him. In his poetry, the struggle of a Mizrahi poet centres on resisting the "white colonial father" (Raz Yosef 2004, 41) and addressing the discrimination perpetuated by the Zionist State against Arab people, both Jewish and non-Jewish.

While critiques of Israeli politics are prevalent in his work, when it comes to the figure of his father, his verses express only nostalgia and a desire to preserve his memory. It seems that Shemoelof collects his father's memories as his father collected stamps or coins, weaving his presence into various verses and situations.

In *The Journey to the Lost Vocabulary of My Father* (2019), the poetical speaker identifies with his father:

> My father had a collection of coins from all over the world,
> That seemed to me like the treasure of an old pirate
> And I took them out of the used plastic bag
> And I classified the coins by the size of the nose of the coined face,
> Or the sound that they made when they fell on the floor
> And now my daughter doesn't know that I am the father who is
>   [collecting coins
> With no purpose and I bless
> Be blessed the one who takes out our longings
> To stay within that unbearable togetherness,
> Charmed those who are killing us
> And another day is passing, letters are coming, letters are leaving,
> Letters remain open for the grief
> and only the body forgets (how) to scab. (Shemoelof 2019, 26)

This heritage of customs, as well as words, passed down through generations, represents not only what Mizrahi poets want to rescue from their grandfathers' past but also what they hope to pass on to their daughters and sons: "other languages", memories, and longings.

5 Conclusions

The experience of migration from Arab countries to Israel plays a significant role as an experience that third-generation Mizrahi authors, born in Israel, seek to recover and rescue from oblivion. In their poetic works, as discussed in this paper, these poets identify with the feelings of nonbelonging and estrangement experienced by their grandfathers. Even as native-born Israelis, they give voice to the silenced narratives of their grandparents' generation.

This endeavour implies some kind of critique against their fathers, who failed to transmit the cultural heritage of their parents. It manifests as a rejection of the assimilationist tendencies and acceptance of Israeli societal values, which risk erasing their families' experiences in Arab countries. The poets' parents' generation often endured the challenges faced by their own parents but responded by seeking assimilation into the surrounding society, often without succeeding, as Hatuka's father demonstrates.

For this reason, the third generation of poets engage in an act of postmemory. This practice highlights a masculine lineage in which the concept of masculinity aligns more closely with the model set by their grandfathers rather than by their fathers. It recovers some elements of Arabness, echoed in language and physical features, such as moustaches and beards, which these poets borrow from them in their verses.

Connecting memories, bodies, and generations, the verses that conclude Almog Behar's poem dedicated to his grandfather sum up this discussion of the male figures in his family and their legacy in contemporary Mizrahi poetry: "[…] For years I recall | All the other cities | I didn't recall as a child | Composing prayers | and growing upon myself | the sinews and skin | of memories | breaking over the waves" (2017, 16).

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