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Yemeni Jewish Identity in the Works of Simha Zaramati Asta

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Yemeni Identity in the Works of Simha Zaramati Asta

by

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Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

August 2013

Abstract

Yemeni Jewish Identity in the Works of Simha Zaramati Asta

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2013

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In this paper, I consider the collection of short stories and photographs *Neighborhood Album A* by Yemeni Israeli author Simha Zaramati Asta. I argue that Asta contributes to a distinctively Yemeni Jewish literature and identity in Israel. While Asta could be considered a Mizrahi author, I claim that a study of Asta's text as Mizrahi in fact erases the distinctive Yemeni elements of Asta's writing. Instead, Asta is purposeful about her inclusion of Yemeni culture and her establishment of Yemeni identity in her text. This Yemeni culture is evident in Asta's inclusion of the songs of Yemeni Jewish women which constitute an oral tradition of memory within Yemen and Israel. Asta further creates a distinctive Yemeni identity through a sense of place in the Yemeni Quarter of Tel Aviv in both her stories and photographs. Through descriptions of the sights, smells, and traditions of the Yemeni Quarter of Tel Aviv, Asta elevates the neighborhood, claiming it as a place where the divine spirit can be found. While Asta is purposeful in her creation of a distinctively Yemeni Jewish literature and identity, she demonstrates the hybridization of this Yemeni Jewish literature and identity with Israeli

literature and identity. By noting the importance of Yemeni Jews to the creation of Israel and the influence of Israel on these Yemeni Jews, Asta claims Israeli identity for Yemeni Jews. She demonstrates the hybridization of the Yemeni Jewish identity and Israeli identity through intertextual references to canonical Israeli poets and authors. Yet while Asta values this hybridization, she uses the characters in her stories to question whether the hybridization of Yemeni Jews in Israel can in fact succeed.

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Introduction

From the late nineteenth-century to the middle of the twentieth-century, thousands of Jews immigrated from Yemen to Israel. These Yemeni Jews have left their mark on Israeli culture: the songs of Yemeni musicians are played on mainstream radio stations, most Israelis are familiar with Yemeni food such as jachnun, and traditional Yemeni Jewish clothing and jewelry are displayed in museums. Yet the influence of Yemeni Jews in other areas of culture, such as literature, has been given less attention. In this paper, I examine a collection of short stories, *Neighborhood Album A*, by Simha Zaramati Asta, a Jewish Israeli author of Yemeni descent, in order to propose a distinctive Yemeni Jewish literature and identity in Israel. While being attuned to the larger affiliation of Yemeni Jews within the category of Mizrahim, I argue that this identity category in fact obfuscates many characteristics of Yemeni Jewish literature and identity. Asta draws on specifically Yemeni Jewish traditions, such as the oral tradition of Yemeni Jewish women who rely on song to remember, and locates her characters within a distinctive Yemeni neighborhood, the Yemeni Quarter of Tel Aviv. Yet Asta also demonstrates a complex process of hybridization in her text by describing the contributions of Yemeni Jews to the development of the State of Israel. Through intertextual references, she maintains a critical dialogue between her own Yemeni Jewish literature and writers from the Israeli canon. While Asta proposes the possibility of hybridization, she also uses the characters and plots of her stories to question whether the hybridization of Yemeni Jews in Israel can in fact succeed.

In order to better understand Asta's Yemeni Jewish literature, it is useful to begin by briefly recount the history of the Jews of Yemen and their immigration to Israel. Jews have a long history in Yemen dating back nearly 2,000 years, although there is little documentation of this history. As a result, historians are uncertain of the date of the first appearance of Jews in Yemen and the reasons behind their appearance. Several traditions explaining their arrival in Yemen persist among Yemeni Jews themselves. According to one tradition, some Jews rebelled against Moses and settled in Yemen when the tribes of Israel wandered the desert for 40 years following the Exodus (Aharoni, 35). Another tradition holds that Jews arrived in Yemen when trade was established between King Solomon and Queen Sheba (Aharoni, 25). The most prevalent belief, however, claims that 75 Jews from the tribe of Judah left Jerusalem when the prophet Jeremiah foretold the destruction of the Kingdom of Judah. This prophecy was shortly followed by the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587 BCE (Aharoni, 25).

The actual experiences of Yemeni Jews varied greatly over the 2,000 year history of Jews in Yemen. A significant component of the history of the Jews of Yemen was their coexistence with other groups, particularly Muslims. The introduction of Islam in Yemen is an important moment in this history. With the arrival of Islam, Jews became a protected minority, referred to as a *d'himmi*, or people of the book. As members of *d'himmi*, Jews could practice their own religion and customs with certain restrictions (Gilad, 14).

The first Yemeni Jews began to immigrate to Palestine in 1881, arriving in Palestine in 1882, a few months before Bilu, the first group of European Jewish immigrants (Aharoni, 162). Several events prompted this immigration. The rule of Yemen by the Ottomans from 1872 to 1914 did not bring positive changes to the conditions of Jews in Yemen as they had hoped (Aharoni, 150). The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 made immigration to Palestine less difficult (Aharoni, 159). Yemeni Jews were also prompted to immigrate by a rumor that Baron Rothschild, a wealthy European Jew, had bought land in Palestine for poor Jews (Aharoni, 159). Upon their arrival to Palestine, Jews from Yemen discovered this rumor to be false (Aharoni, 160). A further motivator was the belief, from a text by Shalom Shabazi, the great seventeenth century Jewish poet of Yemen, that the messiah would come in the year 1882 (Aharoni, 159). The Yemeni Jews who arrived in Palestine met with disappointment. Conditions were difficult, as many Yemeni Jews were initially unemployed and unable to find housing (Aharoni, 160). Slowly they began to establish themselves in Palestine, gaining a reputation as industrious workers (Aharoni, 164). Yemeni Jews continued to come to Palestine, and by 1948, around 28,000 lived in Israel (Lewis, 50). These Yemenis formed a community which provided support for later Jewish immigrants from Yemen after the establishment of Israel in 1948.

The conditions of Jews who remained in Yemen in the half-century before the establishment of Israel were also difficult. In the 1920s, the Orphan Decree was established, requiring that any orphaned Jewish children be adopted by Muslims (Meir-Glitzstein, 157). In the late 1940s, Yemen suffered from economic deterioration as a

result of a political assassination, a coup d'état, and a civil war (Meir-Glitzstein, 150). After the UN resolution of November 29, 1947 establishing Israel as a state, anti-Jewish riots occurred in Yemen and the situation of Jews there continued to deteriorate (Meir-Glitzstein, 157). This deterioration combined with the Israeli project of “the ingathering of the exiles” encouraged Yemeni Jews to migrate en masse to Israel. Yemeni Jews gathered in Hashed, the refugee camp in the nearby British Protectorate of Aden, often after traveling long distances (Meir-Glitzstein, 150). Israel launched an airlift operation to fly these Jews from Yemen to Israel. From 1948 to 1951, about 50,000 new immigrants arrived in Israel as part of “Operation Magic Carpet” (Meir-Glitzstein, 150).¹ Upon their arrival, most Yemeni Jews lived in transit camps, or ma'abarot, until permanent housing could be found (Gilad, 25).

Although Yemeni Jews have contributed to many aspects of Israeli culture, most notably in the areas of food, music, and jewelry, Yemeni Jewish literature is not widely known within Israel. Only a handful of poets and a few prose writers have been published within Israel. The periodical and publishing house אפיקים (Afikim, Heb: springs (Wagner, 280)) has made many aspects of Yemeni culture, including literature, more available within Israel. Many Yemeni Israeli poets engage with the literary tradition of Shalom Shabazi, yet others embrace the styles of contemporary Israeli poets. While fiction writer Mordechai Tabib received recognition in Israel, Yemeni Israeli fiction in general has been less prevalent. This trend may be changing, however, with the

¹ For a discussion of the Orientalist portrayal of Yemeni Jews during and after Operation Magic Carpet, see Esther Meir-Glitzstein, “Operation Magic Carpet: Constructing the Myth of the Magical Immigration of Yemenite Jews to Israel.” *Israel Studies* 16.3 (Fall 2011): 149-173.

work of Yemeni Israeli author Ayelet Tsabari, who has written in several genres and in both Hebrew and English.

Yemeni music and poetry in Israel has continued the literary tradition of Rabbi Shalom Shabazi. According to tradition, Shabazi was a weaver, a mystic, and a poet who composed around fifteen thousand poems (Wagner, 147). Many of his poems became part of the Diwan, a collection of non-liturgical songs sung for celebrations (Wagner, 157). The poems of Shabazi continue to be performed in Israel today by Yemeni singers such as Ofra Haza (Wagner, 283).

Yemeni Jewish poets have been more prolific than Yemeni fiction writers in Israel. The Yemeni Israeli poet Tuvia Sulami² was born in 1939 to Yemeni Jews who immigrated to Palestine before the mass immigration from Yemen in the 1950s (Wagner, 289). Sulami's poetry follows the style of the poetry of Shabazi in its long and narrow form as well as its symbolism (Wagner, 290). Another poet, Shalom Medina, was born in 1915 in Yemen before immigrating to Palestine. Medinah wrote of the expectations of the Yemeni Jews and their disappointment upon reaching Palestine as well as his memories of life in Yemen. One collection of his poems is entitled *Masa' yisra'el* (The Burden of Israel) (Wagner, 294). Born in San'a, Yemen, poet and playwright Bracha Serri also engages with the poetry of Shabazi (Alcalay, 290). Serri currently lives in Jerusalem and Berkeley, California and has published several books in Hebrew (Alcalay, 290). Some of her poems have been translated into English and published in the edited

² I am grateful to Professor Bat-Zion Eraqi-Klorman of Open University in Israel for bringing Tuvia Sulami and Mordechai Tabib to my attention.

volume of Mizrahi literature *Keys to the Garden*, which also includes a translation of Asta's short story "The Dowry." Born in 1931, Aharon Almog is a Yemeni Jew whose family came to Palestine before the establishment of Israel (Hakak, 172). Rather than following the style of Shabazi, Almog's poetry is written in free verse while still engaging with Almog's Yemeni heritage in subject matter (Wagner, 284; Hakak, 172).

While Yemeni Jewish poets have been more prolific in Israel, Yemeni Jews have published fiction as well. Born in a Yemeni neighborhood of Rishon LeZion in Palestine in 1910, Mordechai Tabib, called "the Yemenite storyteller," began publishing poetry at the age of 28 in newspapers and periodicals (Kritz, 444). In 1948 he published his first novel, *כעשב השדה* (As an Herb in the Field), for which he was awarded the Ruppin Prize. In 1953 Tabib published a collection of short stories entitled *777 של עפר* (Road of Dust) which won the Usishkin Prize (Kritz, 444). One story from this collection, "כינורו של יוסי" (Yossi's Violin), has been included in the Israeli curriculum. In 1957 he published the novel *כערער בערבה* (Juniper in the Desert), which was given the Aharonovitch Prize. However, his 1968 collection of short stories, *מסע לארץ הדגולה* (Journey to the Great Country), was largely ignored due to its "modernist" style (Kritz, 444). After his death, a book of Tabib's poems and letters was published in 1987 as *Be-Sel ha-Yamims [sic]* (In the Shadow of Days) (Kritz, 445). His stories and novels, which describe the lives of Yemeni Jews in Palestine in the early twentieth century, "are written with humor and in a rich language saturated with the Hebrew of the Great Midrash (*Midrash ha-Gadol*)" (Kritz, 444).

The works of many of these poets and authors were made available through the periodical and publishing company אפיקים (Afikim). In 1970, a group of Yemeni Israelis formed the Association for the Improvement of Society and Culture (Wagner, 280). This group was involved in many cultural projects, including the publication of the periodical Afikim as well as a publishing company by the same name. This periodical focused specifically on Mizrahi Jews in Israel. The contribution of Yemeni Israelis to Israeli literature, as well as other cultural arenas such as music and theater, was a subject of its Jubilee Volume published to mark the periodical's thirtieth anniversary (Druyan, 164). The founding editor of Afikim, Yosef Dachoch-HaLevi, recognized the general ignorance of Israeli society of Yemeni Jewish culture and attempted to remedy this with the journal (Druyan, 165). A publishing company of the same name also published books, including two books by Simha Zaramati Asta.

Jewish writers of Yemeni descent continue to create literature influenced by their Yemeni heritage. Fiction has become a more popular genre for these authors. Born near Tel Aviv, Yemeni Israeli author Ayelet Tsabari wrote and published short stories, poems, essays and articles in Hebrew before moving to Canada in 1998 ("Biography"). She has published several stories and essays in English, and her first book of short stories in English, *The Best Place on Earth*, was published in 2013. The stories, which take place in Israel or between Israel and Canada, include many Yemeni Israeli characters who negotiate their Yemeni heritage and other identities as well as their changing realities within and outside of Israel.

Simha Zaramati Asta is another Yemeni Jewish author who has published poetry as well as fiction. Her works cross genres, including poetry, novels, short stories, and autobiographies. Born in the Yemeni Quarter of Tel Aviv, Asta wrote largely about Yemeni Jews in Israel. She published two novels: *עושה העפיפונים מכרם התימנים* (The Kite-Maker from the Yemeni Quarter, 1982) and *ללא קשת בענן* (Without a Rainbow, 1984); three books of poetry: *למען שבת* (1982), *מתוך הענן שבהר* (From the Cloud on the Mountain, 1986), and *ערב ומערב* (Evening West, 1991); two autobiographies: *חיי יוסף* (The Life of Yosef, 1987) and *אבשלום* (Avshalom, 1990); and one book of short stories *אלבום שכונתי א* (*Neighborhood Album A*, 1992). Asta died in Israel in 1993. At the time of her death, Asta was collecting material for a book on Yemeni women (Alcalay, 40). All of Asta's works were written in Hebrew, and all but one story remain unavailable in English. The short story "The Dowry" from *Neighborhood Album A* was translated into English in *Keys to the Garden*, an anthology of Mizrahi literature. The editor of the periodical Afikim, Dachoch-HaLevi, brought Asta to the attention of Ammiel Alcalay, the editor of this anthology.

In this paper, I consider Asta's final publication, her 1992 book of short stories, *Neighborhood Album A*.³ This text was published in 1992 by the publishing house Afikim. The copyright page notes that the book was brought to Afikim by Asael Asta. The book has a forward by Yosef Dachoch-HaLevi, editor of the periodical Afikim. In this one-and-a-half page forward, Dachoch-HaLevi describes the text as taking place in

³ In *Keys to the Garden*, Ammiel Alcalay chooses to translate this title as *Neighborly Album 'A'*. (Alcalay, 40).

the Yemeni Quarter of Tel Aviv where Asta grew up. He notes the importance of this text in describing characters who were significant for the development of the State of Israel. As we will see, Asta emphasizes the role of these characters in the development of Israel in order to assert their claim to the Israeli identity.

The book contains 13 stories ranging in length from two pages to 23 pages. The stories all take place within Palestine before the establishment of Israel or in Israel. Most of the characters are Yemeni or Mizrahi, although their ethnicity is only sometimes indicated, and if so often only through subtle clues such as Yemeni names or particular foods. The stories often describe problematic relationships between characters or difficult situations: a divorce, a failed adoption, suicide, the death or injury of a family member at war, and incurable illnesses. The reader becomes familiar with the Yemeni Quarter through the stories and through the four black-and-white photographs included in the text which work together to portray a realistic image of this neighborhood. Through her emphasis on the neighborhood and her descriptions of Yemeni Jewish traditions, Asta creates a distinctive Yemeni Jewish literature and identity within her text. By indicating the importance of Yemeni Jews to the development of Israel and by putting this text in dialogue with several canonical Israeli writers, Asta demonstrates the process of hybridization of Yemeni Jews in Israel. Yet the unhappy endings of these stories question the possibility of the successful hybridization of Yemeni Jews in Israel.

A Yemeni Jewish Literature in Israel

In *Neighborhood Album A*, Asta creates a distinctive Yemeni Jewish literature and identity within Israel. By drawing on the Yemeni Jewish oral tradition in which Jewish women in Yemen remembered through songs, Asta's own writing becomes a continuation of this distinctive tradition. Place also becomes an important element in establishing Yemeni Jewish literature and identity. Many of the stories within Asta's text are located within the Yemeni Quarter of Tel Aviv, which her characters compare to the city of Tel Aviv to its north. She describes the life and traditions of the inhabitants of the Yemeni Jewish neighborhood, highlighting their unique identity within Israel.

While Asta's text creates a Yemeni Jewish literature and identity within Israel, the literature of Yemeni Jews in Israel has been largely ignored in scholarly works. The study of Mizrahim and Mizrahi literature as a category, proposed and undertaken by cultural theorists such as Ella Shohat, tends to occlude the diversity of Mizrahi Jews in Israel. In her article "The Invention of the Mizrahim" Shohat considers the construction of the identity category of Mizrahiyut in Israel. She argues that Zionist discourse built this identity category as a result of the project of "the ingathering of the exiles" and erasing the Arabness of the Arab Jews in order to create a single "Israeli Jew." The Zionist master narrative aligned itself with the European West, adopting the Western idea of nationalism and the understanding of the nation as a "coherent unit" (Shohat, 9). Shohat criticizes the tendency of nationalisms, including Zionism, to eliminate the "impure" identities, the "contradictions," for the purpose of national unity (11). To create a homogenous nation, Zionism required that Arab Jews redefine themselves as Israeli

Jews, an identity aligned with the West. The identification of the Mizrahim as Israeli Jews became a project of the state. Thus, Shohat argues, the “Mizrahim as an ‘imagined community’ is a Zionist invention” (13). Beginning in the 1970s, the community began to claim this categorization of Mizrahim for themselves for political mobilization (Shohat, 14). Shohat concludes her article by calling for a new field of study: “Mizrahi studies, alongside and in relation to Palestinian studies,” thus indicating the close links between Mizrahim and Arabs (Shohat, 17).

Shohat’s argument for considering the connections between Mizrahim and Arabs was a revolutionary move. However, her categorization of thousands of Jews from several different countries with very diverse cultures under a single identity category effects a similar type of erasure that the Zionism inflicted on Jews coming to Israel. The term Mizrahi as explained by Shohat encompasses Jews from many countries, including Turkey, Iraq, Iran, India, Egypt, Morocco, Syria, and Yemen. The experiences of migrating to Israel and the cultures that these Jews brought with them vary greatly. For Shohat, the most important consideration in defining Mizrahi is the position of the Mizrahi in between the identities of Arab and Jew. Yet many Jews in Israel today continue to identify with the culture of their country of origin. By grouping these very diverse communities under the label “Mizrahi,” Shohat erases the differences between them. In contrast to this all-encompassing Mizrahi identity, Asta uses her text to focus on the aspects of Yemeni Jewish culture which makes the literature and identity of Yemeni Jews unique in Israel.

Remembering in the Yemeni Oral Tradition

In *Neighborhood Album A*, Asta is deliberate in her representation of Yemeni Jewish identity rather than Mizrahi identity. The songs of Yemeni Jewish women echo through her stories, carrying with them the memory of life in Yemen and the tradition of oral history and the songs of this oral tradition unique to Yemeni Jewish women. In several stories, she mentions the songs of Yemeni Jewish women, an oral tradition which carried the memories of Yemeni Jews across generations. By including the songs of these women in her text, Asta perpetuates this oral tradition in Israel, and as a result, both Asta and the reader become part of the collective of Yemeni Jews who remember through this tradition.

Traditionally in Yemen, Jewish music was divided into three categories: synagogue songs, men's songs, and women's songs. The songs of the synagogue include prayer songs, songs used in reading the Torah, songs used for teaching children, and songs used by adults when studying together (Adaqi, xxii). In keeping with the Jewish custom, these songs were sung in Hebrew and Aramaic (Seroussi, et al). Under Jewish law, women were not permitted to participate in synagogue services with men (Lewis, 23). As a result, religious music became an exclusively male domain where songs were conducted in a language not understood by women. The Diwan songs performed by men follow the text of poems composed by Jewish poets in Hebrew and Arabic and occasionally Aramaic. These songs were sung collectively, often in antiphonal method with a leader and group singing in a call and response manner. Diwan songs of Yemeni Jews were originally based on the poetry of Sephardic Jews and were expanded to

incorporate the poetry of Yemeni Jews, including the poems of Shalom Shabazi.

Ethnomusicologist Johanna Spector notes that more importance is placed on the text than the melodies these songs, which can be modified to fit the text in the case of both men's music and women's music (Spector, 279).

The songs of Yemeni Jewish women differed greatly from the songs of men due to the exclusion of women from the synagogue and education as well as their presence in the home. Women's songs were composed by the women themselves in Arabic about subjects central to their lives: a woman sang of passion and love; hatred and sorrow; her responsibilities as a woman, mother and wife; epic narratives; and political events (Caspi, 5; Gerson-Kiwi, 98). These songs were sung alone or in groups and on many occasions, such as drawing water from the well or at a party of women (Caspi, 4). When sung at parties, women's songs could be accompanied by percussion and dancing (Lowenstein, 191).

In Yemen, the songs of Jewish women formed a collective of Yemeni Jewish women. These songs were not written but were passed orally from mother to daughter (Gerson-Kiwi, 98). Yemeni Jewish singer Lea Avraham describes this oral history: “[T]hey were transmitted from one woman to another in different versions, each singer-poetess adding her own personal contribution from her own imagination” (Avraham). The singing of songs together while performing chores or at a party of women formed a gendered collective of Yemeni Jewish women, the members of which shared songs and memories. Further, the passing on of these songs and memories from generation to

generation created a multi-generational collective between daughter, mother, grandmother, great-grandmother, and other female ancestors.

The collective is a significant component of memory. In *Collective Memory*, sociologist Maurice Halbwachs argues that memory is social and occurs only within the context of the collective: “[I]t is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories” (Halbwachs, 38). Writing in response to Halbwachs’s claim that memory is social, sociologist Paul Connerton questions how memories are passed from person to person within a group and from generation to generation. He argues that we must recognize that, even if memory is social, much of what is considered collective memory is the conveyance of memory by individuals to other individuals through “acts of transfer” (Connerton, 39).

For Jewish women in Yemen, the acts of transfer of memory occurred largely through oral tradition. Anthropologist Jan Vansina defines oral tradition as “verbal messages which are reported statements from the past beyond the present generation” (27). Within this practice of oral tradition, Vansina distinguishes between history and oral memory, defining history as accounts which have occurred in the lifetime of the informant as opposed to oral memory which is knowledge of the past passed down through generations (Vansina, 12-13, 8). Oral traditions, a category which includes “oral statements spoken, sung, or called out on musical instruments,” are only made visible through performance (Vansina, 27, 34). In the case of Jewish women in Yemen, songs were a significant part of the oral tradition which allowed for the conveyance of memory across generations of women.

Once Yemeni Jews immigrated to Israel, memory began to be written rather than transmitted orally, yet oral tradition remained significant. Yemeni Jews continued to participate in festivals and celebrations in Israel where they gathered to “eat, tell tales, sing and dance” (Gilad, 178). This oral tradition began to be adapted to fit the new means of remembering, particularly in writing. In two short stories in *Neighborhood Album A*, Asta incorporates the oral tradition of the songs of Yemeni Jewish women. Her inclusion of oral tradition both reinforces the idea of a community of Yemeni Jews as well as asserts a distinctive Yemeni Jewish culture.

In “המזהר” (“The Dowry”), Asta describes a Yemeni Jewish girl in Israel, Nadra, as her father tries to acquire a dowry in return for her marriage. At the beginning of the story, Nadra’s father wonders why no one he has inquired after marrying his daughter, a beautiful young woman. In seeking to marry his daughter young, Nadra’s father is following traditional Jewish custom in Yemen where women were often married by the age of 12 (Gilad, 135). This story is fascinating on many levels: the conflict between the old traditions of Yemen and the new life in Israel; tension between Ashkenazi employers and their Mizrahi laborers; and expectations of young women, to name a few. For our purposes, however, I would like to consider the role of the songs of Yemeni Jewish women in this story.

Before she is married, Nadra works as a housecleaner for an Ashkenazi woman. In the tradition of Jewish women in Yemen, she sang as she worked:

בבית גבירתה ליוותה את עבודתה בשיריה היפים שנהגה אימה לשיר לאור הנר
וקול הריחים. קולה העדין הרטיט את כל הבנין [...]. הנעימות נשאו אותה הרחק בחזרה
למקום ילדותה [...]

At the home of her mistress she would sing as she toiled, lovely songs that her mother had sung to the drone of the grindstone, and by candlelight. Her delicate voice made the whole building tremble [...] The melodies carried her far away, back to the land of her childhood [...]
Asta, "The Dowry," 42

Nadra imagines herself in the place of her Ashkenazi employer, wearing high-heeled shoes and a rustling dress as she walks coquettishly down the city street:

— לקצב זה נהגה לשיר על אשה אוהבת המדמיינת כיצד היא רואה את האיש לו היא מחכה —
עלם "דקיק" — אלחסר" לעלם הדקיק היורד לנחל להשקות סוסו, היא מחכה.
Asta, *Neighborhood*, 56

[To the] rhythm [of her steps] she would sing of a woman in love who saw the young man she waited for—*dakik, al-hisr*—it is for the slender young man who'd come down to the street to give his horse water she waits.

Nadra's father is finally successful in finding a husband for his daughter, who is betrothed to the son of a shopkeeper in the village. Nadra's fiancé's mother enquires after Nadra, and after offering a significant dowry and proving that the family can sufficiently provide for Nadra, the fiancé's mother brings gifts to her future daughter-in-law. Nadra does not want to marry, and the gifts do not make her amenable to the marriage. She appeals to her father in song:

כדברי המשוררת בית תימן
אבי אמי כיצד תמכרוני
מכרו הצאן והבקר
בכסף פדוני.
דעו לכם—אם מטר ירד בליל
אין זה מטר כי אם דמעותי
אם ברקים ורעמים—תראו תשמעו
דעו לכם—אלה הלמות ליבי.
Asta, *Neighborhood*, 57

[I]n the words of the poetess of Yemen:

My father, my mother how can you sell me?
Sell the sheep and the cattle
As ransom for me.
Know that if rain falls at night
It is but my tears;
Know that if thunder and lightning you hear
They are but the pounding of my heart.
Asta, "The Dowry," 43

A longer version of this song is transcribed by Caspi in *Daughters of Yemen*, indicating that Nadra's song was in fact one of the traditional songs sung by Jewish women in Yemen. In the tradition of Yemeni Jewish women, this song allows Nadra to express her feelings about her situation in life. It is important to note that the song is transcribed by Caspi in Arabic, indicating that the song was traditionally sung in Arabic. Asta, however, records the song in Hebrew. The absence of Arabic, the language spoken by Jews in Yemen, in *Neighborhood Album A* is discussed in more detail below.

Nadra's song does not sway her father, who was happy with the large dowry he has received for his daughter. Nadra weds her groom in a sorrowful ceremony. Only after a long and unpleasant night with her husband does Nadra realize the reason behind the large dowry: her husband is blind and inconsiderate. Nadra goes to her father to ask for a divorce, which her father refuses in order to avoid returning the dowry. In the early days of her marriage, Nadra loses her appetite and begins to vomit, indicating that she is in the early stages of pregnancy. Miserable in her situation, she resolves "להמליט מבלי שוב" (Heb: to escape forever) (Asta, *Neighborhood*, 59).⁴ One night, she bathes and dresses in her best dress. As she walks to the railroad tracks, she sings:

⁴ Translations from Hebrew are mine unless otherwise indicated.

מלווה את צעידתה בשיר הזכור לה מימי ילדותה, אחד משירי אימה שעד לאותו רגע לא
הבינה את משמעותו, ככל שקרבה למסילה הגבירה את קולה וככל שקרב שקשוק גלגלי
הרכבת הקרבים קול שירתה הפך לזעקה.
Asta, Neighborhood, 60

Singing as she walked a song she recalled from her childhood days, a song
her mother had sung, one she had not understood until that very moment.
The closer the clacking of the wheels, the higher her song rose, becoming
a scream.
Asta, "The Dowry," 45

Asta includes the lyrics of the song Nadra sings as she walked to her death:

המתייסר בחיים הופך קשוח
המוות לו שלווה ונה
גם האבן מחרישה
עת בשבילים צומחים
רק שיחים דוקרניים
מבלי פרחים.
Asta, Neighborhood, 60

He who suffers in life is hardened;
Death for him is peace and rest.
Even the stone becomes silent
When on the pathways grow
Only thorny bushes,
Flowerless.⁵

The story concludes with two lines of a song, which cannot have come from Nadra's still,
lifeless body:

טבע ארץ ישראל גם הוא עיוור.
אין הוא רואה מה מתחולל בנפש.
Asta, Neighborhood, 60

The customs of the Land of Israel, too, are blind.
They do not see what goes on in the soul.
Asta, "The Dowry," 45

⁵ Marsha Weinstein, the translator of "The Dowry" in *Keys to the Garden*, changes the masculine pronoun of this song to a feminine pronoun. I have chosen to translate this song with the masculine pronoun as indicated.

As we have seen, a significant component of memory for Yemeni Jewish women is passed down across generations through songs. It is important to note that Nadra's mother died before the family immigrated to Israel. Nadra's mother is present in the story, however, through songs. As Nadra works, she sings the songs that her mother sang as she herself cared for her family in Yemen. These songs remind Nadra of Yemen. The song Nadra sings as she walks to her death is also a song that her mother once sang, and while Nadra remembers the tune and the lyrics, she did not understand the meaning until the moment before her death. The songs of Nadra's mother remind her of Yemen and connect her to her mother. Nadra also sings songs which are not described in connection to her mother but connect her to the larger collective of Yemeni Jewish women. For example, when appealing to her father, she sings the "words of the poetess of Yemen." This line is absent from Caspi's transcription of the song. Further, there is no record in Caspi's transcription of a single poetess; perhaps Nadra remembers a specific woman singing this song in Yemen. In any event, these songs work to connect Nadra's memory to the larger collective memory of Yemeni Jewish women.

Another character in *Neighborhood Album A* remembers through song as well. The main character of "מה חסר לי?" ("What Does He Lack?") is a young man who is born to a large, poor family. He laments his position in life, which he decides to remedy by marrying a wealthy older woman. He tries to leave his past behind and enjoy his new life of parties, servants, and money. He finds that he cannot escape into his new life, however, as one of the servants at his new home reminds him of his past:

יותר מכל כאב לו שנערה הבאה לשרת בביתו החדש היא בת שכונתו. מראה של הנערה
השחומה, המוצקה, זריזות גופה בעבודת משק הבית.
Asta, Neighborhood, 16

The most painful to him was that the girl who came to work at his new house was from his neighborhood. The girl was brown, solid, her body's movements nimble as she did housework.

Throughout the story, Asta does not provide a specific ethnicity for the man or for the girl who works in the house, yet several details suggest that the two are Yemeni. The man and the girl come from the same neighborhood (שכונה), a word which Asta uses consistently throughout the text to designate the Yemeni Quarter of Tel Aviv. Further, the role of the girl as a house cleaner indicates that she is perhaps Yemeni. Gilad notes in her ethnography of Yemeni Jewish women in Israel that many first generation Yemeni Jewish women in Israel were housecleaners, like Nadra in “the Dowry,” resulting in the nickname “*dor ha'sponga* (the floor mop generation)” (Gilad, 70).

The presence of the woman in his house is troubling to the main character of the story, as it reminds him of a past he is trying to forget. He is constantly reminded of this past as the girl's songs drift around the house. The songs become more haunting, as they are the same songs that his mother sang:

[...] במיוחד קולה הצלול כפעמונים הזכיר לו את אמו, אותה ביקש לשכוח. הנערה שרה
את אותם השירים ששמע בילדותו הרחוקה מפי אמו.
Asta, Neighborhood, 16

[...] especially her voice, as pure as bells, reminded him of his mother, who he tried to forget. The girl sang the same songs that he heard from his mother in his distant childhood.

Similar to Nadra in “The Dowry,” the girl in this story sings while she cleans the house of her employer, most likely singing the same songs her mother and grandmother sang.

These songs carry memory across time, space, and generations. Indeed, despite his best intentions, the main character cannot escape this memory as it pursues him through song. Haunted by memory, he takes his luxury car, a symbol of his new life, and commits suicide.

The memory at work in these stories does not stop at the songs, however. The story itself is also a form of remembering. Asta, herself a Yemeni woman, was born in Israel. While Asta does not remember Yemen or the act of immigrating and adjusting to life in Israel, she is clearly familiar with the songs through which Yemeni Jewish women remember these places and events. In order to become a part of the collective of Yemeni Jewish women singing these songs and passing them down through generations, Asta situates these songs within a story. She thus continues the tradition of creating a collective through this oral tradition, including herself and the reader in this collective.

The inclusion of Yemeni Jewish memory practices in *Neighborhood Album A* is important for Asta to create a distinctive Yemeni Jewish literature. Asta both includes the songs of Yemeni Jewish women within her text and describes the role of oral tradition in passing memories through generations. For Asta, the oral tradition of Yemeni Jewish women is a significant aspect of Yemeni Jewish culture. By including this tradition in her text, Asta emphasizes the particular Yemeni Jewish tradition within which she writes and becomes a part of this tradition.

An Album of a Neighborhood: the Yemeni Quarter

The setting of the stories in *Neighborhood Album A* becomes an important means by which Asta creates a distinctive Yemeni Jewish literature in Israel. Asta uses both the stories and the four black-and-white photographs in her text to root the Yemeni Jewish identity in a particular place, the Yemeni Quarter of Tel Aviv.⁶ Anthropologist Herbert Lewis describes the predominantly negative perception of the Yemeni Quarter and other Yemeni neighborhoods by Israelis as slums, “backward places, with crime, poverty, alienation, and hot-blooded youths” (Lewis, 189). Asta offers a different perspective in her portrayal of the Yemeni Quarter, however. Her text, titled *Neighborhood Album A*, acts as a pictorial and literary album of the Yemeni Quarter of Tel Aviv, which she refers to as “השכונה” or “the neighborhood” with familiarity. In her stories, Asta takes the reader through the neighborhood, introducing her to the sights and smells as well as the traditions of the inhabitants. In the photographs, Asta provides realistic illustrations of the Yemeni Quarter and its inhabitants.

The title of the text contains an epigraph that indicates Asta’s great reverence for the neighborhood. The epigraph only appears in one place: on the first page inside the front cover, the title of the text is followed by an epigraph in smaller text and in quotation marks. The epigraph reads: “אין השכינה שורה אלא בשכונה” (Heb: There is no divine spirit except that which dwells in the neighborhood). The word which I have translated “divine spirit” is the Hebrew word שכינה (Shekhina), literary meaning “dwelling” or “resting”

⁶ One additional photograph appears in the book, a photograph of אילן בן-שלום (Eilan Ben Shalom), to whom this collection is dedicated. I have chosen not to consider this photograph as part of the text for my analysis. It is unclear who dedicated the volume to this individual—the editor Yosef Dachoch-HaLevi or Asta herself.

(Unterman, 441). Unterman explains this religious term in the following way: “The Shekhina is God viewed in spatio-temporal terms as a presence [...]: when He sanctifies a place, an object, an individual, or a whole people – a revelation of the holy in the midst of the profane” (441). The word “Shekhina” is feminine, and in kabbalist tradition, it becomes “the female aspect of the male God” (Koren, 443). It is important to note that שכונה (Heb: Shekhina) and שכונה (Heb: neighborhood) have the same root in Hebrew, ש.כ.נ, indicating the connection already present between the words. The neighborhood to which Asta refers is of course the Yemeni Quarter of Tel Aviv. In saying that the divine is revealed in the Yemeni Quarter, Asta is clearly highlighting the importance of a place which is often seen negatively by Israelis. By emphasizing the femininity of the neighborhood and the divine spirit located within it, Asta indicates the centrality of women to Yemeni Jewish identity in Israel just as she does with her emphasis on the songs of these women in the stories discussed above.

Asta’s belief that the divine spirit is found in the Yemeni Quarter is echoed in the fourth and final photograph of the text, a photograph of the Yemeni Quarter from a distance. The white buildings, only a few stories high, are illuminated against a darkening sky and a black foreground. Everything is excluded from the photograph except the Yemeni Quarter. The photograph is from such a distance that the people within the Yemeni Quarter are invisible. One can only see the place itself, which is illuminated by an almost ethereal glow by the rising or setting sun. In her text, Asta invites her readers into the Yemeni Quarter, drawing them closer in order to understand the place where, for her, the divine can be found.

In other places in this album of the neighborhood, Asta takes the viewer and reader into the Yemeni Quarter. She guides the reader through the streets, introducing her to the Yemeni residents, inviting her to observe the buildings, noting the smells of Yemeni food and the sounds of the neighborhood. She provides a perspective which contrasts with the common perception of Yemeni neighborhoods as crime-filled slums. The first photograph in the text is of a dirt road lined with two-story buildings. A young girl sits on the curb of the street in the bottom left corner, cut in half by the frame. She is staring straight ahead; we are unable to see what she is watching. Farther down the street two more young girls are walking toward the camera. Two children are walking past the girls away from the camera. They appear to be playing: one child is leaning heavily on the other. Nearby, two men are sitting on chairs in front of a building, perhaps a shop. A toddler stands next to one of the men. We can imagine the men talking over coffee or tea or perhaps chewing gat, a practice brought from Yemen (Lewis, 256). All of the people in the photograph appear to have black hair and dark skin. A post with an electric light on the top stands in front of the building closest to the viewer. Some buildings appear to have piles of wood or other materials in front of them. The buildings are white with dark shutters framing the windows. The second story of each building has a balcony. A single figure stands on one balcony peering into the street, observing the children and men below in the same manner as the photographer and the viewer.

The same street-level perspective is provided in the short story “חוש הריח” (“Sense of Smell”). The narrator is a young Yemeni soldier who has been wounded and has lost his sight. His sense of smell is still intact, however, and allows him to find a job

packing at a roasting plant. Throughout the story, he refers to himself as “Michael Strogoff,” the main character from the Jules Verne novel *Michael Strogoff*, a reference which will be discussed in detail later. After he loses his sight, Michael relies on his heightened sense of smell. Even before his accident, however, Michael’s sense of smell is acute, as with all the children of the neighborhood:

תמיד אמרו לי שחוש הריח שלי מפותח כשל כלב, שאינו שוכח ריחות. כך גם אני, אך למעשה לא הרגשתי שונה מילדי השכונה. כשרעבנו, ריח הלחם הנאפה חדר לאפינו כולנו. באביב כאשר תל-אביב והשכונות היו מוקפות עדיין בפרדסים חדר ריח הפריחה לתוך בתינו ושלט בהם. בקיץ ריח הים המלוח הטריף את חושינו, ריח האדמה בחורף לאחר הגשם.

Asta, Neighborhood, 62

They always told me that my sense of smell was developed like a dog’s, who doesn’t forget smells. I’m like that too, but I actually didn’t feel different from the neighborhood kids. When we were hungry, the smell of baking bread penetrated all our noses. In spring when Tel Aviv and the neighborhoods were still surrounded by orchards, the smell penetrated our homes and ruled over them. In the summer the smell of the salty ocean maddened our senses, the smell of earth in winter after the rain.

The smell of the Yemeni Quarter is the smell of bread, fruit, the ocean, and the earth.

The smell of Yemeni food is also a marker of place:

ריח מיוחד היה לאימי, ריח חיטה גרוסה שנהגה לטחון בריחים בפינת המטבח לאור הנר, בתוספת ריח התבלינים שטחנה במטחנת הנחושת שנרכשה עוד בימי התורכים. מטחינה זאת אכלנו לחם. במיוחד שלט ריח הקפה הקלוי שהיתה קולה על אסכלת הפחמים שעליה היתה חבית פח סובבת בידית.

Asta, Neighborhood, 61

My mother had a special smell, the smell of the shredded wheat she used to grind in the corner of the kitchen to candlelight, in addition to the smell of spices she ground in the copper grinder that was acquired back in the days of the Turks. From this grinding we ate bread. The smell of the roasted coffee, which she used to roast on a charcoal grill beneath a manually revolving tin barrel, was especially dominant.

Later in the story, Michael sits down to enjoy a Yemeni meal:

באותו בוקר לאחר מהומת ארוחת הבוקר וריחות המזון: הכובנה, המחקה (רסק), הביצים,
הקפה המתובל [...] *Asta, Neighborhood, 64*

The same morning after the chaos of breakfast and the smell of food: the kubane, the mahaka (sauce), the eggs, and the spicy coffee [...]

While we are unable to see the Yemeni Quarter in the story, we are given a vibrant description of its smells. The food described in the second excerpt is particularly significant as it is distinctively Yemeni. Kubane, for example, a baked good served on Shabbat morning, is a Yemeni Jewish dish (Lewis, 258). The reader can imagine the smells of the Yemeni spices drifting throughout the streets and the food on the tables in each house, giving the neighborhood a unique character.

As well as providing the reader with descriptions of the food in the neighborhood, Asta gives us a glimpse of the traditions carried out within the Yemeni Quarter. In “Sense of Smell,” Michael describes the smell of the synagogue on Shabbat:

לבית הכנסת חדלתי ללכת מאז מות אבי, למרות שזכר ריחו של בית הכנסת עדיין לא סר ממני, אני עדיין מריח את ריח הגווילים העתיקים, ריח כרכי העור הישנים, ריח שמן הקנדיל הנשרף, ריח הבשמים שהיו נשים מעטרות שיערן. כל הריחות שמורים עימי למרות שרחקתי מהם.
Asta, Neighborhood, 63-64

I stopped going to the synagogue since the death of my father, even though the memory of the smell of the old synagogue had not left me, I still smell the smell of ancient parchments, the smell of old leather volumes, the smell of burning candle oil, the smell of perfumes women used to adorn their hair. All the scents are preserved in me even though I had distanced myself from them.

Through the descriptions of the smells of the synagogue on Shabbat, the reader is able to picture the Yemeni synagogue on the morning of Shabbat. The role of smells in this story, particularly in Michael’s ability to recall memories from his past, provides an

interesting parallel to the role of songs in preserving memory in the oral tradition of the songs of Yemeni Jewish women. Future analysis of this text could consider the role of the senses as bearers of memory.⁷

In addition to the rituals of the synagogue, other Yemeni Shabbat traditions are important in these stories. The main character Tsadi in “עפיפונים” (“Kites”), a story discussed in more detail below, mentions the Yemeni practice of ja’ale:

[...] באותם ימים ובעיקר בשבת, על השולחן הג'עלה, הרבו אחיו והדוד בשיחות
Asta, *Neighborhood*, 82

In the same days and mainly on Shabbat, on the ja’ale table, his brother and uncle often were in conversation [...]

Lewis describes the practice of ja’ale in his ethnography of Yemeni Jews in Israel:

Ja’ale in the narrow sense refers to food [...] It consists of popcorn, sunflower and pumpkin seeds, nuts and roasted parched grain, pigeon peas, chick-peas, and fruit. In its wider sense, however, it refers to a major social activity of the Yemenites. Ja’ale also denotes a social gathering attended by any number of people who eat, talk, and sing certain songs.

Lewis, 132

Instead of simply stating that the uncle and brother conversed over breakfast, Asta is intentional in her mention of the Yemeni tradition of ja’ale. Her inclusion of Yemeni customs such as ja’ale in her stories gives the reader a sense of being in the Yemeni Quarter. The absence of an explanation for the specific term ja’ale in this passage is notable. Arabic words are absent from *Neighborhood Album A*, and terms specific to Yemeni Jewish cultural traditions often bring with them a parenthetical explanation or

⁷ The madeleine episode in *In Search of Lost Time* by Marcel Proust, like the smells of the parchments in the synagogue described by Michael in “Sense of Smell,” is another example of memory through smell.

definition. The absence of a description of ja'ale indicates Asta's assumption that her reader is familiar with the practice, either because the reader is herself a Yemeni Jew or because the practice of ja'ale has become more widespread within Israel.

It is not enough for Asta to simply guide her reader through the Yemeni Quarter, however. In "Kites" and a second photograph, Asta observes the Yemeni Quarter from above and outside, locating it within the area and contrasting it to the larger city of Tel Aviv. This comparison indicates the singularity of the Yemeni Quarter. In "Kites," the final story of the collection, Asta tells of a Yemeni Jewish boy in the Yemeni quarter of Tel Aviv who she refers to as "צ" (Heb: Tsadi). The story begins with Tsadi and his friends building and flying kites on the beach of Tel Aviv during summer vacation in the 1940s. While the children enjoy this pastime, they are aware of the tense atmosphere, as the words Holocaust, war, illegal immigration, and destruction echo around them. Tsadi loses his older brother during the War of Independence, and he is reminded of his brother throughout the story. A few years later, Operation Magic Carpet brings Tsadi's remaining family from Yemen to live in the ma'abarot. Tsadi teaches his relatives how to be "more Israeli" as well as how to fly kites. Tsadi's bar-mitzvah around this time, and Tsadi's father helps him prepare. Tsadi's favorite pastime, however, is still flying kites. Of all the children, he is the most skillful at spelling out letters in the air with kites.

After the establishment of Israel, a tourist named Sam, an Ashkenazi Jew with connections in the Yemeni Quarter, visits Israel. Now an advertiser in New York City, Sam observes Tsadi writing letters with the kites and asks him to come to the US and use his "kite-writing" skills as a form of advertisement. Together Sam and Tsadi convince

Tsadi's reluctant parents to allow their son to visit the US. On the voyage, Tsadi becomes very sea sick, and he is overwhelmed by New York City upon his arrival. Although he earns money to help his family, Tsadi is unhappy in the US. After a year, he returns to Israel, once again becoming seasick on the journey. This time he does not recover, however, and shortly after returning to the Yemeni Quarter, he dies.

"Kites" is quite interesting in its historical and geographical descriptions. Asta follows a single character through a significant period in Israeli history: Tsadi witnesses the response to the Holocaust, World War II, the White Papers, the underground movement in Palestine, and the ma'abarot. These events affect him directly as his siblings participate in the underground and explosives are hidden in the community synagogue. He watches the shelling and sniping within the Yemeni Quarter during the War of Independence, and he suffers the loss of his brother during the war. In the 1950s, he helps members of his extended family who were brought to Israel from Yemen in Operation Magic Carpet as they adjust to life in Israel. He teaches them how to pronounce words in a Sephardic accent and how to wear Israeli clothes instead of their traditional robes, although he questions whether this change is good.

As Asta describes this important time in Israeli history, she also provides descriptions of the Yemeni Quarter and Tel Aviv from the perspective of Tsadi, a Yemeni boy. The adventures of Tsadi and his friends take them around the Yemeni Quarter and into the larger city of Tel Aviv. On one such adventure, the children of the Yemeni Quarter search for materials to build kites during summer vacation. Asta

describes the journey of these children from the Yemeni Quarter to the Yarkon River to find cane with which to build their kites:

יצאו יחפים מהשכונה וצעדו לאורך החוף. [...] טפסו לבית הקברות המוסלמי, הופכים אבנים ומחפשים גדלים, מבהילים עטלפים, שמצאו מיסתור בין המצבות. הם עלו על המבנה הגבוה, שבמרכזו והשקיפו, תחילה אל תכלת האין-סוף של הים מצד שמאל, יפו הנכנסת לתוך הים, בנמל היו אוניות [...] מצד ימין היה נמל נוסף, נמל תל-אביב. אך היה זה נמל ללא מפרץ ולמרות זאת, עגנה בו אוניות וספינות הלכו ובאו... הפנו גבם לים והעיר נפרשה לפניהם: בתים קטנים, מוקפים גינות ירוקות. מעט ימינה שדרת עצים שם גרו אנשים חשובים, ביניהם בן-גוריון, שעתידי היה להיות ראש-ממשלה ראשון של מדינת ישראל. הסתובבו מעט ימינה והשכונה מוסתרת...

Asta, Neighborhood, 73-74

They left the neighborhood barefoot and walked along the beach. [...] [T]hey climbed to the Muslim cemetery, turning over rocks and finding centipedes, frightening bats that they found hiding between tombstones. They climbed on the tall structure in the center and observed, first the blue infinity of the sea to the left, Jaffo entering the sea, in the port there were ships [...]. On the right side there was another port, the port of Tel Aviv. But this port did not have a bay, and despite this, ships docked there and vessels came and went... they turned their backs to the sea and the city was spread before them: small houses, surrounded by green gardens. A little to the right was a tree-lined street where important people lived, among them Ben Gurion, who was destined to be the first prime minister of the State of Israel. They turned a little to the right and the neighborhood was hidden...

In this paragraph, the children reach a Muslim cemetery where they stand on the tallest point and look over the area, which includes Jaffo to the south and Tel Aviv to the north. Their survey of the area situates the Yemeni Quarter within Israel—between the port of Jaffo and the port of Tel Aviv.

Tsadi's love of kites enters into his dreams; one night, he dreams that he ties the kite to his body and that it carries him up with it, allowing him to see the neighborhood from above. He is surprised by the difference between the neighborhood and the area of Tel Aviv to its north:

מרחוק הוא רואה את בתי השכונה, גגות רעפים רעפים צבועים הכל בצבע אחד, אדום.
ממול השכונה בתי העיר הלבנים, מוקפים גינות ירק. הבתים רחוקים אחד מהשני,
הכבישים רחבים יותר מדרך העפר שבשכונה. מעולם לא תיאר לו כמה שונה העיר
משכונתו הצמודה, כאילו מדובר בשתי ערים נפרדות, שני עולמות ובסך הכל זה מרחק של
כמה דקות...

Asta, Neighborhood, 75

From afar he sees the houses of the neighborhood, tile roofs painted all in one color, red. Facing the neighborhood the houses of the city are white, surrounded by green gardens. The houses were far from each other, the streets wider than the dirt roads in the neighborhood. He had never realized how different the city was from the adjacent neighborhood, as if they were two separate cities, two worlds and they were only a few minutes apart...

Through this dream, Tsadi provides the reader with a comparison of the Yemeni Quarter with the area of Tel Aviv to its north during the 1940s. The contrast between the two areas is also visible in the third photograph in the book. This photograph features a young child standing in the foreground. Her legs are bare, and she is wearing a shirt with rolled cuffs above her elbows and sandals. She has dark skin and short black hair. She is perhaps on the brink of a smile, although her eyes may be squinted because the sun is behind the photographer. She appears to be standing on a rooftop. At her feet is a plaid blanket or a discarded item of clothing. Immediately behind her is the skyline of the neighborhood: shorter buildings with peeling paint. Behind these buildings are the tall skyscrapers of Tel Aviv. Just as in Tsadi's dream, the viewer cannot help but compare the foreground with the middle ground. The Yemeni child stands with her back to the view, confident in her place in the neighborhood. Just as the child is situated in the Yemeni neighborhood which is contrasted with Tel Aviv, Asta locates her Yemeni Jewish characters and stories in this neighborhood.

Hybridization: Yemeni Jews in Israel

In *Hybrid Cultures*, Nestor Garcia Canclini explores the concept of hybridization. Originally applied to biology, hybridization has been appropriated by the social sciences to explore “cultural processes in which discrete structures are combined to generate new structures, objects, and practices” (Canclini, xxv). Canclini emphasizes that the object of study is not hybridization itself but the *process* of hybridization—how hybridization combines elements to create new structures, objects, and practices. This process often comes about through “individual and collective creativity” in art, literature, cooking, technology, or daily life (Canclini, xxvii). The study of hybridity questions the understanding of identities as pure or authentic in favor of the understanding of fluid identities. In observing where studies of hybridization are lacking, Canclini proposes that studies of identity must consider more than just the fusion of elements but also the elements which contradict and resist hybridization.

Asta is deliberate in her representations of Yemeni Jewish culture, highlighting distinctive Yemeni cultural elements in her short stories. The songs of Yemeni Jewish women echo through her stories, carrying with them the memory of life in Yemen and the unique oral tradition of Yemeni Jewish women. Many of Asta’s stories take place in the Yemeni Quarter of Tel Aviv, an important location for Yemeni Jews in Israel, which she describes in painstaking detail in her stories and photographs. However, Asta’s project also engages in a complicated process of hybridization. Just as Canclini describes how hybridization combines elements to create new structures, objects, and practices, Asta uses her stories and photographs to demonstrate how Yemeni Jewish identity combines

with Israeli identity in a process of hybridization. Asta argues that Yemeni Jews have a claim to Israeli identity due to their significant roles in the history of the State of Israel. Asta demonstrates this process of the hybridization of Yemeni Jewish identity with Israeli identity through her characters' references to canonical Israeli literature. As a result, Asta creates a Yemeni Jewish literature and identity that is both distinctively Yemeni but also influences and is influenced by Israeli literature and identity.

Israeli Identity for Yemeni Jews

While the stories and photographs in *Neighborhood Album A* describe the Yemeni Quarter of Tel Aviv, they also demonstrate the hybridization of Yemeni Jews in Israel. In her photographs and stories, Asta claims not only the identity of Yemeni Jew for her community but also the Israeli identity. By noting the presence of Yemeni Jews in Palestine before the establishment of Israel and describing their involvement in the creation of Israel through their roles in the Irgun and the Israeli army in the War of Independence, Asta indicates the importance of Yemeni Jews in the establishment of the State of Israel. For Asta, the important role of these Yemeni Jews in the history of Israel gives this community a claim to the Israeli identity.

In the story “Kites” discussed in detail above, Asta introduces the reader to Tsadi, a Yemeni Jewish boy in Israel. Unlike the many Jews who came from Yemen in Operation Magic Carpet in the early 1950s, Tsadi and his community lived in Palestine before the establishment of Israel. Like other Jews in Palestine, Yemeni Jews made significant contributions to the development of the state of Israel. One example described by Tsadi is the involvement of his brothers and sister in the underground organization. This organization, Irgun Zeva’I Leummi (Heb: National Military Organization), often referred to as simply the Irgun or by its initials as Etsel, was founded in 1931 by Jews opposed to the “restrained” position of the more established defense organization, the Haganah (Gilbert, 80; Niv, 27). In the 1930s, the Irgun carried out reprisal attacks against Arabs, and after the publication of the White Paper by the British government in 1939 limiting Jewish immigration to Israel, the Irgun redirected its activities against

British targets, both property and people, in Palestine (Niv, 27). The Irgun was condemned by the Jewish Agency, the official organization assisting the development of Israel, which saw the Irgun's activities as destructive and hindering to the establishment of the State of Israel (Niv, 27). In the following years, the Jewish Agency encouraged the capture of Irgun members who were then given to the British (Niv, 28).

Tsadi observes the activities of the Irgun in the Yemeni Quarter, including the secret activities of his brother and sister as well as the explosives for use by the Irgun hidden in the community synagogue. He describes two wars: one against Hitler and the other against the British, who did not want the Jews in Israel, by the Irgun. Tsadi describes the British reaction to the involvement of Yemeni youth in the Irgun as the British catch and interrogate the youth in a field, refusing to allow their mothers to bring them water. In his ethnography, Lewis notes that many Yemeni youth in Palestine joined the Irgun, which in part contributed to the Ashkenazi perception of the Yemeni neighborhoods as dangerous and rebellious (Lewis, 190). Although Tsadi notes the tension within the Jewish community regarding the activity of the Irgun, he seems to express pride in the involvement of the Yemeni Jews in the "war against the British" to create the State of Israel.

As time progresses, Tsadi witnesses the establishment of Israel and the War of Independence. Many families in the neighborhood, including Tsadi's, lose a son, father, or husband in the War of Independence. Just as Tsadi is proud of his community's involvement in the Irgun, he describes with pride the sacrifices the Yemeni Jews made

during the war. In this way, he asserts the role of Yemeni Jews in the creation of Israel and the claim of Yemeni Jews to the Israeli identity.

In the story “בצילו” (“In His Shadow”) and the photograph which follows it, Asta also recognizes the contributions of Yemeni Jews to the State of Israel. The story describes the life of a mother and daughter who have lost their husband and father, יחיא (Yechia). This name indicates that the father is most likely Yemeni. The mother overwhelms her daughter with her grief over the death of her husband, which she constantly expresses in the sentence “חבל שאבא נהרג” (Heb: It is a shame that father was killed) (Asta, *Neighborhood*, 33). Her daughter, named Yechiela after her father, is frustrated that she must constantly mourn her father’s death rather than enjoy her own life. The daughter expresses her frustration to her mother, and while her mother understands and sympathizes, she cannot change her own grief. The story ends with the inability of the relationship between the two women to move past this grief.

This moving story about the relationship between a mother and daughter expresses the inter-generational conflicts that existed among Yemeni Jews.⁸ Despite her constant conflict with her daughter, Yechiela’s mother has a brief moment where she understands her daughter’s attempt to move past the death of her father and enjoy life. As she waits for her daughter to come home one night, she overhears her daughter say goodnight to her soldier boyfriend:

⁸ For more on the relationships between Yemeni Jewish mothers and daughters in Israel, see Lisa Gilad, *Ginger and Salt: Yemeni Jewish Women in an Israeli Town*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1989. Print.

כאשר בפעם הראשונה אחרה יחיאלה לחזור הביתה, חכתה לה האם באורות דלוקים. היא שמעה את הבת מתלחשת עם החבר לבוש המדים, לרגע עמד ליבה מדפוק. אכן גדלה הילדה. היא זכרה את עצמה בחברתו של לובש מדים הנפרד ממנה.
Asta, Neighborhood, 33

When for the first time Yechiela returned home late, her mother waited for her with the lights on. She heard her daughter whispering with her uniform-clad boyfriend, and for a moment her heart stopped beating. So her daughter was grown. She remembered herself in the company of the man wearing a uniform who was separated from her.

For the mother, this soldier was her husband, Yechia, who was killed years before.

Yechiela's mother hopes that her misfortune of losing a husband in war does not happen to her daughter. The experience of loving a soldier unites the two women, however briefly. Throughout Asta's stories, we see Yemeni Jewish men serving in the Israeli army, and many, like Yechia, are killed, leaving families mourning their loss.

Just as the injury or death of Yemeni men in the army is a theme throughout the book, the service of these men to their country plays a significant role in inserting the Yemeni place within Israel itself. The photograph following "In His Shadow," the second photograph in the book, is of an Israeli war monument. The monument depicts three men carrying rifles, their faces hardened in the stone. Two men stand facing the enemy, rifles ready. A third is on his knees behind them, his head turned away from the enemy, looking behind him. At the bottom of the monument, a text is carved in the stone: "מנשרים קלו מאריות גברו" (*Asta, Neighborhood, 35*). This text comes directly from the Bible, 2 Samuel chapter 1 verse 23, in which David sings a eulogy for King Saul and his son Jonathan, who were killed in battle: "They were swifter than eagles,/ They were stronger than lions!" (JPS, 645). Although this photograph, like the others in the book, is

not accompanied by a caption, the reader can easily identify the monument as one for soldiers, specifically the War of Independence Memorial in Tel Aviv. It is interesting to note, however, that nothing about this monument is particular to Yemeni Jews or even Mizrahi Jews. This monument is for all Israelis, those who have served their country in battle. By including this photograph and highlighting the Yemeni Jewish soldiers fighting for the establishment of the State of Israel, Asta locates the Yemeni Quarter, the space of Yemeni Jews, within Israel. Further, she is not only arguing that Yemeni Jews belong to Israel but also that they have been essential to the creation of Israel. She claims the Israeli identity for Yemeni Jews.

The use of photographs to interrogate identity and to fashion a hybrid identity is not without precedent in Mizrahi literature. In “Location, not Identity,” literary scholar Hannan Hever discusses the novel *The One Facing Us* (זה עם הפנים אלינו) by Mizrahi author Ronit Matalon. The novel tells the story of Esther, who has been sent by her family in Israel to live with her uncle and his family in Cameroon. Throughout the story, Esther pieces together her family’s history, which extends across generations and from Egypt to Israel, Africa to New York. Esther gathers stories and photographs about her family. These photographs separate the chapters of the text. Thirty-one spaces for photographs are included in the novel; of these, 15 photographs are missing, and one missing photograph is replaced by a painting. In his article, Hever argues that Matalon uses the photographs to criticize the rigidity of identity politics and instead create a fluid Mizrahi politics of location. Hever describes how the photographs and stories within the novel contradict each other. As a result, the identity of the characters in the photographs

and stories cannot be fixed. Instead, Hever argues, Matalon proposes a fluid identity which depends on location and, more particularly, change in location, a “politics dictated by a shifting rather than a fixed location” (Hever, 325). Further, Matalon challenges the constructed nature of the photograph by portraying the process of creating the photograph, which “offers no more than a fragment of reality cut off from history and space,” in order to question the process of identity formation (Hever, 327). Thus, both Asta and Matalon utilize photographs to understand the complexities of Mizrahi identity in Israel: while Matalon uses photographs to criticize rigid identity categories and argue for a fluid understanding of identity, Asta uses photographs in *Neighborhood Album A* to claim the Israeli identity for Yemeni Jews and to suggest the hybridization of the identity of Yemeni Jews in Israel.

The Process of Hybridization through Intertextuality

While Asta's fiction and photographs claim the Israeli identity for Yemeni Jews, her text uses intertextuality to create a dialogue between these elements. As mentioned above, Asta includes songs of Yemeni Jewish women in her text in order to establish Yemeni Jewish literature as a collective with a distinct cultural tradition. Asta includes other intertextual references in *Neighborhood Album A* which allow her to facilitate dialogue between Yemeni Jewish literature and canonical Israeli literature. While the characters in her texts reference canonical Israeli authors, they interpret the texts they reference through their own culture: some characters sing poems of Ashkenazi Israeli poets to their own tunes, while others relate to Ashkenazi poets through their own literature. In this way, the Yemeni characters in Asta's texts not only indicate the influence of canonical Israeli culture on their own culture, but they also assert their own influence on this Israeli culture which mirrors the process of hybridization experienced by Yemeni Jews in Israel.

Literary critic Gerard Genette provides a taxonomy of types of transtextuality, including intertextuality, in his book *Palimpsests*. He defines transtextuality as "all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts" (Genette, 1). Genette explores five types of transtextuality: intertextuality, paratextuality, metatextuality, hypertextuality, and architextuality. The first type, intertextuality, is the presence of one text, either through quoting or allusions, in another text. Intertextuality will be our main focus here, and it is discussed in more detail below. Genette gives examples of paratextuality, the second type of transtextuality: title, subtitle, preface,

cover, and illustrations, among others, are all examples of paratextuality. These paratextual elements provide the text with a “setting and sometimes a commentary” (Genette, 3). The third type is metatextuality, or commentary, which “unites a given text to another, of which it speaks without necessarily citing it” (Genette, 4). Genette calls the next type, architextuality, the “most abstract and most implicit of all” (Genette, 4). Architextuality is taxonomic, detailing the type or category of the text, such as a novel, a story, or poems. The final type of transtextuality described by Genette is hypertextuality, which he defines as any way besides commentary by which one text is “grafted” onto another (Genette, 5). Genette is deliberate in his choice of the word graft, using it to emphasize the transformative process by which one text relies on another. He cites the connection between *Ulysses* by James Joyce and the *Aeneid* and the *Odyssey* as an example of hypertextuality.

Asta masterfully incorporates several different types of transtextuality in *Neighborhood Album A*. As noted above, Asta includes an epigraph at the beginning of her book describing the divine presence in the neighborhood. The epigraph as well as the photographs throughout the book are both examples of paratextuality. The fourth type of transtextuality listed above, architextuality, establishes the category of the text. As discussed above, Asta’s title refers to her text as an “album,” a taxonomical category which indicates the purpose of her book in creating an album of the Yemeni Quarter through the photographs and the stories.

While Asta uses several types of transtextuality in *Neighborhood Album A*, her use of intertextuality is particularly notable for creating a dialogue between Yemeni

Jewish literature and Israeli literature and thus indicating the process of hybridization available to Yemeni Jews. Genette defines intertextuality simply as “the actual presence of one text within another” (Genette, 1-2). He distinguishes between two types of intertextuality: quotation, an explicit reference to another text in quotation marks, and allusion, in which a text establishes and assumes perception of a relationship between the text and another text through small “inflections” (Genette, 2). Both types of intertextuality are present in Asta’s book, and through each type of intertextuality, Asta includes references to canonical Israeli literature within her Yemeni Jewish text. As a result, the presence of canonical Israeli literature within Yemeni Jewish literature and the influence exerted on these canonical texts by the Yemeni characters mirrors the process of hybridization for Yemeni Jews in Israel.

Although Asta is firm in her articulation of Yemeni Jewish culture, her intertextuality often includes canonical Israeli poets and novelists of European heritage in addition to poets of the Yemeni Jewish tradition. In “Kites,” Asta engages with two poets at the center of Israeli poetry: Hayyim Nahman Bialik and Shaul Tchernichovsky. As the main character, Tsadi, studies for his bar-mitzvah, his mind wanders to a line by his favorite poet: “אל אלוקי מדברות הפלאי ויאסרוהו ברצועות” (Asta, *Neighborhood*, 81) (Heb: “The God of wonders of the wilderness [...] Before they bound him [...]” (Tchernichovsky, *Flowering*, 114)). It is important to note that Tsadi’s quotation alters the poem slightly. In the original poem, the lines read:

אל אלהי מדבריות הפלי,
אל אלהי כובשי כנען בסופה—
ויאסרוהו ברצועות של תפלין...

The God of wonders of the wilderness,
The God of gods, Who took Canaan with storm
Before they bound him in phylacteries.
Tchernichovsky, *Flowering*, 114

Tsadi never states the name of his favorite poet. Instead, he describes a time when the poet, also a physician, visited his school. Tsadi was impressed by the poet's appearance, as he resembled a character from his mother's stories:

ראה לפניו את דמות השייך או האמיר (שליט), כפי שאימו תארה לו בסיפוריה: גבה-קומה,
שפם עבות, בלורית מקסימה, שופע חיוכים, מלטף ראש כל ילד.
Asta, *Neighborhood*, 81

Tsadi saw before him the character of the sheikh or the amir (the ruler), like his mother described to him in her stories: tall, thick mustache, enchanting forelock, smiling abundantly, stroking the head of a child.

The poet/physician engages Tsadi in conversation, commenting on his hair which resembles a forest and asking if he has animals, or lice, in this forest. Tsadi assures the poet/ physician that he bathes regularly and does not have lice.

Tsadi speaks of this poet, both in reference to his poetry and in describing the visit to his school, with familiarity. He never mentions the poet by name, although there are clues as to the identity of the poet. Tsadi begins his discussion of his favorite poet by quoting a line from one of Tchernichovsky's most well-known poems, "Before a Status of Apollo" ("לנכח פסל אפולו"). The second indication that this poet is Tchernichovsky is the poet's profession as a physician. Born in 1875, Tchernichovsky attended medical school and practiced medicine in Russia before immigrating to Palestine where he became the physician of the municipal schools in Tel Aviv in 1934 (Schweid, 563-565).

While Tchernichovsky is perhaps most known for his poems, he also composed stories and essays and translated many literary works into Hebrew (Schweid, 564).

Tchernichovsky's poetry is often critical of Jewish Diaspora culture and expresses his sense of alienation from the Jewish community. In "Before a Statue of Apollo," the poem quoted by Tsadi, Tchernichovsky criticizes Jews for binding Judaism in rituals while failing to celebrate beauty and life, epitomized by the Greek god Apollo. The presence of this poem by Tchernichovsky, a canonical Ashkenazi Israeli poet critical of Diaspora culture, is provocative in a text which so strongly exerts a Yemeni identity in Israel. In the poem, Tschernichovsky expresses admiration for Greek culture, using his reflection on Greek culture to criticize the current state of Judaism. Just as the figure in "Before a Statue of Apollo" creates a dialogue between Greek and Jewish culture, so does Tsadi create a dialogue between Yemeni and Israeli culture through this intertextual reference.

After Tsadi shares with the reader his interaction with his favorite poet, he describes his sister's favorite poet, Hayyim Nahman Bialik:

אחותו אהבה דווקא את ביאליק, כל הזמן שרה את שיריו. המנגינות הזכירו לו את שירתה
של אימו [...] *Asta, Neighborhood, 81*

His sister actually loved Bialik, she sang his poems all the time. The melodies reminded him of the poetry of his mother [...]

Bialik was born in what is now Ukraine in 1873 (Leiter and Spicehandler, 561). He was deeply affected by the persecution of Jews in Eastern Europe, especially the Kishinev pogrom in 1903 (563). In 1924 he immigrated to Tel Aviv (Leiter and Spicehandler,

564). Bialik was central to freeing modern Hebrew from its Biblical influence, thus contributing to the development of a modern literary language for the Jewish people. While Bialik generally wrote in the Ashkenazi accent, he was one of the first poets to try writing in the Sephardic accent (Leiter and Spicehandler, 565). This poet became, for many Israelis, the Israeli national poet.

Just as Tsadi relates to the figure of Tchernichovsky through a character in his mother's stories and alters Tchernichovsky's poems to fit his own intentions, so does his sister adapt the poems of Bialik to the Yemeni traditions. Rather than merely reciting Bialik's songs, Tsadi's sister sings them using the same tunes her mother sings. Her mother's songs are likely the same songs sung by Yemeni Jewish women for generations. The choice of Bialik, a poet who pushed against the boundaries of language by writing in a modern Hebrew and experimenting with the Sephardic accent in his poetry, is significant in this instance. By singing the poems of Bialik to her own tunes, Tsadi's sister incorporates Bialik's poetry into her own tradition and pushes his poetry beyond its boundaries, thus exerting her own influence on this canonical poetry.

In addition to quoting from and referring to Ashkenazi poets of canonical Israeli literature, Asta also alludes to celebrated Israeli novelist Amos Oz in her short story "חוש הריח" ("Sense of Smell"). She uses another type of transtextuality, metatextuality, to connect the novel 1968 *My Michael* by Amos Oz to her short story "Sense of Smell" without quoting or referencing Oz's novel at all in this story. Instead, she relies on the novel *Michael Strogoff* by Jules Verne, a novel which is also central to Oz's *My Michael*.

By incorporating a novel which is also used by this prominent Israeli author, Asta creates a dialogue between her text and canonical Israeli literature.

At the center of the conversation between Asta and Oz is *Michael Strogoff*, a novel by Jules Verne published in 1876. Set in tsarist Russia, the novel describes the journey of Michael Strogoff, a courier for the tsar, carrying a message across Siberia to warn the tsar's brother of a treasonous officer. On his journey, Strogoff assists a young woman, Nadia. The pair encounters the treasonous officer, Ivan Ogareff, and his informant, Sangarre. Ogareff blinds Strogoff with a heated sword, but Strogoff continues on his journey and reaches the tsar's brother. There Strogoff reveals that he was not actually blinded but was in fact saved by his tears shed for his mother. The novel concludes with the death of Ogareff and Sangarre and the marriage of Michael and Nadia.

Perhaps one of the most canonical Israeli novelists, Amos Oz was born to Ashkenazi parents in Jerusalem in 1939. For many, Amos Oz epitomizes the ideal Israeli: after witnessing and participating in the creation of the State of Israel, Oz lived on a kibbutz for two decades (Balaban, 554-555). One of Israel's most popular writers, Oz has won several literary prizes, including the Bialik Prize and the Israel Prize (Balaban, 555-556). Published in Hebrew in 1968 and in English in 1972, *My Michael* is Oz's second novel (Balaban, 555). After the publication of this novel, Oz became very popular within Israel (Balaban, 555). The novel focuses on the relationship between a young man, Michael, and a young woman, Hannah, in Jerusalem in the early years of the State of Israel. It is narrated by Hannah, whose life is dominated by both nightmares and

fantasies. One of Hannah's recurring fantasies involves the hero Michael Strogoff who stands in contrast to her ordinary geologist husband Michael. During their second meeting, Hannah tells Michael of her love for adventure novels, including those by Jules Verne. She then describes her fantasy of Michael Strogoff:

Even now I sometimes long to meet a man like Michael Strogoff. Big and strong, but at the same time quiet and reserved. He must be silent, loyal, subdued, but only controlling the spate of his inner energies with an effort. What do you mean? Of course I'm not comparing you to Michael Strogoff. Why on earth should I? Of course not.
Oz, 25-26

Despite Hannah's protests, she clearly compares her husband Michael to the hero Michael throughout the novel. When the Suez Crisis begins in 1956, Hannah dreams of the brave Strogoff who does not flinch before the traitor Ogareff:

He stood before the shaven-headed Tartar notables, whose faces bore an expression of brutish cruelty. He ended his tortures in silence and did not betray his secret. His mouth was tight-shut and magnificent. Bluish steel glinted in his eyes.
Oz, 169

Hannah imagines a hero in the figure of Michael Strogoff: a man brave when confronted with danger. However, when her husband demonstrates his own bravery, strongly expressing his opinion about how Israel can win the war, Hannah is shocked by his passion. Throughout the novel, the reader witnesses the disintegration of the relationship between Hannah and her husband, who cannot live up to his wife's fantasy of Michael Strogoff.

Just as Hannah's husband Michael is compared with Michael Strogoff in *My Michael*, so does the main character in Asta's "Sense of Smell" become a figure like

Michael Strogoff. As mentioned earlier, the narrator of “Sense of Smell” is a young Yemeni soldier called Michael who has been wounded and has lost his sight. His sense of smell has been heightened in his blindness, allowing him to describe the Yemeni Quarter through its smells. The narrator describes one of his female friends, a refugee from Europe whose family perished during the Holocaust. Their friendship began before his accident; the narrator, whose sense of smell is sharp even before his accident, particularly loves her perfume, *Soir de Paris*. For Purim one year, the pair dressed in costumes inspired by *Michael Strogoff*. The narrator dresses as Strogoff while his friend dressed as Sangarre, the informant to the traitor Ogareff:

לי קראו "מיכאל סטרוגוף" ולה קראנו "זנגרה" זאת משום שבאחד מנשפי פורים הגדולים [...] התחפשנו אני "למיכאל סטרוגוף" ואין הכוונה לסטרוגוף הרוסי הנאמן לצאר מספרו של ג'ול ורן אלא לשחקן המגלם את דמותו ושעינין (כפי שציינו כולם) דמו לעיני הגדולות הבהירות והבורקות.
Asta, Neighborhood, 62

They called me “Michael Strogoff” and we called her “Zangara” because at one of the large Purim parties [...] we dressed up, me as Michael Strogoff, not meaning Strogoff the Russian loyal to the tsar from the story by Jules Verne but the actor who plays his character and that his eyes (as everyone said) resembled my large light, bright eyes.

Here the narrator, “Michael,” explains that he dressed as Michael Strogoff for Purim one year not because of the novel by Jules Verne but because he resembled the actor who played Michael Strogoff either in a film or a play. He particularly notes the resemblance of their eyes. His friend’s decision to dress as Sangarre⁹ is not explained, but it becomes an important element in the development of the story.

⁹ While the Hebrew text refers to Michael’s friend as “Zangara,” I have chosen to utilize the spelling “Sangarre” from Verne’s novel to maintain consistency.

The role of the narrator as Michael and his friend as Sangarre foreshadows the events that happen later in their lives. Just as the narrator's eyes resemble the eyes of the actor who plays Michael Strogoff, the narrator becomes blind like Strogoff. Michael's friend decides to dress as Sangarre, whose role in the novel is to betray Michael, instead of Nadia, the woman who helps Michael in his blindness and whom he marries. After his accident, the Yemeni Michael waits for his friend Sangarre to visit him, yet she never comes. One day while he is being led around the streets of Tel Aviv, he smells her perfume. He shouts for Sangarre, but no one answers. Just as Sangarre betrays Michael Strogoff in the novel, so does the Israeli Sangarre betray her friend Michael.

The reference to Verne's novel *Michael Strogoff* in both Oz's *My Michael* and Asta's "Sense of Smell" creates an interesting connection through metatextuality between the two works. In both pieces, the male character becomes a Michael Strogoff figure: in *My Michael*, Hannah's husband fails to live up to her fantasy of the hero Michael Strogoff, while in "Sense of Smell" the narrator Michael is blinded and betrayed by his own Sangarre. The connection between the works is likely not coincidental. As noted above, Oz's *My Michael* was published in Hebrew in 1968, 24 years before Asta's *Neighborhood Album A*. This was one of Oz's most celebrated novels, making it very likely that Asta was familiar with the work. Her choice to utilize the same novel in her story "Sense of Smell" thus creates a metatextual connect to the novel by Amos Oz. Both works examine failed relationships shortly after the establishment of the State of Israel. While *My Michael* focuses on Ashkenazi Jews in Jerusalem, the protagonist of "Sense of Smell" is a Yemeni Jew in Tel Aviv. In alluding to the novel by Oz, Asta is

neither rewriting nor writing against his story. Instead, she establishes a conversation between the two pieces about common themes, such as relationships and the land of Israel. As a result, her Yemeni Jewish literature engages in a process of hybridization. This connection affects our understanding of both texts: while Oz's *My Michael* opens Asta's story to further interpretation, "Sense of Smell" adds another layer of meaning to Oz's novel. As a result, Asta's text allows itself to both influence and be influenced by the canonical literature of Israel. Through this intertextuality, Asta demonstrates the process of hybridization by which elements are combined to create new structures, objects, and practices. In this way, Asta posits, Yemeni Jews become Israeli without losing their Yemeni Jewish identity.

Additionally, Asta demonstrates this process of hybridization in the language of her own text. As noted above, the main character in "המורה" ("The Dowry"), Nadra, sings a song she remembers sung by Jewish women in Yemen. The song, which is transcribed in *Daughters of Yemen* by ethnomusicologist Mishael Maswari Caspi, was originally sung in Arabic. Asta does not assume that her readers are able to read or understand Arabic and thus provides the text in Hebrew translation. Despite its role as the language used daily by Jews in Yemen, Arabic is notably absent from *Neighborhood Album A*. Asta writes in a high register of Hebrew, one similar to the canonical Israeli authors she references in her text. Yet Yemeni cultural references appear throughout the text, particularly Yemeni Jewish cultural foods or traditions. Some of these words are followed by a parenthetical definition, as in the case of "המחקה (רסק)" (Heb: the mahaka (sauce)) in "Sense of Smell" (Asta, *Neighborhood*, 64). Other words for Yemeni foods

or traditions appear without definition, such as “הכובנה” (Heb: the kubane) in “Sense of Smell” or “הג'עלה” (Heb: the ja'ale) in “Kites” (Asta, *Neighborhood*, 64, 82). Asta seems to write between two audiences: on one hand, she does not expect her audience to be able to read or write Arabic, nor does she expect them to know all the terms for specific Yemeni cultural practices. On the other hand, however, she assumes the reader has enough familiarity with Yemeni culture to understand the terms kubane and ja'ale. Just as Asta's characters rely on and alter canonical Israeli literature to negotiate the process of hybridization, so does Asta demonstrate this process in her own writing.

The Possibility of Hybridization

In *Neighborhood Album A*, Asta indicates the process of hybridization by which Yemeni Jews become Israeli while still retaining their distinctive Yemeni culture. She claims the right of Yemeni Jews to the Israeli identity by demonstrating the significant roles played by Yemeni Jews in the creation of the State of Israel. Through her use of intertextuality, Asta creates a dialogue between Yemeni Jewish literature and canonical Israeli literature within her text. Yet while Asta demonstrates this process of hybridization of Yemeni Jews, she also questions whether the integration of Yemeni Jews in Israel is in fact possible through the plots of the stories. Many stories describe failed relationships between husband and wife or parents and children while others describe incurable diseases and suicide. In these stories, Asta questions the ability of her characters to move beyond their past and to establish successful relationships in Israel.

Several stories in *Neighborhood Album A* describe a failed relationship between individuals of different backgrounds. In “הגט” (“The Divorce”), the reader is introduced to a husband and wife of different backgrounds. The wife is Yemeni while the husband is Ashkenazi, and their marriage is seen as a successful example of integration:

הם היו סמל לכור ההיתוך, למיזוג הגלוי, לכל מה שחלמו אחרים ולא עשו בני הוותיקים
בארץ.

Asta, *Neighborhood*, 42

They were seen as a symbol of the melting pot, the merging of exiles,
everything others dreamed of but the veterans of the country did not do.

The story describes the moment the marriage ends. The husband comes home late from one of his extramarital affairs, finding his wife waiting up for him, as she has done many

times before. The story concludes with the husband asking for a divorce, which elicits wild laughter from his wife as she considers what her life could have been. The story “חוש הריח” (“Sense of Smell”) discussed in detail earlier also describes a failed relationship between a Yemeni Jew and an Ashkenazi Jew. The narrator, a former soldier who refers to himself as Michael, remembers his relationship with Sangarre, an Ashkenazi immigrant. Sangarre arrived in Palestine after escaping the Holocaust:

זנגרה היתה פליטה מאירופה, שהוריה שלחו אותה בזמן הנכון לפלשתינה, ואף תמחו בה עד שנמוגו בעשן המשרפות באירופה.
Asta, Neighborhood, 62

Zangara was a refugee from Europe whose parents sent her to Palestine at the right time, and even supported her until they dissolved in smoke in the crematoriums of Europe.

Michael notes Sangarre’s love of the Yemeni Quarter of Tel Aviv where they spent their free time. He describes Sangarre’s intoxicating Parisian perfume *Soir de Paris*. After Michael is blinded, however, Sangarre abandons him. While walking on Allenby Street in Tel Aviv, Michael suddenly smells her perfume. He calls for Sangarre, but she does not answer. In Sangarre’s absence, Michael expresses a new interest in a Yemeni girl from his neighborhood who leads him around Tel Aviv. This Yemeni girl mirrors the character of Nadia, the young woman who assists the blinded Strogoff in Verne’s novel. As noted above, Michael resembles the character Michael Strogoff in the novel by Jules Verne. Sangarre is also a character in the novel, a woman who assists in the capture and blinding of Strogoff. In calling the Ashkenazi character Sangarre, Asta indicates that the relationship between the Yemeni Michael and the Ashkenazi Sangarre cannot succeed. Further, in contrasting the abandonment of Michael by Sangarre with the assistance

offered by the Yemeni girl, Asta suggests that the relationship between the two Yemeni characters could be more successful than the relationship between Michael and Sangarre.

Many of the relationships in *Neighborhood Album A* fail because the characters are unable to move beyond their past. The first story in the collection, “אשת לוט” (“Wife of Lot”), opens with a verse from the Bible describing the wife of Lot who is turned to salt because she looks behind her when leaving Sodom. The story follows the relationship between a nurse in a hospital and her patient. The patient, a Mizrahi employee of the Israeli Department of Security, is admitted to the hospital for exhaustion. He does not talk to anyone in the hospital, including the nurse who takes special care of him. The nurse becomes curious when no one comes to visit the man and she cannot find any indication that he is married or has any family. Slowly, the nurse’s special attention pays off, and the patient begins to talk to her. When he is discharged from the hospital, she accompanies him home, and their relationship quickly becomes romantic. Although the nurse knows very little about the man, she agrees when he asks if she will marry him:

איני יודעת את שמו האמיתי, איני יודעת בדיוק במה הוא עוסק, כל מה שאני יודעת שכרגע
הוא נועץ מבטו בי.
Asta, Neighborhood, 12

I don’t know his real name, I don’t know what he does exactly, all I know is that at this moment he’s staring at me.

Her ignorance of his identity and his past haunts her. When she questions her fiancé, however, he refuses to answer her questions:

במקום להשיב על שאלותי היה משיב לי בנשיקות: "העיקר שאני אוהב אותך. מה חשוב
העבר, טוב לנו ביחד, זה חשוב."
Asta, Neighborhood, 13

Instead of answering my questions, he would answer me with kisses: “The main thing is that I love you. What is important about the past, it is good for us together, that is important.”

This answer is not enough to satisfy her, however, and her questions about her fiancé’s past begin to keep her awake at night. Finally, the relationship dissolves because the nurse is unable to focus on the present rather than the past.

Other characters are hindered by the past as well. In “מה חסר לו?” (“What Does He Lack?”), the main character, a man from a poor and perhaps Yemeni family, attempts to change his life by marrying a wealthy older woman. He tries to forget his past life and identity through elaborate parties and a luxurious lifestyle. As discussed above, he is reminded of his past by the songs of a girl who works in his house. He is ultimately unable to reconcile his past life and identity with his current life, and as a result, he takes his own life.

The title of the story “בצילו” (“In His Shadow”) reflects the present lives of a mother and daughter in the shadow of the past. While the mother continues to mourn the death of her husband many years before, her daughter tries to experience happiness in the present, partly through her romantic relationship with a soldier. Even though the mother understands her daughter’s desire to be happy, she is unable to let go of her grief over the past and live in the present. In these stories, Asta questions the role of the past in the lives of her characters. These characters are ultimately unsuccessful in reconciling the past with their present, and as a result, their relationships fail or their lives end.

One expression of the inability of Yemeni Jews to integrate into the present in Israel is the prevalence of disease and death in the stories. The story “במסיבה” (“At the

Party”) describes the end of a romantic relationship because the woman has a serious illness. Another story, “חשיכת המרפא” (“Incurable”), also describes a woman with a disease who is in a failed relationship. The main character Tsadi in “עפיפונים” (“Kites”) dies at the end of the story after an unsuccessful journey to the United States. In these stories, the characters suffer from illnesses which cannot be treated: there is no solution, no future. When confronted with difficulties, other characters take their own life.

In other stories, the characters willingly choose death when faced with difficulties. In “המוהר” (“The Divorce”), discussed above, the young Yemeni woman Nadra finds herself married at a young age to a husband she hates. Unable to cope with her situation, Nadra commits suicide on the train tracks. The main character in “מה חסר לו?” (“What Does He Lack?”) also commits suicide when he is unable to reconcile his past and his present. These stories, in which the characters feel they have no choice but to commit suicide, reflect the inability of Yemeni Jews to move beyond their difficult situations in Israel. The presence of suicide in these stories is particularly meaningful as suicide is generally considered a great sin in Judaism as it violates the Jewish duty to preserve life (Rabinowitz, 295). The choice of Nadra and the young man to commit suicide indicates the despair they face in their inability to cope in the present. For Nadra, suicide is preferable to a life as the wife of her inconsiderate husband, while suicide provides an escape for the young man in “What Does He Lack?” from his past.

While Asta suggests the possibility of the hybridization of Yemeni Jews in Israel, at the same time she notes its ambiguities and costs. Asta questions whether the hybridization of Yemeni Jews in Israel can in fact succeed. She poses this question in the

conflicts present in the stories themselves, which often resolve in failed relationships, disease, and death. Asta's characters are often unable to move beyond their past into the present. The relationships of many Yemeni characters, sometimes with Ashkenazi Jews, often fail, while other characters suffer from disease and death. The absence of a future for these Yemeni Jewish characters in Israel questions the possibility of the hybridization for which Asta hopes.

Conclusion

Although largely unknown both within and outside Israel, Yemeni Jewish author Simha Zaramati Asta's works are significant in their construction of a Yemeni Jewish literature and identity within Israel. In *Neighborhood Album A*, Asta relies on the oral tradition of Yemeni Jewish women using song to pass memory across generations, and as a result, her text becomes a part of this tradition. By describing the place and customs of Yemeni Jews in the Yemeni Quarter of Tel Aviv through her text and photographs, Asta creates a distinctive Yemeni Jewish literature. She emphasizes the significant role of Yemeni Jews in the establishment of the State of Israel, thus claiming for these Jews the right to the Israeli identity. Through intertextual references to canonical Israeli authors, Asta demonstrates the process of hybridization through which Yemeni Jews in Israel can combine components of their identities as Yemenis and Israelis. Yet she questions whether this process of hybridization can in fact succeed through her characters themselves, almost all of whom are unsuccessful when negotiating their lives in Israel. By pointing the fates of these characters, Asta raises questions about the ability of Yemeni Jews to successfully hybridize in Israel today.

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