

Ehud Ben-Ezer

The Arab in Hebrew Fiction

In the Hebrew literature of the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, the East exerts a romantic fascination, exemplified by the image of the Arab and the Arab world.

The short story "New Year for Trees" (1891) by Ze'ev Yavetz introduces a new type of Hebrew youth. Nachman, shedding the traditional image of the pail and frail Jewish yeshiva boy, symbolized the transition from passivity and resignation in the Diaspora. This was replaced by sabra (native-born) assertiveness. This new Jewish youth emulated the Arab's love of the land, and could also confront him in armed battle.

In addition to fighting the Arabs, the Jews in Palestine had to contend with the forces of nature, the climate and disease. It was dangerous to even ride from one settlement to another. This danger was an integral part of the returning Jew's struggle to make his home in the land. Descriptions of Arabs ambushing Jewish travellers and the desperate struggles which ensued filled the new Hebrew literature from the beginning. This was more than a reflection of the national conflict: it was the reality of life in a semi-savage land, under corrupt Turkish rule, where the inhabitants—of whatever nation or religion—were never safe from sudden attack.

*

Theodore Herzl's "Altneuland" (1902), written originally in German, is indispensable for understanding his approach to the Arab issue. The novel illuminates clearly the entire Zionist worldview. Herzl visited Palestine only once, in 1898, after Kaiser Wilhelm's visit, and it was a brief, disappointing experience. The country, and Jerusalem in particular, appeared to him gloomy and depressing, as he described it at the beginning of the novel. The story opens in 1902 and goes on to describe a utopian society set in 1923. Palestine is now flourishing, thanks to the economic and cultural riches that the Jewish immigrants brought with them. They create a model society, a cooperative where all inhabitants enjoy full equality: Jews and Arabs, natives and new immigrants alike.

Herzl was convinced that the Jewish capital and the economic growth it would generate would transform Arab society, so that an Arab national problem would never arise. The Arabs would willingly sell their lands to "the new society" and would be accepted as full-fledged members of the cooperative. They would be grateful to the Jews for improving their standard of living. One of the novel's Arab protagonists, Rashid Bey, is born to a wealthy family which profited from the Jewish settlement. When asked: "What will happen to all the fallahs (farmers) who have no land to sell?" he replies:

Whoever has nothing to lose, clearly has only gained. See all that they have gained: employment, good wages, a better life. There was no more pathetic and miserable sight than an Arab village in Palestine at the end of the nineteenth century. The farmers lived in shabby mud huts unfit for a pigsty. Babies went naked, uncared for, and grew up like wild animals. Now all that is changed. The Jews drained the marshes, repaired the sewage and planted eucalyptus trees which restore the land, all with strong, local workmen, and paid them fair wages.

Rashid Bey takes his visitors on a tour of an Arab village, where the minaret of a small mosque rises on the horizon, and explains:

These people are now much happier. They make an honest living, their children are healthy and go to school. No one has harmed their religion or ancient customs. They have only benefited.

Herzl's utopia went no further than improving the miserable living conditions in the Arab villages and refraining from harming their religion and customs. The national issue did not exist for him. His vision was limited to the economic development which the Jewish immigrants would bring about.

*

We find a different sort of utopia in essays by R. Binyamin (pseudonym of Yehoshua Radler-Feldman), who was a close friend of Brenner and was later active in "Brit Shalom" and other peace organizations in Palestine.

In 1907, before R. Binyamin migrated to Palestine, he published his manifesto "Arab Prophecy" in Brenner's London-based journal Hame'orer. Written in high-flown biblical language, it prophesied a pan-semitic development in Arab Jewish relations in the future. The author believed that Jews could, and indeed should, immigrate to Palestine, but without aggravating the national problem. His solution was based solely on intensive agriculture and orchards: Increased productivity would provide a livelihood for more inhabitants. There would thus be ample room in Palestine for more Jewish immigrants, without dispossessing the Arabs.

His vision of the future of the two peoples is epitomized in the following lyrical and emotionally charged passage:

In the future he shall be as one of you, no different from yourself;
You shall give him your sons and take his sons unto yourself;
Your blood and his blood shall mingle and grow strong;
Each to his own kind, one kind for all;
We are brothers, several families of one people;
I will soon see this come to pass.

His pan-Semitic approach in "Arab Prophecy" envisions the fusion of the two peoples into one Semitic nation.

*

The shared Semitic ancestry is one of several motifs dominating turn-of-the-century Hebrew literature in Palestine. These motifs are of vital importance for understanding the formation of the new sabra fictional hero and his relations with the neighboring Arabs.

The meeting of the Jewish pioneers—the immigrants of the First Aliyah and Second Aliyah—with the East and with Palestine's Arab inhabitants—gave rise to several myths. (Aliyah is the Hebrew expression for "A wave of immigration coming to the Land of Israel"; literally, it means "ascent".)

The first motif is the shared Semitic origins of the two peoples and the etymological bond of the Semitic languages. This affinity came perhaps as no surprise to Jewish immigrants from North Africa, the Mediterranean and Yemen, but it was a new idea to Jews who came from Eastern Europe. The latter discovered in Palestine that Hebrew and Arabic were cognate Semitic languages, and they imbued this discovery with a romantic aura.

The second motif is the fascination of Eastern-European Jews with the picturesque deserts of the Middle East. Their fascination appears as early as Feuerberg's "Whither?" (1899), though the author never set foot in Palestine and the story was first published a few weeks after his death at the age of 25. His rallying cry: "Eastward! Eastward!" welled up from a desire to found a new and a pure world in the East, which would be the antithesis to the corrupt European Western civilization. The clean and virgin desert was the ideal setting for a new existence.

The third motif is the so-called "Arabization" of the inhabitants of Palestine. Some Jewish pioneers, among them several Hebrew writers, fantasized of revealing to the Arabs their original Hebrew roots. Jews had been living for generations in Peki'in in the Galilee and in Dir-al-Qamer in Lebanon. Was it possible, mused the romantics, that the Arab inhabitants of Palestine are our true brothers? Could it be that they are descendants of the ancient Hebrews or the early Jews? We must bring them back to our common etnical source and create with them a new Hebrew culture.

A fourth motif is the similarity between the image of the Arab and the biblical Hebrew forefathers. Nahum Gutman's illustrations of Bialik's Biblical tales peopled them with the Arab stevedores and seamen of his Jaffa childhood. This is a widespread motif in the literature of the period, whose writers studied Talmud as children, were well-versed in the Bible and easily picked up traces of these sources in the local Arab and Bedouin agriculture and customs. Palestine had undergone fewer changes from the biblical period to the end of the first quarter of this century than it did in the decades that have passed since.

The fifth motif, that of the legendary tribe of Bedouin Jews of Khaybar (who might still be living in the Arabian desert since the time of Mohammed) began with the waves of Jewish immigrants from Yemen, especially during the Second Aliyah period, about ninety years ago. Shmuel Yavnieli travelled to Yemen in 1911 and was active there in bringing Jewish immigrants to Palestine. They settled in the new colonies of Petah-Tikva, Rishon-Lezion and Rehovoth. The younger Eastren European immigrants and writers of the Second Aliyah, fascinated by the return of the

Yemenite Jews, began wondering whether there might not also exist a tribe of Jewish Bedouins who could be brought to the Land of Israel.

*

The implementation of Zionism was viewed as a transition from passivity to action to activity—in the context of the Jewish settlement in Palestine. The image of the armed watchman guarding the Jewish settlement took on a romantic dimension and was a precursor of the nascent Israeli army and soldier. The Arab was nearly always the adversary, the enemy, in this struggle.

At the same time, the concepts of courage, weapons and power were also derived from the Arab, especially from the image of the armed Bedouin astride his noble mare. The antithesis of the feeble Diaspora Jew was the strong, forceful sabra youth, whose new image was created in a dialectical process both of assimilating the Arab's qualities while resisting the Arab as an opponent.

As mentioned before, another way of contending with the presence of generations of Arabs in Palestine was to suggest that the local Arabs were in fact descendants of ancient Jews forced to convert to Islam and "Arabized" over the years. The slogan was: We must re-acquaint the local Arabs with their Hebrew and Jewish roots, we consider the Arabs brothers of our own race.

Israel Belkind, a member of the Bilu Jewish pioneer movement in the 1880's, published during the First Aliyah a Russian-language pamphlet in this spirit. Entitled "Palestine in Our Time", it exerted a great influence on the Jewish immigrant-pioneers of the time. This significant and interesting myth reappears in "Arab Prophecy" and in other stories including Brenner. The myth later grew into the "Canaanite" philosophy of the poet Yonatan Ratosh. He believed that the Hebrews had to liberate themselves from Judaism, and the Arabs from Islam, and create a single pluralistic secular state. This entity would extend throughout the Fertile Crescent, dominated by the Hebrew language and culture, and become the United States of the Middle East.

The novel "Days and Nights" (1926) by Natan Bistritzki-Agmon, was published during the Third Aliya, between the two World Wars. It deals with Jews yearning for a father-figure and casting the Arab in this role. The novel tells of a Jewish youth, a member of a new kibbutz group, who hungers for the company of his Arab neighbor Sheikh Sa'id. The youth seems to be imploring Sa'id to assume the role of his new father in place of his real Jewish father, who stayed behind in the Diaspora. However, his hopes turn to bitter disappointment when the Arab rejects him and becomes his enemy instead. In the struggle between the romantic biblical view of the East, and the bitter reality, a pessimism emerges which emphasized the grimmer aspects of the national experience in Palestine.

*

The First Aliyah literature minimized the gravity of the armed struggle, adhering instead to a policy of propaganda. Its readership lived mostly in the Hebrew-speaking centres of Odessa, Warsaw and Vilnius and did not consist of the few Hebrew-speakers living in Palestine. The writers feared that painting a bleak picture of Palestine would deter potential immigrants, and they preferred the ideal to reality. The

dangers were submerged in stories which frequently described the Jew easily overpowering his Arab enemy.

But there were danger signals. The Hebrew writer Yoshef Haim Brenner described the abyss separating the two peoples. He viewed the romantic stories of Jewish- Arab relations written at the time as self-deception, and as an indication of a failure to cope with the bitter reality, with the roots of the conflict.

Brenner was unique among writers of the Second Aliyah since he was aware of the bitterness and difficulties facing the Jewish existence in Palestine, describing the Jewish life with harsh self-criticism. He believed that assimilation was a danger in Palestine too, not only in the Diaspora, and that the East could swallow up the Jews, rather than afford them a new heroic life.

In his view, the Arabs were primarily the enemy, and their treatment of the Jews was simply a continuation of the age-old animosity towards the Jews in the Diaspora. Brotherhood, the socialist ideals of the Second Aliyah, seemed to him flimsy and artificial vis-a-vis Jewish-Arab relations. In the grim, bitter reality of daily life in Palestine those days he found no signs of love or peace, neither between the two peoples nor between individuals from the two sides. He was murdered by Arabs during the riots of 1921.

*

Moshe Smilansky published his "Arabian Sons" stories (first volume 1911) under the pseudonym Hawajja Moussa, beginning in the first decade of this century. His writings serve as the classic example of the romantic approach to Jewish-Arab relations. He did not turn a blind eye to the facts; on the contrary, he knew that the gulf between the two peoples would only widen and its consequences grow bloodier. The only alternative to this, he believed, was to find ways to bring about greater mutual understanding.

Smilansky's stories and much of his ideology expressed this view. He never forgot his own childhood encounter (just after arriving Palestine) with an Arab horseman in the dunes of Caesarea in 1891, ending with the Arab striking him across the face with a whip. Though he was a farmer and a member of a Jewish defence organization, he could write appreciatively about Arab customs in a series of romantic stories, most of which do not deal at all with the Jewish presence. He writes about the bitterness and strife within the Arab and Bedouin society and about animosity between families or tribes in love stories resembling the themes of "Romeo and Juliet". These themes also appear in some of the well-known stories by the native-born Sephardi writers Yehuda Burla and Yitzhak Shami, who were familiar with the East.

Between the two World Wars, during the Third Aliyah, the struggle revolved around the ability to cultivate and settle the land. The young Jewish hero was depicted as torn between the romantic appeal of the return to the ancient homeland, and the bitter reality of trying to master it. Total acceptance involved more than adapting to difficult living conditions; it also meant three waves of bloody riots between 1920-1938. The violence and tension recurs in such works as "Days and Nights" (1926) by Natan Bistritzki-Agmon, "The Hajj of Hephzibah" (1927) by Ya'akov Steinberg, "A Galilee Diary" (1932) by Shin Shalom, "Tanhum Scroll" (1942) by Yitzchak

Sheinberg-Shenhar and "The Wanderings of A'mashai Hashomer (the guard)" (1929) by Ya'akov Rabinovitz, describing the Second Aliyah era. Writing of Brenner's murder in 1921, Bistrizki-Agmon concluded "Days and Nights": "The man of Israel has now struck deep roots that cannot be torn up. We can now settle in his dust and dream of a homeland."

*

Hebrew literature between the two World Wars fluctuated between romanticism and bitter reality. A new generation of Hebrew authors emerged just before and during the 1948 War of Independence. In their stories the Arab became a moral problem for the Israeli soldier, who is disappointed and frustrated that the Jewish national ideal failed to accord with the ideals of brotherhood and peace.

For the first time Israeli-born authors are prominent in this generation, which was beset by an ideological crisis extending beyond the war itself and the relations with the Arabs. The socialist pioneer youth movements in Palestine indoctrinated the younger generation with a mixture of Zionism and the brotherhood of men. They held a naive, Herzl-like belief that "the Arabs would come to accept our presence in Palestine, since we bring progress to the Middle East." They struggled to liberate Palestine from the British, and blamed them for the trouble and killings. It was widely held that the British were trying to apply the principle of "divide and rule" in Palestine, as they had done with the Hindus and Muslims in India.

The War of Independence and the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 proved conclusively that the Arabs utterly rejected the Jewish national claims. It was also revealed that during the war and in its aftermath, Israelis committed such acts as killing prisoners and expelling inhabitants. In less than a year, the part of Palestine which became the State of Israel was emptied of most of its Arab inhabitants.

The moral crisis and social-demographic upheavals gave rise to works such as "The Prisoner" (1948), "Hirbet Hiz'ah" (1949) and "Days of Ziklag" (1958) by S. Yizhar; "The Swimming Contest" (1951) by Benjamin Tammuz and "The Treasure" (1949) by Aharon Megged. All these works are marked by the ideological crisis of the war. Are we, too, guilty? Could we have acted otherwise? The Arab in literature is now no longer a romantic image nor an alien and menacing one: he has become a moral problem. The cruelty that the Israeli soldier committed in the course of his national struggle causes him to question his own moral values.

The War of Independence left a deep-seated trauma in that generation. Its youth especially had to face the killing and atrocities committed on both sides and the disappearance of their childhood world in Eretz-Israel (Palestine) before 1948. They were unable to adjust to the new Israel, or to cope with the mass immigration and "the disappearance of values."

The Israeli native son was alienated from the very landscape and his human surroundings. Everything was utterly changed as a result of the occupation or liberation of new lands in the 1948 war, the mass flight of the Arabs, the waves of immigration and the overnight building rush devoid of any trace of romanticism. It is significant that most of Yizhar's stories take place in the 1948 war or just before it: the

world that had existed until that time was destroyed before the eyes of his protagonists, and they failed to adjust to the world which arose from its ashes.

The generation of 1948 was bewildered by the changing landscapes and values. Perhaps that was the reason they adopted what they saw as Brenner's last will and testament, his pacifist story-essay "Mipinkas" (From the Notebook) written several weeks before he was murdered in 1921, rather than his grim prophecies regarding the Arab issue, which emerged clearly from all his other writings.

The contrast between the pre-1948 world and the post-war reality was captured in Yizhar's well-known story "Hirbet Hiz'ah", published in 1949:

"Sure, what did you think? Of course! I should've thought of that before. Hirbet-Hiz'a is ours! You say there are housing and absorption problems! Hooray for housing and absorption, and how! We'll open a general store, build a school, maybe a synagogue too. There'll be political parties, people will argue about all kinds of things. They'll plough the fields and sow and reap and do great deeds. Long live Jewish Hiz'ah! Who would imagine that it was once some Hirbet Hiz'ah? We came, shot, conquered, burnt, blew up, shoved away, pushed and banished... What the hell are we doing here!"

That generation remembered their childhood in the Jewish community under the British Mandate, living alongside the Arabs, the orchards, the landscape of Eretz Israel before 1948. All that belonged to a past that was gone and done with. Now it was time for the sobering, painful awakening from their Zionist-Socialist education and from the belief in a synthesis between Jewish nationalism and brotherhood among the nations, a belief shot to pieces by the war.

"The cruelty of the world: Enough! But who am I asking? My own country gazes at me, my friends, my own people, they are all bearing down on me, staring at me: Kill nicely, dearest son, kill cleanly with a wide sweep of your arm, kill with all the good we gave you, all that we taught you, kill for us, so that we may finally have a nice, peaceful world... I will kill, oh, will I kill: "

The young generation of 1948 paid a heavy price in the war. Their education left them unprepared for the intensity of the Arab resistance. They were unwilling—writers included—to admit that they could not have persuaded the Arab inhabitants of Palestine and the neighbouring Arab countries to the creation of the Israeli national homeland. They experienced a strong moral outburst of self-accusation, which smacked of Israeli superiority. They seemed to be saying: Had we behaved differently the conflict would not have come to this. It was entirely up to us, but we misjudged the situation.

Yizhar's "The Prisoner", the most famous of this type of moral-dilemma story, was first published in November 1948. The narrator's indecision is vividly described, a result of his upbringing which inculcated him with a respect for human life, liberty, and freedom of thought. Now he is shamefully incapable of action when faced with the possibility that an old Arab shepherd, a prisoner, might be killed. The narrator's Hamlet-like agony leads to nowhere: His thoughts paralyze his ability to act. He deliberates the issue from one side then the other; he invokes his education and belief

in humane compassion, and on the other hand, raises wartime justification for ruthlessness. The narrator's deliberations never converge with the prisoner's personal fate. There is no personal contact between them. The Arab individual exists solely as a moral dilemma for the Israeli soldier: the choices are either to kill the prisoner or to expel him and separate him from his family. However, the narrator's inability to take a decisive action in effect endorses a position that allows the killing or the exile of the prisoner. The story is open-ended: the prisoner's death is not described, though we may assume it does take place. In any case, the prisoner will apparently never return to his herd, his lands and family, or resume the life he led before the war.

*

For the next generation of writers, who reached maturity after the establishment of the State of Israel, the Arab continued to figure as an inherent part of the Israeli's inner world. Though no longer as a moral problem or part of the war experience. The Arab is transformed into a menace to the Israeli's very existence, a shadow reflected from the innermost depths of the Israeli psyche. The Arab becomes an existential nightmare that prevents the Israeli protagonist from extricating himself from his predicament, from being imprisoned in a situation of siege, from being surrounded by hatredness.

The story "Facing the Forests" (1963) by A.B. Yehoshua stems from a deep-seated sense that our presence among the Arabs is an existential nightmare. An Israeli student, writing a thesis about the Crusaders takes a job as a fire-watcher in the forests in the south of Israel. In the watchman's hut lives an Arab with his young daughter. The Arab's tongue has been cut out. The forest covers the ruins of an Arab village whose inhabitants fled in 1948: the mute Arab once lived there.

A pervasive sense of oppression overcomes the Israeli watchman, a sense of impending catastrophe, a nightmare, as if a fire is about to break out. Strangely enough, he shares his apprehension with the Arab. One might say that the waiting drives both men crazy. The watchman throws a lit match and cigarette-butts into the forest, as though secretly hoping for a fire. The Arab hides oil-cans in different spots in the forest; the guard knows this but does nothing to stop him. Finally, the Arab sets the forest on fire and it burns to the ground. As dawn breaks, the ruins of the former village are clearly delineated on the ground.

The demonization of the Arab figure ultimately expresses the destructive, dark side of our spirit. The watchman longs for the fire no less than the Arab, since the disaster affords a relief which is preferable to the tension of endless watching and waiting.

The watchman's reckless behavior attests to his loneliness and despair. Is he merely torturing himself, or is he a victim of his society's conditioning? It is a difficult question to answer. In "Facing the Forests" there are no moral deliberations, no ideological crises. The bewilderment typical of Yizhar's story of prisoners and banishment, and of the works of Aharon Megged, Benjamin Tammuz and others of that generation is absent here. All has merged into an existential nightmare, devoid of illusions. This is perhaps the typical approach of the generation of writers whose lives were molded and determined after the war of 1948, in the first nineteen years of Israel's existence, surrounded by enemies.

*

In his story "Nomad and Viper" (1963), Amos Oz describes a frustrated woman who lives in a kibbutz and her encounter with a Bedouin shepherd. The Bedouin is a primitive, almost bestial creature, ugly and miserable. Nevertheless, he arouses her. It seems he might rape her, and she is attracted yet repelled by him—but nothing happens. At the end of the story, Geula is found lying on the grass in the evening, among the shrubs near her room in the kibbutz. She has been bitten by a viper. In this story, the Arab symbolizes the dark passions of the human soul. Geula's attraction and repulsion play out her instinctual rebellion against the dictates of Israeli society, Israeli daily life. The viper seems to fulfill what the Arab began. The dark side of the soul also harbors death and madness. The Arab apparently already exists there, where animal lust and irrationality dwell with death, with the drive for self-destruction.

Amos Oz's "My Michael" (1968), written before the 1967 Six-Day-War, is the story of a woman student in Jerusalem. She is married and has a child, and is slowly going mad. The shadow within her and the growing madness revolve around her childhood playmates, the Arab twins Aziz and Khalil. Their presence grows strong in her hallucinations; they become terrorists, sowing destruction and death. Their empowerment in her hallucinations grows and reaches its climax at the story's end, indicating perhaps the protagonist's acceptance of her madness.

The twins are a metaphor for Hannah's suffering rather than its cause. This should be emphasized so that the story is not misinterpreted: death, sexuality, madness and the dark side of the psyche exist independently of the Arabs' presence. Even idyllic peace, the tumbling down of the barriers of hate, a solution to the Palestinian problem—none of these will free the Israeli of his or her human suffering and turmoil. These are the features of finite human existence.

But from the 1960s on, writers such as Amos Oz, A.B. Yehoshua and others employed the fictional image of the Arab as a metaphor for the menacing shadow, the projection of our fears and terror. The image of the Arab did not manifest itself as a real individual, or as a representative of an ideological and moral problem, but rather as an integral part of the Israeli waking nightmare. He has no separate, independent existence, no social, national or mundane being. The Arab does not so much frighten as persist in disturbing, and does not allow the Israeli to live his life as he would wish, beyond the cycle of national strife and war.

*

A sense of foreboding and constriction is typical of other pre-1967 works, such as "The Border" (1966) by Moshe Shamir, "The Battle" (1966) by Yariv Ben-Aharon, "Another Time, Another Place" (1966) by Amos Oz and "Ants" (1968) by Yitzhak Orpaz. At the end of my novel "Nor the Battle to the Strong" (1971) (which, like Orpaz's book, was written before June '67), a young Israeli student commits suicide while serving in the reserves by throwing himself toward the hostile border.

The Arab issue and its stereotypical embodiment was internalized. The Arab's presence filters into the Israeli, though not necessarily as guilt or ideological crisis—rather, as a persistent, troubling menace. This angst replaces the earlier generation's moral deliberations.

*

Alongside the depiction, the perception of the Arab as Other, as the enemy across the border, Hebrew literature also referred to daily life in Israel. Jews and Arabs lived side by side in "Little Israel" which existed between 1948 and 1967.

These works are frequently dealing with the Arab national question as a class struggle fought by the Arab individual within Israeli society. The shared social milieu of Jews and Arabs in Israel is the context of Hemda Alon's "No Stranger Will Come" (1962) and Yehoshua Granot's "A Bitter Cup of Coffee" (1967). The national antagonism assumes, or wears, the aspect of social and erotic competitiveness, neutralizing both the menace and alienation as well as the moral dilemma. These works were not written with the romanticism of the past. They deal mostly with the struggle of Arab youths trying to enter Israeli society, and the writer describes their conflicts with national, social, cultural and personal issues.

The June 1967 war, known also as the Six Day War, intensified this trend. The Arab became increasingly an integral part of Israeli life, no longer the image of the stranger or nightmarish enemy. The situation of the Arab is reminiscent of the Jewish intellectuals in the West, or of Jewish intellectuals from Arab countries in Israel. Torn between different cultures and identities, they pay a price for every decision they make, which heightens their sensitivity and complexity. This is the case in the novels "A Locked Room" (1980) by Shimon Ballas, "Refuge" (1977) and "A Trumpet in the Wadi" (1987) by Sami Michael and A.B. Yehoshua's "The Lover" (1977).

Fat'hi, the protagonist of "Refuge", is a pampered poet of protest, adored by his Arab readers and Jewish girlfriends alike. He is at once pathetic and tragic—an Arab who has lost his identity in trying to enjoy the best of both worlds, he ends up being viewed with suspicion by all. His poetry supposedly reflects the spirit of his people, but in fact he is alienated from them. This is made grotesquely clear in his visit to Jenin. The Arabs of the West Bank consider Fat'hi an Israeli for all intents and purposes, almost half-Jewish, an anomaly. The Jewish women treat him the same way, a stranger, yet charming.

He lacks any practical aptitude, but his high self-esteem ensures that he will look after himself well. His national aspirations, should they ever come to pass, would destroy him as well as the state of Israel. But he lacks the courage to leave the country and join the PLO like his friend Fakri. The Israeli setting in which he grew up is his lifeline—he is perhaps more at home there than in another Arab country or the West Bank—and he cannot give it up.

Fat'hi stands for the intellectual and nationalist Arab camp in Israel, whose every action and utterance is subject to the scrutiny of several different positions: that of the Jewish population of Israel, the Israeli Left, the Arab population of Israel, the Arab Left, the Palestinians on the West Bank, and the Palestinians abroad. In addition, there is the artistic yardstick which will evaluate his work in the corpus of Arab literature, not only as the work of a famed poet of protest.

Fat'hi is a far cry from all the stereotypes of Arab individuals we have encountered until now, from those in Moshe Smilansky's stories, through "The Prisoner" by S. Yizhar, the mute Arab in "Facing the Forests", and many other Arab stereotypes which exist in Hebrew literature. Fat'hi is educated, sensitive, talented, a stranger who

is "one of us". His situation is reminiscent of the Jewish intellectual in the West, or of Jewish intellectuals from Arab countries in Israel who are torn between different cultures and identities, and whose sensitivity and complexity is heightened by the paradoxes they face.

The life of Jews and Arabs in Israel become so inter-mingled that in Ya'akov Buchan's "Sleepwalkers" (1989), the Arab is a Hebrew-speaking Bedouin who is an officer in the Israeli Police. At the heart of conflict is a woman; she symbolizes a homeland, a country and a goal for the two quarreling nations much like Luna in Tammuz's allegorical novel "The Orchard" (1972).

The Arab as a living and breathing individual appeared in post-1967 Hebrew literature, as the country became increasingly bi-national. He is no longer the product of romanticism or of bitter reality à la Brenner, nor is he a moral dilemma for the omnipotent, guilt-ridden Israeli soldier. He is neither an existential menace nor a social-national problem within Israeli society itself. But there are two nations in one country, a homeland of contradictory yearnings, contradictory longing; they are locked in a bitter, constant struggle waged on various fronts. These stories offer no optimistic solution.

*

The above, with its pessimistic conclusion about 100 years of Hebrew prose in Eretz-Israel, was written before the first Rabin-Arafat meeting in September 1993, the Oslo agreements, the peace with Jordan and finally the assassination of Rabin – a national shock that may, in the long run, strengthened the peace process between Israel and the Arabs. Now the question is: Have these landmarks launched us into a new Middle Eastern reality, one that will be reflected in literature?

If a new reality does emerge, it will perhaps be the fulfillment of Herzl's original prophecy regarding the relations between the two peoples, as described in "Altneuland" 90 years ago. Herzl was convinced that economic prosperity and progress would prove stronger than nationalist animosity, of which he was scarcely aware. The oil-rich Arab countries were nothing but desert at that time, and Herzl's hope that an influx of Jewish capital would develop the land for the good of Jews and Arabs may be compared to modern expectations that American support for Egypt, Israel Jordan and the Palestinians will ensure a profitable peace for all.

There have been two currents in this country in the past 100 years: on the one hand, a slow process of growth, of calm and of improved economic relations between Jews and Arabs. On the other hand, there have been increased periods of violent nationalist clashes and hatred, in which the economic loss and the human suffering went unheeded, breeding one war after another.

*

We have seen the theme of "unrequited love" in Hebrew literature in regard to Arabs. It appears in the five motifs which animated the literature during the First Aliyah. Natan Bistritzki-Agmon's novel "Days and Nights" expresses the disappointment of young immigrant pioneers of the Third Aliyah, when the Arab rejects them and refuses to serve as an ancient and latter-day Eastern father, to replace the Jewish father who remained in the Diaspora. We have seen the romantic fantasies

and seen them shatter. Unfortunately, the historical perspective seems to justify the pessimistic outlook of Hebrew literature on this subject.

The Israeli desires to be an integrated citizen of the East, not a stranger or conqueror, not one whose presence depends on his military force. When I visit Egypt today I feel at home in the East. It is almost a childhood dream come true. In Egypt I did not feel that people were accusing or hostile, despite the high toll, the high price, both sides have paid in the wars between the two countries.

In his speech before the Israeli Knesset in 1977, Egyptian President Sadat said that the psychological breakthrough in Israeli-Arab relations was the most significant of all. I believe the motif of "the ardent lover", the dream that the East will embrace us with friendship and love is again emerging among Israelis, after years of disappointment with Arab rejection. Should the Palestinians accept us wholeheartedly and surmount the psychological barrier all the practical details of a future solution would be become easier.

*

The theme of "unrequited love" in Israeli-Arab relations resulted in one of our most deeply rooted collective denials: that of the problem of Palestinian refugees from 1948 onwards. Even the politically moderate Israelis had no hesitations on the subject, due mainly to the Palestinian "all-or-nothing" position. But then, no individual, no normal nation, wishes to become extinct or to commit suicide.

Today, however, the closer the Palestinians come to reconciliation, compromise and coexistence, the greater the willingness of Israeli society to consider solutions to the taboo issue of the refugees. Should the Palestinians persist in their threatening, unyielding posture, and continue to use terrorist methods—I fear the process of reconciliation will come to a halt and no solution will be found.

*

Writers are conditioned by the past, its accumulation of pain and grief; writers are conditioned by the old view of the Other as hindering one's "good life". Even writers allied with the peace camp express profound fear and horror, with negative descriptions of the Other. The outlook is not optimistic.

To encourage optimism, literature dealing with Jewish-Arab relations in the past must ignore what Brenner called the bitter reality. One must be utopian, romantic, pacifist, willing to advance a cause, and to incur the danger of misrepresenting a reality too painful to represent.

Literature which furthers a cause need not be only chauvinistic or nationalistic, either in Arabic or Hebrew. It need not be patriotic literature which denies the rights of the other people and becomes a mere propaganda.

Literature can promote a bias for peace as well, and the two kinds of biased literature are very far from serious and realistic literature, and far from reality. Both reality and literature are complex depths, laden with suffering and passion and pains, and both offer no simplistic solutions or ideal situations.

The peace between Israel and Egypt, Israel and Jordan, and perhaps the imminent change in the relations between Israel, the PLO and the Palestinian people, suggest that politicians on both sides are one step ahead of the writers, and less pessimistic.

The Arab-Israeli author Emil Habibi, recipient of the Israel Prize, once said: "The literary portrayal of Jews and Arabs, each in the works of the other, will not change even when we know one another better and write about each other as individuals—the change will occur only after a political solution is found, which will bring normalization and peace between the two nations."

I believe he was right.

Tel-Aviv, November 1995

The Israeli Superiority Complex

I read the bombastic visions of peace expounded by A. B. Yehoshua, Amos Oz, David Grossman, Yosi Beilin, Yosi Sarid, and their like, and I see that they have not been cured and most likely will never be cured of their dovish superiority complex. They are sure that we are the guilty side, that our concessions have the power to put an end to our conflict with the Arab and Muslim world, and that we are in no danger of destruction by our enemies, if we are only "good."

I recall a monograph published by the late Yehoshofat Harkabi (1921-1994), a general and head of Army Intelligence who later became a professor of international relations at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. It is entitled: *Israel's Position in the Israel-Arab Conflict* (Devir, 1967, 79 pp.). The first version of the monograph was written on the invitation of Jean-Paul Sartre for *Le temps moderne*, and it was published in Paris in late June 1967. The final draft of the Hebrew version was written in early 1966. For that reason Harkabi added an introduction written after the Six Day War, before the establishment of even a single settlement in the territories that had just been conquered.

In his monograph, Harkabi analyzed two dominant Israeli approaches: the "rigid" or "hawkish" approach, and the "soft" or "dovish" approach. The point of departure of the "rigid," "hawkish," or "nationalist" approach was the historical right of the Jews to the Land of Israel. Its proponents more or less expected that the Arabs would recognize that right and waive their claim to the land. When reality dealt them a slap in the face, a tendency arose among them to view international relations as an essentially amoral area. This view entails a strong feeling of superiority and belief that Jewish victory is not only the result of superior strength but also of moral virtues. This view does not fear a prolonged conflict, it shows no tendency to relax its severity, and it offers no proposal for a peaceful solution. Rather, it anticipates the continuation of the struggle until the enemy is weary of it.

Therein we can find the main weakness of the "hawkish" approach, for whereas the Arab states can hope to end the conflict by war, war cannot be the ultimate solution

for Israel. Indeed, paradoxically, the victory in the Six Day War was liable to give rise to impatience and disappointment, because the Israelis were likely to claim that if such a splendid victory did not bring about a final settlement, the situation was very bad indeed. In Harkabi's opinion, we had to be prepared for a prolonged and exhausting conflict, and we must not be misled by the illusion that we could impose peace with our victory in war. Therein also hide the gravest danger of the "hawks" position, for they were liable to reach the extremism of viewing the conflict as eternal.

However, the "soft," liberal, "dovish" position also suffered, say Harkabi – from the flaws of the Israeli feeling of superiority. The very effort to view the history of our relations with the Arabs as a series of missed opportunities for peace implies an underestimation of the will and position of the Arabs. The "dovish" approach also tends to depreciate the danger of destruction. Harkabi suggests that the rejection by the "doves" of the possibility that the Arabs might wish to exterminate us could imply "self-infatuation that rejects the possibility that the Arabs could seek to exterminate such chosen and superior people." Emphasis on the idea that Israel must be a means to persuade the Arabs to make peace arouses suspicion that here, too, the Israeli superiority conflict is at work. This is accompanied by a strong feeling of frustration. Having been victorious in war but not in peace, the Israeli is not willing to admit that, objectively speaking, he is unable to achieve peace in the meantime. Hence, he tends to blame himself for lost opportunities, as though to say, had we only been "decent," peace would have been within our reach. The matter depends only upon us. The positive aspiration of this position, according to Harkabi, is distorted because of its blindness toward the depth of the insult to the Arabs. It is driven to the extremism of viewing the conflict as an imaginary one, and it tends to interpret criticism of it as advocacy of the opposing extreme view: that the conflict is eternal, a matter of fatalism that cannot be settled.

Harkabi said that we must avoid such categories as "eternal" with respect to political situations, but on the other hand, he emphasized that the soft view is accompanied by a suicidal tendency among the Israelis. That tendency is based on extreme moralistic attitudes of self-accusation, both in Modern Hebrew literature and also among Israeli youth.

A letter to a Friend

Thanks for your last letter, which I have read very carefully. Yes, we do feel very bad about what we need to do in the West Bank and Gaza Strip but you can't imagine how naive we were during the years of the Oslo agreement. No one, not even our military intelligence, ever suspected that the Palestinians had gathered such an arsenal against us, all of us, as now you know exactly, unless you are blind.

Since the Passover Massacre in Netanya, April 2002, nothing will stop us until we ruin the military and terror infrastructure of the Palestinians. They will never succeed to destroy us. There will be no second Holocaust for the Jewish People and there will never be a massacre only for Jews. If some Europeans and Englishmen do not understand it by logic, they will understand it through the reality of a Muslim Intifada

soon to come to their own doors. You can already see the beginning of its spreading-flames, and these flames will not grasp only the Jews in the Diaspora.

Israel is a Western stronghold of democracy, humanity and civilization against the vast majority of an Arab, Muslim and Palestinian world, which is producing almost nothing and giving almost nothing to humanity **in our time** except hatred and oil, and it seems that only the hatred is their own production. All other facilities that they own and use, they are buying, including Western media and academy and future nuclear and other mass-destruction weapons, which they are purchasing from some corrupt wings of the western civilization.

What is happening now is not the consequence (or the problem) of Sharon being our prime minister and leader (and supported by the vast majority of Israelis – even his former hard opponents like me). What is happening now is a war between the children of light and the children of darkness. Those Europeans and Englishmen who are too blind to see it, or have a fear of admitting it or hope that by appeasing the evil they will keep it from their own home, oh, time is short, very short, till you begin to feel what we feel every day and night and in every street and family in Israel.

You can never have a deal with the evil, with the elements who want to ruin you. Remember it for your own sake and for the future of your children who are due to live in the frightened new world which emerged the ashes and debris of nine-eleven.

This is my perspective, and don't be fooled by our tanks and helicopters and airplanes and their harsh images in the BBC, SKY or CNN – which make your attitude so stupid and bias. Our weapons are only the sharp nails (thanks God!) of less than six millions Jews in Israel to defend themselves against the hundreds millions of Arabs and Muslims enemies, most of whom have yet to give up their hope to destroy Israel forever.

*

Ehud Ben-Ezer is a well-known Israeli writer and critic. He edited "**Unease In Zion**" a book of interviews with prominent Israeli writers, philosophers and leaders (Quadrangle, The New York Times Book Co., 1974); he wrote "**Hosni the Dreamer**" a picture-book illustrated by Uri Shulevitz (Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1997), which has been chosen as one of the best ten illustrated books of the year by the New York Times Book Review; he also edited the anthology "**Sleepwalkers and other Stories, The Arab in Hebrew Fiction**", selected stories translated from the Hebrew and introduced by him (A Three Continents Book & Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999), Arabic edition: "**Surat al-Arabi fi al-Adab al-Ibri**" (Dar al-Hamraa ,Lebanon, 2001). The list of Ben-Ezer's Hebrew books includes more than 40 volumes of novels, short stories, researches, juvenile and biographies. Ben-Ezer was a member of Meretz party.