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Gil Z. Hochberg: In Spite of Partition

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INTRODUCTION

Between “Jew” and “Arab”

Probing the Borders of the Orient

There was a time
when I'd have said:
I won't defile myself
with this contemptible Orient,
I'll relegate my ancestral
home to oblivion [...]
—Amira Hess, *Keys to the Garden*¹

In a short story entitled “Umami fi Shughl” [Arabic for “My Mother Is at Work”], the Israeli writer Orly Castel-Bloom follows her protagonist—a self-identified paranoiac—as she leaves her apartment to sit down on a nearby bench and “reflect.”² The protagonist’s stream of thoughts is suddenly interrupted when she feels a sharp sting on her leg. Terrified, she jumps and looks under the bench, expecting to find a spider or a scorpion. Instead, she discovers an old Arab woman who claims to be her mother. The two women quarrel for a while, the protagonist insisting that this is impossible (“my mother would never lie underneath a bench!”), the old woman repeating her claim: “I am your mother.” Finally the protagonist turns to the old woman and asks: “so who are you really, some kind of a ghost?” At this point the dialogue shifts from Hebrew to Arabic, the old woman persistently claiming that she is the narrator’s mother, and if not her mother then surely her sister, while the protagonist adamantly denies any such familial affiliations:

—*Ana Ummik*. [I am your mother.]
—*Ummi? Ummi mush huma, ummi fi shurl*. [My mother? My mom isn't here, my mom is at work.]
—*Ana ukhtik*. [I'm your sister.]
—*Inti mush ukhti, ukhti fi shughel*. [You are not my sister, my sister is at work.]
—*Ana ummik*. [I am your mother.]
—*Inti mush ummi, ummi fi shughel*. [You are not my mother, my mom is at work.]³

This dialogue, we are told, is repeated about twenty times, after which the old woman asks the protagonist to please take her home with her. When the latter refuses, the old woman grumpily mutters “Yasater yarab” [so help you God] and slides back down under the bench.

Who or what is this ghostly figure—this old Arab woman who emerges from beneath the surface, proclaiming familial ties, between the Israeli-Jewish protagonist and herself? Who is she, who switches their language of conversation from Hebrew and Arabic? Who is she, if not the embodiment of a haunting repressed memory: the memory of the proximity, indeed familial ties, between Hebrew and Arabic, the Arab and the Jew? Castel-Bloom's absurd representation, itself typical of her Kafkaesque poetic style, unleashes this repressed memory (which could be called the repressed memory of the Semite) by introducing it as an unexpected threat: a fleeting memory that might flash up at any given moment and “bite.” It is a memory that emerges from underneath momentarily, only to be immediately pushed back under the bench, sealed in the dark abyss of national amnesia.

This book attends to this national amnesia and its haunting ghosts, namely, the Arab and the Jew, or more precisely, the inseparability of the two. We are all well familiar with the image of the Arab and Jew as two polarized identities. Often and regularly we hear about the two peoples' “centuries-old” fight over the same strip of land or about their long-lasting “sibling rivalry” dating back to the “legacy of their common father Abraham” (Charney, 1988). But little is usually said about the historical, political, cultural, and, above all, libidinal ties that bind these identities together, even today, under the horrid circumstances in Israel/Palestine. This book seeks to draw attention to these “forgotten” ties. It argues that “Jew” and “Arab,” rather than representing two independent identities, are in fact inevitably attached, each necessarily configured through or in relation to the other. They are, to borrow Derrida's term, always already “traces” of the other when only one of them is addressed.

Historically speaking, my discussion is limited to modern times. I follow this “logic of traces” as formed under European colonialism and at a time when the so-called Jewish question was crystallized in Europe itself, to the more recent reality in Israel/Palestine, where we find that “Jew” is always prefigured in relation to “Arab” (Muslim, Palestinian, the Orient), just as “Arab” emerges, for better or worse, in relation to “Jew” (Israeli, Zionism). Exploring the meaning of this inseparability against the current polarization of the Arab/Palestinian and Jewish/Israeli societies, I suggest that the radical separation of the two people is itself attainable only on the basis of repression and active forgetting. While such forgetting has long been perpetuated by the West for the sake of promoting its own imperial, colonial, and economic benefits, it is today further promoted and secured by an ethno-national separatist politics of memory as manifested most evidently in the case of Zionism, and arguably also by the leading trends of Palestinian nationalism.⁴

My focus, as stated earlier, is literature. If there are plentiful publications on the relationship between Jews and Arabs, or on the various aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, these are predominantly historical, political, or social. Little attention has been directed so far to literary representation and to the manner by which it not only *reflects* historical and sociopolitical realities but further *competes* with them, introducing alternative actualities, which might find expression only at the level of cultural imagination, but which, as such, are nevertheless part of our times.⁵ My interest, then, lies in exploring the manner by which Jews and Arabs imagine and write about the relationships between Jews and Arabs, or about the relationship between the signifiers “Arab” and “Jew” (as well as “Palestinian” and “Israeli”) in modern times, and most notably in the context of Zionism.⁶

This is also the place to note that theology or religion, while certainly playing a growingly significant role in the construction of today’s political reality in the Middle East, is not the focus of this study. Indeed, the literary texts I engage, whether written by Jews, Muslims, or Christians, all locate the question of the relationship between “Arab” and “Jew” within a cultural space that is primarily *secular*. Religion in this context functions as a component of one’s cultural identity (along with, and in relation to, other components such as nationality, ethnicity, gender, class, and linguistic affiliation), but it does not amount to a privileged or a defined status, nor does it represent a divine order or a transcendental ideology. In other words, if the cultural space examined in this book is clearly secular, “secularism” itself must be understood *not* as the rejection of anything traditional or religious, but as a critical force through which familiar categories or names (“Jew,”

“Arab,” “Muslim,” “Israeli,” etc.), used for mapping social belongings and classifying collective identities along national, ethnic, or religious borders, are liberated from their static positions and relocated in a cultural space articulated *between* and *across* such borders.⁷

The bulk of this book, then, is dedicated to close readings of literary texts, for which this introductory chapter provides a shared political, cultural, and historical context. This context includes, most directly, the legacy of partition as associated with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—a legacy that assumes and promotes a radical separation between the Israeli Jewish and Arab Palestinian communities—but it further expands to include the broader theoretical and historical debates concerning the possibility or impossibility of fully separating the Arab from the Jew, as reflected in the intertwined Eurocentric discourses of orientalism, anti-Semitism, imperialism, and colonialism.

A Stubborn History of Intimacy

[Both] Zionism and Palestinian nationalism have not amounted to the philosophical problem of the Other; of learning how to live with, as opposed to despise, the Other . . . [the Other] who is always part of us, not a remote alien.

—Edward Said, “What Can Separation Mean?”

The idea of partition has accompanied the Zionist-Palestinian conflict since its very early stages. It was first introduced by the British colonizers of Palestine in 1937 as Britain was losing its power in the colony, and it later gained the support of the United Nations in 1947.⁸ Finally, the Oslo peace negotiations revived this political legacy in promoting the “two-state solution”: the idea that the answer to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict lies in a territorial division that would allow the establishment of two separate neighboring nations, Israel as a Jewish state for the Jews and Palestine as an Arab state for the Arabs. But if this legacy of partition points at the continual attempts to separate Jews and Arabs, it also reveals the persistent conditions of *inseparability* that turn such attempts repeatedly into failures. Thus, despite the elaborate system of checkpoints, the numerous fences, walls, and roads, all set to police human traffic and separate Arabs from Jews, and regardless of how much most Israelis and Palestinians may wish to exist apart, the

demographic, territorial, and economic reality in Israel/Palestine is such that the two people are forced to share an inextricably linked life.

That this “linked life,” which has so far been governed by extreme inequality, reflecting the power dynamics between Israelis as occupiers and Palestinians as occupied, upholds *alternative*, latent possibilities for envisioning social emancipation achieved across national and ethnic differences, is exemplified in Sahar Khalifah’s gripping novels *Al-Tsubbar* (1976) and *‘Abbad al-Shams* (1980).⁹ Both texts focus on the movement of young Palestinians from traditional working positions as farmers and peasants to new positions as daily workers in Israeli factories, following the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza in 1967. While Khalifah surely alludes to the harmful effects of this transition, revealing the manner by which it reinforces the fragmentation of the occupied Palestinian society, she also points at the liberating effects this transition carries in terms of breaking “the privileged class’s patriarchal control over [the land]” (Yazili 1996, 88–89). Indeed, by centering her narratives on the question of work “in the inside” (i.e., is it a form of national betrayal? a sheer act of individual opportunism? or, perhaps an act of transgression and defiance?), Khalifah draws attention to the limits of the Palestinian national narrative, which casts the conflict in terms of Israelis versus Palestinians. This representation, her novels show, fails to account for other, not less prominent, social injustices, which take place across national differences and territorial borders. Most specifically, Khalifah shows how, by rendering the question of the land in exclusively territorial *national* terms (does the land belong to Palestinians or Israelis?), the national discourse draws attention away from the oppressive and most concrete labor and property divisions between the rich and the poor, as well as between women and men—between, that is, those who *own* the land and those who *work* the land.¹⁰

To be sure, Khalifah’s novels certainly emphasize the importance of the Palestinian fight against the oppressive Israeli occupation, but they also stress the fact that a meaningful social fight against injustice and oppression must take place *against*, rather than in compliance with, existing separatist ideologies. Both novels, then, replace simplistic notions of national liberation with extensive contemplations on the very meaning of “liberation,” entertaining, among the rest, the possibility of an Arab-Jewish cross-national collaborative fight against the military occupation (*‘Abbad al-Shams*) as well as a shared Arab-Jewish proletarian fight against unjust working conditions (*Al-Tsubbar*).¹¹ Furthermore, Khalifah’s daring exploration of the revolutionary potential imbedded in the growing daily interactions between Jews and Arabs, oppressive as they currently are, takes place not

only thematically but also linguistically. As other critics have noted, Khalifah's language is a pioneering mix of classical Arabic and Palestinian vernacular, which is further enriched by her extensive use of Hebrew words and expressions (Muhammad al-Mashayik, Barbara Harlow, Muhammad Siddiq). But if her use of Hebrew has been described as a "semiotic guerilla warfare" (Harlow) and explained in terms of the need of the occupied to "know all sides of the enemy" in order to use this vital information "whenever the need arises" (al-Mashayik), such combative accounts, I suggest, overlook one of the most distinct characteristics of Khalifah's bilingual expression: the fact that, for the most part, she limits her use of Hebrew to words that sound very much like their Arabic counterparts. In so doing, Khalifah accentuates the phonetic similarity between Hebrew and Arabic, calling attention to the "familial" (Semitic) relationship of the two languages, and further implying, not unlike Orly Castel-Bloom, that the two Semitic people might in fact be closer to each other than they realize, or wish to realize.

I take this brief detour through Khalifah's writings not to suggest that the growing economic relationships between Israel and the Palestinians, or the new territorial proximity between Jews and Arabs (especially since 1967), in themselves carry a promise of social or political transformation. For anybody familiar with the devastating living conditions of Palestinians in the occupied territories, it is evident that this is far from being the case. But the point I wish to emphasize, and which I believe Khalifah's novels powerfully illustrate, is that these relatively new territorial and economic realities, while so far working in the service of separatist ideologies, nevertheless introduce a level of social and linguistic familiarity that furnishes our cultural imagination with "new-old ways," to borrow David Shasha's term, for envisioning the relationship between the two peoples in terms of proximity and affiliation. Above all, these new conditions intensify the so-called drama of identification between the Jew and the Arab, as new libidinal attachments join older narratives of familial intimacy, bringing Jews and Arabs closer together despite, or even due to, their current animosity. Such attachments follow the general principle of differentiation by which, to borrow Judith Butler's words, "that from which I am differentiated returns to me at the heart of what I am" (2000, 35), and are further contextualized by Said, who observes, in one of his earliest essays on the question of Palestine, that the more the two people seek to separate, the more attached they become:

Neither people can develop without the other [already] there, harassing, taunting, fighting; no Arab today has an identity that can be unconscious of the Jew, that can rule out the Jew as a

psychic factor in the Arab identity; conversely, I think, no Jew can ignore the Arab in general, nor can he immerse himself in his ancient tradition and lose the Palestinian Arab and what Zionism has done to him. The more intense the modern struggles for [separate] identity, the more attention is paid by the Arab or the Jew to his chosen opponent, or partner. *Each is the other.* (1974, 1, my emphasis)

It is this “psychic factor” that interests me the most: the drama of identification that binds the Jew (or the Israeli) and the Arab (or Palestinian) together, making a clear differentiation between them impossible: “Each is the other.”

The immediate historical and political context against which we must understand this drama of identification centers on the ironic “meeting” that took place in Palestine between modern Jewish and Arab histories or between two semi-independent narratives of oppression: that of anti-Semitism and that of modern colonialism. Thus, if for Jews the establishment of Israel was, to a certain degree, a “response” to centuries of anti-Semitic persecution, primarily in Europe, for the Palestinians it was a manifestation of yet another European-modeled colonial occupation; in fact, the harshest Palestine has ever known. Acknowledging the significance of this historical intersection, the Palestinian scholar and politician Azmi Bishara notes that “the question of Palestine [which is first and foremost a colonial question] is fully intertwined with the Jewish question. This might not be fair or just but it is true . . . any attempt to find a political solution in the Middle East must therefore attend to the history [of modern Palestine] as a *shared* history of these two people” (1995, 54).

Moreover, the shared history of the two people, reflected in the historical link between the Jewish question and the question of Palestine, or between the history of anti-Semitism and that of colonialism, does not begin with the actual encounter of Jews and Arabs in twentieth-century Palestine. Rather, it finds its origins in much earlier political and theological discursive practices by which Europe, or the Christian West, has differentiated itself from, and identified itself against, *both* Jews and Arabs.¹² Where we best witness this process of “doubled othering” is, without doubt, in the discursive practices Said has called “Orientalism.” Indeed, it is through its orientalist imagination, I suggest, that the Christian West has indirectly, yet systematically, brought the Jew and the Arab, as well as the “Jewish question” and the question of the Orient (of which the question of Palestine is a clear example) together, by paradoxically pulling them apart. To paraphrase Jonathan Boyarin (1992, 77), if the Orient [Arab or Muslim] represented Europe’s “Other from without,” it is the Jew who for Europe came to represent the “Other/Oriental within.” Most important to note in this context

is the fact not only that Jews and Arabs were both othered by Europe, but that their othering was directly linked to their *shared*, albeit different, status as Orientals. Indeed, the so-called Jewish question was itself articulated in terms borrowed directly from the orientalist discourse, the same discourse through which Europe justified its colonial domination over the Orient.¹³ The actual question behind the “Jewish question,” particularly in its German manifestation, was, after all: do the Jews represent a racial/ethnic group, and as such are they part of the Oriental people (and hence essentially Other to Europe) or, are Jews a religious group and as such capable of assimilating into European culture?¹⁴ Moreover, if the Jewish question—as manifested in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe—was articulated through orientalist and, at times, even explicit colonialist terms, the orientalist discourse of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, directed primarily toward Arabs/Muslims, has itself borrowed directly from the European anti-Semitic discourse. As noted by Said: “The transference of a popular anti-Semitic animus from a Jewish to Arab target was made smoothly since the figure was essentially the same” (1979a, 286).¹⁵

If, then, the Israeli-Jew and the Palestinian are today locked in a circuit of identification in which “each is the other,” such accounts of orientalism expand this claim to the broader historical context of modern Europe, where the figure of the Arab and that of the Jew appear to be “essentially the same.” The continual impact of this intimate relationship between orientalism and the Jewish question or between anti-Arab polemics and modern anti-Semitism (both discourses, one must note, conflate the political and the theological as well as the ethnic/racial and the national) on the present relationships between Jews and Arabs, particularly in Israel/Palestine, cannot be overestimated. Indeed, what we notice as we follow the trajectory of orientalism from eighteenth- to twentieth-century Europe to contemporary Israel is that the very paradoxical effect of Orientalism, as a discourse that distinguishes between Arabs and Jews while simultaneously collapsing the differences between them, finds its most extreme and perplexing manifestations. Thus, as I attempt to show throughout the book, while the Zionist orientalist imagination clearly seeks to set apart the Jew and the Arab, and to do so by mobilizing Eurocentric orientalist binaries (West/East, Europe/Orient, civil/barbarian, modernity/tradition, etc.), these very binaries repeatedly crumble. This is due primarily to the ambivalent and unstable position of the Jew within the orientalist imagination, a position that reveals the stubborn historical intimacy between the two Semitic figures: the Arab and the Jew.

