

Zionism, post Zionism and fear of Arabness
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In this talk I discuss the fear of Arabness of the Ashkenazim (Jews of European and American origin) and its impact on the Mizrahim. I explore the Mizrahim's reaction to the fear of Arabness and examine it in the light of the post Zionist critic of Arab-Jewishness.

Let me open with two episodes.

When I was 10, there was a boy in my class whose name was Baruch (in Hebrew it means blessed). He had dark skin, black eyes and curly hair. He lived in Beit Saffafa, an Arab village in South Jerusalem. At school he spoke very little but when he did one could hear his Arab accent. His family name was Salman – a name common both to Arabs and Jews. This has always puzzled me: How come an Arab boy was given a Jewish first name 'Baruch'.

It was only many years later when we once met on the street that I dared asking him about it. He told me that the teachers changed his name from Muhamed to Baruch explaining that it would make it easier for him in a class where he was the only Arab pupil amongst 35 Jewish pupils. As our conversation went on both of us agreed that it was meant to make it simple for the Jewish children and the teachers but it certainly did not ease his social difficulties at class.

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A colleague of mine told me this second episode. She is a woman of Ashkenazi origin. As a child, she said, her parents have always warned her to never cross the street but did not explain to her why. She grew up in a middle class Jewish neighborhood in the Arab-Jewish mixed town Lead and left it after she finished the mandatory military service. Only when she became a peace activist, a couple of decades later she recalled, that her parents did not allow her to cross the street because there was an Arab neighborhood, and like all the Jews in this street, they did not want their children to mingle with Arabs.

These two incidents, minor to Jewish young girls and critical to Arabs who lived amongst them demonstrate Orientalism¹ at work. Clearly, these incidences conceal deepest fears that Ashkenazi Jews had of Arabness and of the Palestinians who lived around them and amongst them. They explain how casual and easy could it be to erase Arab names, bodies, entire neighborhoods while simultaneously living in their midst. But could they eliminate the fear of the Arabs who lived inside them, the fear of the Arab-Jews? And what did the Arab-Jews do with this fear? In other words, how did the fear of Arabness, fueled by the Israeli establishment, an establishment consisting mainly of Ashkenazis, affect those Israelis who were both Jewish and Arab? What did the Arab-Jews do when realized that they live amongst people who envision their Arabness as frightening and as contradicting their Jewishness?

Unlike the Palestinian whose Arabness was regarded by Zionist nation builder as compatible with their enmity, the Jews of the Arab countries confused them. As the Zionist project saw itself as the Jews redeemer, the idea of redemption in the case of

Arab-Jews was taken further to redeem the Arab-Jews of their own Arabness² (Dahan-Kale 2001).

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For a couple of decades, till the late 1960s, however it looked like success in separating Arabness from the Jews, has been achieved. Assimilated Mizrahim showed loyalty and condemned the Arab enemy, internalizing the derogatory sense of Arabness. Moreover, they participated in national tasks that the decision makers had put on the Israeli society, contributing their share to the militaristic efforts, occupying the territories, and governing the Palestinians people's lives. For a while this has helped to create amongst many Israelis: Ashkenazim and Mizrahim, a belief that Arabness was finally tamed and the source of fear within them is under control. But not for more than one decade.

An interesting attempt of post-Zionists in the late 1980s involved a particular move, to bring Arabness back in and to problematize it within the Israeli discourse, has shackled up this belief and awakened anew the fears.

This has happened following the breaking through paradigm of Said, *Orientalism*. The Iraqi-American Jewish scholar Ella Shohat was among the first to apply *Orientalism* to the analysis of the Mizrahi-Ashkenazi social tension in Israel. Shohat has treated the Israeli cinema and film industry as texts and narratives, exposing within them deepest fears of Arabness embedded in Zionism (Shohat 1989)³. Shohat claimed that Zionism was more or less a particular case study of *Orientalism*, saturated in fears of Islam and Arabness. Her genuine contribution to the critic of Zionism, in *The Israeli Cinema* in 1991, continued with the post-Iraq war article "Dislocated Identities"⁴ (1992), offered a theoretical-critical discussion, in which the idea of erasing the hyphen which appended Arabness with Jewishness, has appeared

as an Orientalist project. Moreover, what was threatening to the Ashkenazis and the Ashkenazified Mizrahim in her works was that she has re-hyphenated it ruining Zionist tireless efforts to de-hyphen it for decades (Ibid, 1992).

Shohat's bringing the hyphen back in has re-inflamed the hibernated fears of Arabness of Israeli Jews, and burning experiences from the past, preoccupied the intellectual dispute again.

Nevertheless, the variety of the critic of Shohat's argument, ranging from well Ashkenazified Zionist seculars through Mizrahi activists, nationalists as well as left wingers, or the Ultra-Orthodox Mizrahim of the third largest political party Shas, have proved Shohat's view of the Mizrahim to be touch upon the important point of fear but does it in a monolithic and anachronistic in nature⁵. It spurred a debate showing that Mizrahim are playing an active role in the discourse and not necessarily out of the initial shame or contempt or even of fear of their Arabness.

Indeed, I find it difficult to understand the absence of the discussion of what seems to be the 'Mizrahim's' consent and not just subordination, or Mizrahi dispute with the Zionist de-hyphenization in Shohat's work. The Mizrahim's position is very difficult to be summed up. Shohat insists on the Arab-Jews victimization, as one of her article's title points out: "Zionism from the Standpoint of its Jewish Victims"(1988). In this respect, it reduces the Mizrahim's diverse reaction to one that is politically passive and uniform. Mizrahim appear to be objects who accepted the Zionist imposition of the 'de-hyphenization'. This is a monolithic standpoint which do not coincide with possible political heterogeneity and cultural diversity, which Shohat herself attributes to them. Moreover, she does to the Arab Jewishness just the same, Zionism has done to the Jewish Arabness. In other words, Shohat hardly discusses Jewish religion and Jewish tradition in itself. She discusses Diaspora negation in the

context of Zionism's goal to eliminate the Arab-Jews history from the curricula. Shohat' attempt was to bring it back. She argued that Jewishness when related to the Arab-Jews it was presented in civilian and cultural terms, as Jewish Iraqi language, family life, customs and space (See for example Shohat 1992). Jews distinguished them selves as a community from the Moslems not from the Arabs, she explains. This was a religious distinction which divided the Arabs into groups of Jews and Moslems (Ibid). Her conclusion is that the Arabs-Moslems and the Arab-Jews were not alienated from each other. This indeed was the common description repeatedly mentioned by Jews who came from the Arab world.

But while Shohat is giving a peaceful description of the community life in Iraq till the emergence of the Zionist movement, even somewhat nostalgic, Alber Memmi, the author of the powerful work *The Colonizer and The Colonized*⁶, discussed his Jewish-Arabness rather furiously insisting that fear of Arabs was part of the Jews experience, back there in the Arab countries. In an article titled "Who is an Arab Jew?" published in *Israel Academic Community on the middle East* in February 1975⁷, he responded to Muammer Khadafi's (the Libyan leader) call to the Jews to return to the Arab countries, rhetorically asking them "Are you not Arabs like us - Arab Jews?"

Memmi agrees with Shohat that the similarities between Jews and Moslems are rooted in their Arabness and that Arabness is a cultural similarity. But while Shohat sees culture with a capital c and includes history, geography politics and space, Memmi's culture is written with a small c. He draws the line of Arabness after the habits, music and menu saying that the "Jews were at the mercy not only of the monarch but also of the man in the street." (ibid) Thus pointing to the constant threat, on Arab-Jews, politics is being drowned as at least two histories.

Memmi's different view of culture, I want to suggest, results from the time in which he wrote his reply to Khadafi, the mid-70s. Shohat on the other hand, is writing in the post- era, post modernist, post colonialist and post Zionist era. To use Shohat's brilliant explanation of the post- in the article "Notes on the 'Post Colonial' (1992)⁸, the focus in the idea of the post here is on new modes and forms of colonial actions rather than on something that is beyond. When applied to the above point, this results in continuities and in discontinuities. In other words, experiencing a phase of othering within what is imagined as one's own country, as the Mizrahim did, had a sobering effect of post naiveté. And therefore we can conclude that Mizrahim from Arab countries have indeed suffered both from being Jews in Arab countries and from being Arabs in Israel. Zionism racialized them for being Arabs, and in this sense they were Jewish victims of Zionism and Jewish victims of Arabness in Israel as they continue to be even when de-Ashkenazified like Shohat's, and others Mizrahi post-Zionists suggest. However, they have learned how to survive both in the Arab countries and in the Zionist country.

What I center on here is how they have survived this racialization in Israel. Although severely economically deprived, in three decades they have learned how to play the Israeli political game and became a significant **if not the significant actor on the political arena.**

This talk is in a way a continuation of the paper "The Israeli Palestinian Conflict and the Israeli Arab-Jews" which I delivered in a conference in *Al-Kuds University in January 2005*⁹. I argued then, that the Mizrahim – the Jews who came to Israel from Arab countries are a diverse social category, and their political

orientation, in general, and their position towards the Israeli Palestinian conflict, in particular, ranges from the right to the left of the political parties map. Unlike their political image as right wingers, their political considerations are complex and influenced by factors which are connected to the peace process directly and indirectly and in any case are influenced by economic factors and bitter experience of deprivation.

Therefore it would be myopic to see them only as passive and victims and not to consider their impact on the Israeli Palestinian conflict, though indirect impact. Today they are scattered across the political map although their voice is mainly heard from the right wing. Why it is so is a question that still needs to be studied. From this point of view Shohat's proclamation of Arab-Jewish victimization of Mizrahim remains **an abstract idea** that might attract intellectuals but is conquered by **daily life practices**. As their racialization experience was completely different from that of the Palestinians from within and from out of the green line, therefore I suggest seeing them exclusively neither as Arabs – victims of Zionism nor as Israelis identical to the Ashkenazis. This turns the gaze to the Palestinians, and to how they see them?

This complication was fairly well discerned by many Palestinians who have been impatient with the abstruse arguments surrounding epistemological foundations of post-Zionism. They have concentrated instead on more historically informed studies of the political conditions and biases of particular knowledge claims, as works of Bishara, for example, demonstrate (1993)¹⁰. Such works ultimately derive from Said and they usually want to preserve some kind of distance from Mizrahim as well as from the post-Zionist discourse. The Mizrahim post-Zionist, like Shohat however,

who want to bring Arabness back in to the Israeli Palestinian conflict, deny this impatient to exist or to be contestable.

In conclusion the Arab-Jewish idea offers no model of conflict resolution beyond disputes as to how to remove from Zionism the fear of Arabness or how to move to political action. Given this contested position, relations between Palestinians and leftists Mizrahim, have been wary. Mizrahim in the left wing organizations such as Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow and Ahoti – Mizrahi Women Organization have paid little explicit attention to the issues raised by Palestinians outside the academic world¹¹. Like Shohat, the Mizrahi intellectuals in Israel enjoy the game of pulling Zionism from the hands of the mainstream establishment and delivering it to the hands of critical, perhaps post-Zionist activist. But the problem is that this does not bear the exploration of the complex relations between the Mizrahim and Israeli-Palestinian conflict in new contexts. Thus the belief that Mizrahim who hold Arab-Jewish views and who are often identified as left wingers cannot enjoy the sympathy of the Palestinian on the common ground of being Arabs while other Mizrahim continue the occupation in the territories and the oppression of Palestinians. Such belief would be both misleading and synthetic. It is impossible to ignore Mizrahim right wingers who contest from the extreme right and from religious and Orthodox the idea of Arab-Jews. Shas, the Ultra-Orthodox Party representing religious people of Arab-Jewish origin, whom I did not include in this analysis, proclaim being the true Zionists. They don't even call themselves Arabs or Mizrahim but Sepharadim. Zionist Sepharadim. However, it would be too easy and superficial to put all of them in the same pot as right wingers.

Last comment, it is my contention that understanding the fear of Arabness as looked closer in the case of the Israelis, Ashkenazis as well As Mizrahim, can be applied to

the exploration of the fear of Islam and Arabness in general as expressed in other places and in other historical times. USA scholars works such in general as Bernard Louis and Samuel Huntington, and the making of political decisions such as the invasion to Iraq, are not in vain rooted in the fear of Islam. The fear of Islam is not imaginative only, as Said himself points out:

"Yet where Islam was concerned, **European fear, if not always respected, was in order.** After Mohammed's death in 632, the military and later **the cultural and religious hegemony of Islam grew enormously**". P.59 [my emphasis]

¹ Said, Edward, 1978, *Orientalism*, Vintage, NY

² Dahan-Kalev, Henriette, 2001. "You Are So Pretty, You Don't Look Moroccan", *Israeli Studies*, Vol. 6:1-14.

³ Ella Shohat, 1989 *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation*, Univ. of Texas Press,

⁴ Ella Shohat, "Dislocated Identities: Reflections of an Arab-Jew," *Movement Research: Performance Journal* # 5 (Fall-Winter, 1992) p. 8.

⁵. See the Left Bank internet site <http://www.hagada.org.il/hagada/> article on the Mizrahi woman trial charged for accusation of Mizrahi woman for collaboration with Palestinian terrorists, Taly Fahima 25.9.04. For religious Mizrahim discourse on Jewish tradition and religion see for example Zvi Zohar, "Sephardic Rabbinic Response to Modernity: Some Central Characteristics", in: S. Deshen and W.P. Zenner (eds.), *Jews Among Muslims: Communities in the Pre-Colonial Middle East*, London, Macmillan and New York University Press, 1996, pp. 64-80. For left wing Mizrahi discourse see for example the Democratic Mizrahi Rainbow internet site www.hakeshet.org.il For social justice issues see internet site <http://www.haokets.org/> For national-religious position see for example Avi Picard's Book Review: Were the Sephardim Religious? In Shasha's internet site The Shepharadic Heritage September 2004: <http://student.cs.ucc.ie/cs1064/jabowen/IPSC/journals/SephardicHeritageUpdate.php>

⁶ Memmi Albert, 1967 *The colonizer and the colonized* Boston: Beacon Press

⁷ Albert Memmi, 1975, "Who is an Arab Jew?" *Israel Academic Community on the middle East*, February 1975.

⁸ Shohat Ella, 1992 "Notes on the 'Post Colonial', in *Social Texts* 31/32

⁹ Henriette Dahan Kalev "The Israeli Palestinian Conflict and the Israeli Arab-Jews", The Faculty For Israeli – Palestinian Peace, FFIPP, The 4th International Academic Conference on *An End to Occupation, A Just Peace in Israel-Palestine :Activating an International Network* January 3rd – 5th, 2005 Al Quds University East Jerusalem

¹⁰Bishara, Azmi, 1993, "On the Question of the Palestinian Minority in Israel"
Theory and Criticism, vol. 3 (1)

¹¹ From a recent draft published in the www.keshet.org.il internet site one can immediately identify the Zionist middle class spirit blowing in it. There is not even one issue of the conflict, be it Jerusalem, the right of return or the refugees, that is talked.