

Zionism, post Zionism and fear of Arabness

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

I begin by relating to two incidents 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 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 while changing his name made it easier for Jewish children and the teachers to relate to him it certainly did nothing to ease his social difficulties in the class.

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A colleague of mine once 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 of Lod [in Hebrew Lod] and left it after she had completed her mandatory military service. Only when she became a peace activist, a couple of decades later she recall, that her parents reason not to allow her to cross the street was because Arabs lived on the other side of the street, and like all the Jews in this street, they did not want their children to mingle with Arab children.

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 have both of Arabness and of the Palestinians who lived around them and amongst them. They show how easy it was 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 largely of Ashkenazis, affect those Israelis who were both Jewish and Arab? What did the Arab-Jews do when they realized that they lived 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 redeemer of the Jews, 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, that is until the late 1960s, some success had been achieved in separating Arabness from the Jews. 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 placed on the Israeli agenda – they contributed their share to the militaristic efforts, occupying the territories, and governing the Palestinians people's lives. For a while this helped to create an illusion amongst many Israelis - both Ashkenazim and Mizrahim - a belief that Arabness was finally being tamed and that the source of the fear within them was under control. But this went for only one decade.

Some post-Zionists in the late 1980s involved in an attempt to bring Arabness back in and to problematize it within the Israeli discourse, has shackled up this belief and re-awakened the old fears.

The catalyst for this was publication of the breaking through paradigm of Edward 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, that display the deepest fears of Arabness that is embedded in the Zionist project (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 criticism of Zionism, in *The Israeli Cinema* in 1991, was later continued in her post-Iraq war article "Dislocated Identities"⁴ (1992). In both these works she put forward an analysis with which she laid stress on the idea of erasure of the hyphen

that joined Arabness to Jewishness, and demonstrated it 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 the connection between Arabness and Jewishness for decades (Ibid, 1992).

Shohat's bringing the hyphen back in has re-inflamed the hibernated fears of the Arabness of Israeli Jews, both Mizrahim and Ashkenazim. This brought to consciousness hurtful experiences of the past which began to occupy public intellectual discourse in Israel.

Nevertheless, Shohat's views were criticized from all sides: from Ashkenazified Zionist seculars to Mizrahi activists; right wing nationalists as well as left wingers, and the Ultra-Orthodox Mizrahim of the third largest political party Shas. This multifaceted criticism of Shohat's view of the Mizrahim did touch a nerve of fear but did it in a monolithic and anachronistic in nature⁵. Her view spurred a debate which showed that Mizrahim do play an active role in the intellectual public discourse in Israel and that they are not not necessarily ashamed or contemptuous or afraid 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 the title of one of her article's announces: "Zionism from the Standpoint of its Jewish Victims"(1988). Shohat 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 does not coincide with possible political heterogeneity and cultural diversity, which Shohat herself attributes to them. Moreover, she treats all varieties of the Arab Jewishness just the same, and

what Zionism has done to the Jewish Arabness she also treats in a monolithic manner. Shohat hardly discusses Jewish religion and Jewish tradition in itself. She discusses negation of the Diaspora only in the context of Zionism's goal to eliminate the Arab-Jews history from the school 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 only from the Moslems but not from the Arabs. This was a religious distinction which divided the Arabs into groups of Jews and Moslems (Ibid). Her conclusion is that in the Diaspora the Arabs-Moslems and the Arab-Jews were not alienated from each other. This indeed was the common description repeatedly mentioned by Israeli Jews who came from the Arab world.

But while Shohat and other scholars such as Shlaim give us 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, discusses 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 claims that Jews Arabness was displayed in habits, music and menu. But he also claims that "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 moves beyond. When applied to the above point, this results both 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 looked down upon them, racializing them for being partly Arabs, and in this sense they in Israel were Jewish victims of Zionism and Jewish victims of Arabness. However, they have learned how to survive both in the Arab countries and in the Zionist country. That is to say that they suffered because of being classified along racial lines.

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 have become 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. Then I argued that, 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 as Shohat does 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 contradicted 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 accurately mirror the complex relations between the Mizrahim and Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Thus the belief that Mizrahim who hold Arab-Jewish views and who are often identified as left wingers do not enjoy the sympathy of the Palestinians on the common ground of being Arabs while other Mizrahim want the occupation in the territories to continue the oppression of Palestinians. Such belief would be both misleading and synthetic as there is no such a single Mizrahi view of the Israeli Palestinian conflict. 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.

It is my contention that understanding the fear of Arabness as it is expressed in Israeli society both among, Ashkenazim as well As among Mizrahim, can help throw some light on the exploration of the fear of Islam and Arabness in general as it is expressed in other places in other historical times such the writings of Bernard Lewis 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 Mizrahi 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

¹⁰ Bishara, 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.