Back to the Future:
Israeli Literature of the 1980s and 1990s

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By

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To the greatest kids in the world:
My daughter Lori and son Ethan
Who make every minute of the day worthwhile

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REFERENCING CONVENTIONS

In this work there are two referencing conventions for citations from other works. Where citations are used from novels or short stories to illustrate the discussion, a reference is provided by the use of the title of the particular work, either in full or in a shortened form, followed by the page.

In the case of critical works, articles and other sources of commentary such as newspapers, the usual conventions of citation are followed. The author's name is given, the date of the work, and the particular page[s].

INTRODUCTION

If you've picked up this book then you must have some affection for modern Israeli literature. Needless to say, I am glad you did. Here you will find enthralling, acidic, norm-defying, consciousness-raising novels and short story collections published in the 1980s and 1990s by authors you may have never heard of. Indeed, lamentably, it is often only renowned Israeli writers whose work is translated into English or whose novels are given prominent coverage in literary journals and newspapers. This means that many fine Hebrew novels are sidelined and destined to occupy space on library shelves and collect dust. As such, it is my hope that the chapters in this book, which discuss an author's single work, and in some instances several in a series, will point you in the right direction and encourage you to look for the authors' other titles. But there is another reason why it is my hope that you will gain value from this book. To borrow the words of Rebecca L. Torstrick: "Literature provides a window into the heart and soul of another people. Israelis used that literature to create that heart and soul, to constitute a new Israeli national identity and culture" (Torstrick 2004: 55).

Clearly, no study can cover every genre and every work of fiction published in one year, let alone two decades. As a result, a range of outstanding novels published during that period is not evaluated in this book. Still, I have no doubt that even in this attention-deficit era, many readers will discover a whole new panorama of Israeli culture among these pages, that will grip their imagination, and keep them busy reading for years to come. In addition, each section contains background information on the development and trends of a particular genre, about the authors' motivations and about their thematic concerns.

So why a book that offers a critical appraisal of Israeli fiction of the 1980s and 1990s and why borrow a title from a film of that era? Recall that *Back to the Future* became such a cultural artefact that it was added to the Library of Congress' National Film Registry permanent archive to be preserved for future generations. It has now transcended its original scope and has influenced a variety of landscapes— literary, cinematic, political, social, and philosophical—beyond its immediate timeline. In very much the same way, the dramatic repositioning of Israeli literature in the 1980s and 1990s and its emergent new voices, created an entire spectrum of

heterogeneous and polyphonic series of themes, visions, and concerns. These motifs and trends endured and prepared the way for the current crop of Israeli authors who drew power from the success of their predecessors. Casting our mind and glance back to the 1980s, we find that the cultural signatures that pervaded that period have come to dominate the discourse of Israeli fiction today. In a sense, though Hebrew writing of the 21st century is not a replay or a reprise of the 1980s, it is wholly evident that in a myriad of ways there has been a return to the past and to a prominence of narrative point of views and diegetic forms symptomatic of the 1980s and 1990s. It is no wonder that Gershon Shaked unequivocally asserts that, "From the 1980s and onwards a new chapter in the history of Hebrew fiction has begun…" (Shaked 1998: 481). Risa Domb agrees: "The 1980s were probably the most prolific period in the development of the literature of the state of Israel, of prose in particular" (Domb 1995: 13).

In further understanding the specific choice of these two decades, here are some small swathes of exposition about modern Hebrew literature. Our starting point is with a statement by Israeli author Aharon Megged. Megged observes that during the Yishuv[1] period and the first few decades following the 1948 establishment of the state of Israel, the main branch of Hebrew literature had been, "unremittingly concerned with burning national issues. The things that happen to its heroes have a strong relationship to national or social events taking place around them… Hebrew literature bears a definite relationship to the cardinal issues of our times here in Israel" (Megged 1992: 36)[2]. This unmistakable tone was strikingly set by a cluster of authors variously tagged as *Dor Ba-aretz* (The Generation of the Land), *Dor Ta-shach* (The Generation of 1948), or *Dor Ha-Palmach* (The Palmach Generation)[3]. Most of these authors were born in Palestine of the 1920s and began their literary careers in the 1930s and 1940s. A product of the pioneering, farming co-operative settlements as well as the Labour movement, their fictions were imbued with social-realism and begat the seminal image of the *Sabra*, the native-born Israeli that populated and sustained the early Hebrew canon (Gertz 1983)[4]. The fiction of that day was steadily anchored in the image of the warrior pioneer, the new Jew who would drive the British out of Palestine and

[1] Jewish settlement in Palestine that began in the late 19th century.
[2] For a clear exposition of the history of Hebrew literature, see Halkin (1974) and Silberschlag (1975).
[3] The acronym *Palmach* refers to the Jewish underground army/commando groups formed during the British mandate in Palestine of the 1940s.
[4] See also Shaked (1983) and Shapira (1990).

establish a state that would absorb the hundreds of thousands of persecuted European Jews.

The ideological and ideational trajectory of these authors chiefly embraced the "conformist collective ideals of the founding fathers" including, "love of country, passionate idealism and readiness to sacrifice the fruit of their Zionist education tendered at home, in the youth movement and in the school" (Abramson 1998: 7). Similarly, Gershon Shaked argued that the "…tradition of Hebrew fiction during the years immediately preceding the declaration of the state in 1948 was primarily a realist tradition, serving the ideological and cultural needs of a newly established nation in the process of consolidating its identity" (Shaked 2001: 95).

And so, with a few exceptions, for the first thirty years of statehood, the Israeli canonical corpus had been greatly absorbed with state and nation-building issues, as well as the fostering of a national mythos—all at the expense of marginal groups. True, Israeli authors did criticise the Zionist enterprise and were sceptical of its goals and objectives. And yes, a close reading of Hebrew literature of the period does show signs of rupture that undermined the hegemonic Zionist story. This was especially manifest in the generation of authors that came to be known as *Dor Ha-medina* (The State Generation) or *Gal Chadash* (The New Wave). These writers were teenagers when Israel was established in 1948 and it was this formative event that defined and dominated their zeitgeist and creative output. Though some grew up in religious households, they jettisoned those essentialist values in favour of a secular lifestyle. Broadly, this subgroup began to publish in the 1960s and 1970s.

In various ways, their plots contained strains of deconstruction, rebellion and a critique of the entrenched conventions, culture and social-realist template of the *Dor Ba-aretz* faction, a protest that mirrored the youthful counter-culture movement of 1960s America. Disenchanted and fatigued of patriotic maxims and the doctrines of the collective 'We', the writers of *Dor Ha-medina* were swept up by the cultural upheavals that were felt globally. One of Israel's foremost authors, A.B Yehoshua, who belongs to this generation, writes that "…one of the things that distinguished our generation from others was a further loosening of the ties that bound together the collectivity…And from here follows the second point: we took a positive but also a realistic stand in relation to the creation of the state, with none of the romanticism that characterised the previous generation" (Yehoshua 2001: 49).

However, by and large, the writers who had traditionally set the tone in modern Israeli fiction were besieged by the normalising context of the

mainstream terrain that focused on the perennial issues of statehood and survival. In other words, Zionism, its politics and ideology, not only made a strong appearance in Israeli fiction, but also dominated its dynamics and contours. Zionism served as the touchstone, the reflexive marker that monopolised the work of Israel's best fiction writers and effaced many traces of 'otherness'. Although the 'state generation' authors argued that their works accentuated the human condition of the individual over the collective, a closer look reveals that they were never successful in cutting themselves off from the political sphere.

In addition to adopting fierce public stances on an array of issues, the fiction of these authors assumed a dual, analogical stand, in which relationship and characters were symbolic of the overriding national situation. Author and poet Yitzhak Laor argues that Israeli culture muffled the identities and voices of what one may term the 'other' or 'minorities'—principally, ethnic groups and women in Israel. Laor avers that the political and literary establishment had imposed a crippling discourse on the public, a pool of ideas whose paramountcy had become very difficult to defy or overcome. He adds that for years, Israelis did not bridle at the thought that this form of consensus prevented them from learning, discovering, and achieving the freedom to rebel against the prevailing discourse (Laor 1995: 115-170). All this began to change significantly in the 1980s and continued throughout the 1990s.

Alexandra Nocke offers a succinct and adroit overview of the fundamental transfigurations that took place in Israel of the 1980s and 1990s:

> Since the 1980s and 1990s, Israel has undergone extensive changes, initiating transformation processes on political, demographical, cultural, and economic levels. Many aspects of Israeli identity are being deconstructed and reconsidered. The idealized Zionist image of one single Israeli culture and identity is being replaced more and more by the perception of Israel as a pluralistic and, as some put it, even multi-cultural society. The influence of the founding generation and the pioneer elite is slowly fading away, and new currents are undermining the Zionist core values, which had been functioning as a social glue for decades. This entails the deconstruction of the hegemonic, secular Zionist national identity, and the emerging Israeli identity is confronted with an increase of individualization and privatization in all sectors of daily life. Since the 1990s, the post-Zionists' demythologizing view of history has made Israelis painfully aware that attempts to force the creation of a common culture and identity, based on the idea of a homogenizing melting pot, have failed. The Zionist meta-culture is declining, and competing cultures and countercultures have risen in its place. The continuous heterogenisation of

> society and the so-called *kulturkampf* among the different ethnic and ideological groups has been subject to increased debate in sociological and anthropological research in recent years (Nocke 2006: 144).

Examining the multi-genre transitions associated with the literature of the 1980s and 1990s, one discovers a panoply of authors groping for a new order of concerns. Their story telling relates to a bundle of intimate moments and identities that stress personal knowledge and desires, "In the 1980s writers permitted themselves to turn inward towards more idiosyncratic and sui generis experience" (Shaked 2001: 101; See also Shaked 1993: 43-78). David Gurevitch, who wrote one of the first texts on postmodernism in Israeli fiction, correctly identifies the 1980s and 1990s as decades in which the central models of Hebrew fiction lost their dominion and exclusivity, clearing the way for new subject matters—immigrants, minorities and women. Referring to this period not only as postmodern, but also as post-ideological, Gurevitch observes that, "Postmodern Israeli literature re-examines the foundational myths of Israeli society and exposes a multiplicity of identities and differences" (Gurevitch 1997: 29). Gurevitch puts it nicely when he writes that if Israeli literature was once likened to a town with a central culture and with suburbs, the literature of today is only composed of suburbs with no centre. Thematically, the postmodern protagonist belongs to a numerical or spiritual minority, turning against the official history of Zionism in a desperate attempt to travel a different highway.

In the same vein, Hamutal Bar-Yosef contends that in the 1980s and 1990s the primary criterion in assessing a work's literary worth was its subversive complexion. Bar Yosef states: "The postmodern outlook has institutionalised subversiveness within the boundaries of those segments of the population that were neglected or were somehow driven to the edges of culture: women, ethnic minorities, homosexuals, lesbians and the mentally ill" (Bar-Yosef 1998: 555). In other words, if the traditional modern Israeli hero was native-born, Ashkenazi and usually male, the postmodern protagonist is likely to belong to a numerical or spiritual minority and roam an alternative historical or social highway. Veteran Israeli author Amalia Khana Carmon adds her own observation: "We live in a time of change—the walls of consensus have collapsed, at least for now. The pose of the outsider is in" (Abramson 2003: 533).

On another front, Yael Feldman points to the 1980s as a period of unprecedented momentum for Israeli female authors. She writes: "Somewhere around 1987-1988 an unseen gate seems to have opened and Israeli prose fiction was pervaded by an unprecedented number of women writers—most, though not all, of a younger generation" (Feldman 1999:

225). The proliferation and ubiquity of Israeli women's writing in the 1980s led commentator Yaffa Berlovitz to ask whether Hebrew literature had been feminised (Berlovitz 1992) and for Gershon Shaked to note that the, "…very appearance of so many women writers in a short space of time is noteworthy in itself…" (Shaked 2001: 109).

Avraham Balaban sums up some of the reasons that brought about the intense departures from the traditional frontiers of Hebrew literature:

> The Yom Kippur War created deep cracks in the Israeli consensus and gave birth to a new inspection of the aims of Zionism and the manner in which it was realised. The political revolution of 1977 was the pinnacle of the earthquake that began in October 1973 and reflected the fierce social shake-up experienced by the Israeli public…The former image of Israeli society as one with a strong centre and edges, changed without recognition. Lacking a consensus, the social and ideological divisions that up until then were kept at the margins of social and political activity moved to centre stage, including the tensions between Mizrachi and Ashkenazi (Balaban 1995: 31).[5]

According to eminent scholar Dan Miron, central to understanding the major changes that emerged as dominant in the 1980s is the interrogation of the interchange between politics, society, and art. Miron explains that for about 30 years, many unresolved tensions in Israeli society were in the main unarticulated, and argues that in the late 1970s Israel underwent

> Enormous social tremours that hoisted to the arena of public life forces that heretofore were oppressed and stymied. The entire Israeli public system that was shaped long before the state's establishment, and was stabilised and cemented in the 1950s, was shaken and cracks appeared right through it. Into those cracks poured in all the pressures that were once subdued. Those cracks widened and broadened into actual breaches. Parts of the system began to disintegrate; other parts changed their form. By the end of the 1970s the structure of Israeli society was about to change at its very core (Miron 1993: 416).

What emerged therefore is a model of opposition, overturning all the accepted formulations and representational standards. Taking stock of the basic values of Zionism and stressing the mistakes of the past, Israeli fiction's continuing sense of engagement with the political currency of the

[5] Hand in hand with this development, one should also mention Francis Fukuyama's argument that in the 1980s old ideologies reached their terminus and that, as a result, ethnic groups began to construct their own triumphalist histories for themselves and to assert their repulsion with the works of the founders (Fukuyama 1992).

state was increasingly subject to ambivalence, and avoided with an underlying hostility. As a result, one of the seminal tracks in Israeli fiction's ever shifting strata in the 1980s and 1990s was "openness—when the centre disappears and only the fringes remain, they begin to bloom. Social minorities, neglected communities…all these begin to create or become the subject of creation; literature becomes heterogeneous, fermented, more involved in life's actualities…" (Bartana 1993:43).[6] Nocke writes about the individualisation of contemporary Hebrew literature in the 1980s and 1990s:

> …there is a noticeable emergence of sub-national identities and cultures, which are paying more attention to individual aspects of identity formation and indigenous culture…The heroes and characters are not reflected within a political or national framework, rather they are individuals caught up in their private worlds and trying to master the challenges of daily life. The collective 'we', characteristics of literary expressions of the *Dor Ba-aretz*, is now being replaced by the individualistic 'I'. Unlike their literary predecessors, this group, provided by their parents with relatively well-off economic means and the illusion of security, takes the existence of the state of Israel for granted. In addition, by the choice of their supposedly shallow topics, they are undermining the ideological values of the *Dor Ba-aretz* writers.

Not all critics welcomed this more personal, intimate approach. In a highly contentious article, Dan Miron argued that in the 1980s and 1990s Israel's canonical authors had decided that the, "time of the personal has arrived. The direction of Israel's cultural clock with which they are entrusted, has sounded its last bell" (Miron 1994: 28-29). Miron labelled a select array of novels as mere vessels employed to fill the utter emptiness that has formed as a result of the rotation towards the individual and away from the public and bona fide categories of rational and analytical thinking. Miron further claimed that this triple trend of individualism, technical knowingness, and mystery, signalled a shying away from the ideological-cultural identity sphere to an immersion in the isolated world of the ego. Miron wondered if this was not part of the public's weariness of the dominant political writing, and concluded his article by stating that this is an "unholy triangle" and that the novels hitched to its false wagon may be taken to a, "destination anchored in the depths of an Israeli world which is new, hedonistic and brave" (Miron

[6] See also Shaked 1998:19-104.

1994: 28-29).[7] In another essay, Miron argued that the key detour taken by Israeli fiction in the 1980s and 1990s was not only its extrication from the archetypal motifs of the cannon, but more so its inlaying of this 'escape' as legitimate. He opined that the authors who elected to travel down that boulevard knew that they were distancing themselves from literature's spiritual and culture centrum, and accepted their marginality (Miron 1993: 426-427).

Consequently, a vacuum had been created, enabling innovators such as the authors discussed in this book to make a splash on the literary scene. To be sure, Miron's general lines of characterisations of the Hebrew canon match the overall patterns of postmodern and post-Zionist attitudes that entered the corpus (Yosef 1994: H1; Silverstein 1996: 105-122). In short, literary post-Zionism encouraged a shift away from the big national questions of the conflict to a centre of gravity that emphasised the personal. In this kind of writing, the accent is on the particular, on those issues society deems marginal, but which the author considers meaningful. Inevitably then, in the 1980s and 1990s, writers searched for their own observational points, for their own beginnings that were inextricably related to their personal feelings and origins. The crumbling of the unified empire of Hebrew literature meant a movement away from a national prism and the total rejection of ready-made truths flung from the public pulpit. "In 1980s and 1990s…it was much more disconnected from the Israeli political reality," writes Nurit Gertz, "It neither sought nor found values or a source of power in the nationalist narratives, of the right or of the left; it sought alternatives to them, even though these might be in the worlds of fantasy or reverie" (Gertz 2000: 157).

In a society where hitherto sacrosanct parameters were now blurred, it is easy to see why essentialist, traditional categories were deconstructed. Weary of the perennial issues of self-preservation, the peace process, and Israel's relationship with its Arab neighbours, a more diversified corpus sprung up, giving expression to the pent up energy of young writers who were determined to take Israeli literature in different directions. As one critic observed of the body of writing that dawned in the 1980s: "The books of prose and poetry that came out were each different, creating at once a closed and free creative field. This is a blessed pluralism…The literary activity of the last decade has been enriched with daring in its subject matter…authors have dared to speak and express with directness, lack of restraint and with multiple voices" (Bezherano 1990: 10). In many ways, the margins were moved to the centre.

[7] Miron's essay generated a flurry of debate. See Balaban (1994: 7); Yitzchaki (1996: B10-11); Schwartz (1995: 7-15); Shalev (1994: 8).

The deep transformation that saw Israeli society become less ideologically motivated and driven, signalled a weighty shifting, a move away from an identity constructed by a national collective myth to a multiplicity of narratives situated in many zones and peoples. A greater openness to artistic genres that were earlier sidelined resulted in a further proliferation and crowding of Israeli literature. Gershon Shaked aptly remarked that the principal direction of Israeli fiction in the mid-1980s and 1990s was a revolt against the traditions of the 1960s, waged by young writers battling for artistic and thematic independence from the preceding generation (Shaked 1993: 4-8).[8] Ortsion Bartana tags these authors as "The Beginners", a group that stressed the notion that Hebrew literature also dealt with the theme of disintegration rather than only with the themes of structure and order. He includes Mizrachi[9] writers in that alignment (Bartana 1993: 24).

As I have mentioned Mizrachi authors, it should be pointed out that the momentous historical change in political life that took place with the defeat of the Labour Party in 1977 and the election of the Likud party meant that Mizrachi Jews had at once a demographic ascendency and a voice. The rise of the Likud party, led by Menachem Begin, saw for the first time the participation of this silent majority in Israel's socio-cultural life, all the more as central labour institutions (whose senior leadership was composed of Ashkenazi Jews) were dismantled to give way to privatisation and free market economics. Naturally, the political revolution was accompanied by a social one, as a parcel of Mizrachi writers, representing secondary codes, disturbed established hierarchies of life and literature.

Literary historian Hannan Hever speaks of a complex process following the 1982 Lebanon War in which a series of opportunities presented themselves for a new Israeli identity to emerge that was less clear and less assured. Hever refers to the dismantling of the Jewishness that typified Israeli literature. This, Hever argues, "enabled the Mizrachi voice to be heard, no longer subordinate to the Ashkenazi hegemony. Ethnic writing has moved from its regular position in the margins of the literary field. The criticism of a nationalist literature, led to the undermining of the natural space in Israeli fiction, once occupied by the image of the Ashkenazi and the Sabra" (Hever 1999: 128-129).

[8] For additional articles on the developments of Hebrew fiction in the 1980s and 1990s, see Moked (1990: 13-14) and Shamir (1991:24-26).

[9] Mizrachi refers mostly to Jews from North Africa and The Middle-East. Ashkenazi refers mostly to Jews from Western Europe and Eastern Europe.

One should also emphasise and call attention to the impact of the 1982 Lebanon War on contemporary Hebrew fiction, especially its triggering of a transformation in literary tenors and strategies. The Lebanon War rent the consensus that was concretised in the previous wars. The perceived and actual failures of the incursion into Lebanon accelerated the feeling of alienation and doubt as to the goals and objectives of the political leadership and its ideology. In the aftermath of the Lebanon War, Israel was seen as a society with little faith in its values, leaders, and vision, full of agony and despair (Balaban 1995:31-32; Gurevitch 1995:38-43). It is certainly true, that consequently, Israeli society was characterised as one lacking any general consensus and afflicted with a state of division between its disparate sectors. If Israel of the 1960s was distinguished by having a dominant political party with representative social and literary symbols, the 1980s, by contrast, were defined by decentralisation and fragmentation (Balaban 1995:32).

In a wide-ranging *Jerusalem Post* article, entitled "A Literary Blank Ballot" Miriam Shaviv included conversations with a number of scholars about the disengagement of young authors in the 1990s and their reluctance to touch on the ideological and political issues that resided in the public square. Quoted in the essay is cultural theorist Gadi Taub who remarked that, "This young generation does not want to be a spokesman for the collective…They shy away from the age-old Jewish role of Hatzofeh lebeit Yisrael (observer of the Jewish People) with a moral vision that he has a duty to share with his people" (Shaviv 2001: 16). Taub expressed surprise that his contemporaries were so detached. Literary critic Dror Burstein opined that there is a deliberate avoidance of writing about the big picture. Rather, he noted, current authors were telling their own story, manifesting a startling loss of interest in moral and polemical stances. Burstein noted that "…in a culture without uniting stories, every person has to reinvent their whole world. Literature begins again" (Shaviv 2001: 16). Professor of Hebrew literature Nisim Calderon pointed to the end of the melting pot conception and the ascendancy of sub-cultures in Israeli society. Calderon traced the prevailing disillusionment to the 1982 Lebanon War and the 1987 Palestinian uprising, events that shook people's beliefs in the country's founding myths.

As noted, fixed traditions and models had broken down and had been re-fashioned in the 1980s and 1990s, giving way to shunned pockets of society that in some instances mobilised around ethnicity, the Holocaust, and "trivial" genres—to name the three areas this book explores. Israeli literature ripped open the oppositions that dynamised the aesthetic and cultural value

system, including Mizrachi/Ashkenazi, Shoah survivors/native-born Israelis, high art/pop culture, female/male.

More significantly, it gave a platform to the less crystallised voices oppressed by the cultural elite. The master Zionist narrative went up in smoke in the implosion of difference. The one story became many, in a movement that saw the grand plot yield to those narratives that were once regulated by a normalising frame and pushed to the edges.

As a result, a cluster of writers had gained prominence within the Israeli literary community. These authors were not interested in the national condition and were, to a great extent, disinclined to deal with ideological or political issues. They preferred to foreground obscure, marginal aspects. Rather than preaching and being messengers of a cause, the generation of new writers has re-fashioned the stable notions of yore into a flux of fragmented identities. In response, the door has opened to a more pluralistic and personal style of writing that is no longer male and Ashkenazi, or concerned with state and nation building issues. Instead, these new waves of fictions are unafraid to disengage from the Zionist superstructure and give expression to neglected landscapes. Consequently, Israeli literature is now more welcoming to the fostering of otherness and to the needs of the individual, rather than to the destiny of the nation.

Returning briefly to the minority discourse of those Jews from North African and Middle-Eastern origin who settled in Israel. Their culture was often seen as opposing the ingathering ideal propounded by a new society drenched in the Eastern European socialist mould. Situated within this overpowering stamp, Oriental Jews were forced to integrate and assimilate into the cultural superstructure. Consequently, their unique ethnographic expression, with its attendant folklore, customs, and way of life, was absorbed in the melting pot of Israeli acclimation. One can sense the intense rage associated with the concept of 'The ingathering of the exiles' crucial to Zionist policy, in an autobiographical chapter by Professor Ella Shohat, an Iraqi Jew. Reflecting on her own emotional dislocation, Shohat writes:

> In order to be transformed into the 'New Jews' (later Israelis), the 'diasporic Jews' had to abandon their Diasporic-*galuti*- culture, which in the case of Arab-Jews meant abandoning Arabness and acquiescing in assimilationist modernisation, for 'their own good', of course…Physical dislocation from Arab and Muslim spaces was not adequate in the case of Arab-Jews, since the displaced Arab-Jews in Israel had to undergo a metamorphosis…by attempting to reshape our identity as simply 'Israeli', by disdaining and trying to uproot our Arabness, by radicalising us and discriminating against us as a group— Israel itself provoked a series of traumatic ruptures (Shohat 2002: 263-264).

The books of the first Mizrachi writers—Eli Amir, Shimon Ballas, Amnon Shamosh, to mention but a few—described the immigration and subsequent hardships in the transit camps, as well as the ethnic discrimination they experienced. It was no wonder that these angry, burning social concerns, fuelled the thematic template of those writers. It was only in the late 1980s and 1990s that a primary evolution occurred in the Mizrachi corpus, evolving beyond the merely didactic and accusatory.

In contrast, the fictional efforts examined in this book explore and illuminate Jewish life in several North African and Middle-Eastern communities before the establishment of Israel. Importantly, the novels re-write Zionist history, tendering alternate stories of the Diasporic past, and positing a viable and competitive account to add to the Zionist narrative. They share a new atmosphere in which Mizrachi Israelis are confident enough to depict their own roots.

Another group showcased within the literary world of Hebrew literature of the 1980s and 1990s is that of Shoah survivors and their children, a minority whose voice has been projected with great resonance on to the literary scene. In the first decades of Israeli statehood, native Israelis viewed most European Jews as passive weaklings going to their death, and thus in sharp contrast to the core myth of the heroic Sabra. This attitude began to collapse during and following the 1961 Eichmann trial. During the trial, the survivors were urged to testify about their personal inferno, bringing a significant change to the prevailing mindscape in contemporary fiction, "…Hebrew literature began to show an awareness that Holocaust victims and survivors were part of the Israeli experience and had as much literary (and social) legitimation as the new 'Hebrews'" (Shaked 2006: 44).

And by virtue of this breach of silence, a new band of second generation writers appeared. Born after the war, they overcame the dual moral obstacles of describing a reality that they did not directly experience and making art of a subject that defies human comprehension. The reading public in the 1980s and 1990s witnessed the conspicuous and visible surfacing of a poetical direction known as "bearing witness" fiction. Moreover, the much-derided portrait of the Diaspora as the locus of oppression, persecution, and passivity was accommodated and incorporated into the arena of Israeli consciousness as a vital part of the country's persona.

Then and now, the hallmark of the sharp thematic changes in Hebrew literature is the fusion of the native Israeli and the old world Jew, the hero and the victim—a true amalgam of the rich imaginative diversity exemplified in the canon. Appositely, Gurevitch maintains that:

> The 1980s offer a real revolution in Hebrew literature—narratives of the statistical and "emotional" minorities of Israeli society…It seems that a wind of democracy and openness is sweeping from every direction, injecting fresh air into our cultural house. Israeli society is returning to its authentic dimension: a society of minorities, a society of immigrants, a multicultural society…History again is invited to say its piece. The Shoah and repressed memory are returning to young writers…who are repeatedly attempting to find techniques to deal with this great Israeli trauma. This openness is also flowing towards "minority" groups of Israeli culture… The Orientals are subject to an unapologetic representation…All these "minority" circles I have mentioned are fighting in their own way for the same cultural aim—against the myth that claims that one can understand the world through all-encompassing theories regarding literary historiography as embedded in the artistic text, literary poetics and the critical system that tries to interpret it (Gurevitch 1990: 6-7).

The chapters in this book are informed by a methodological, thematic approach that re-examines a broad survey of the representational literary changes in the Israeli canon in the 1980s and 1990s, covering sixteen novels and two short story collections penned by fourteen writers. This book addresses the evolution and development of these new, influential trends and genres, which garnered the attention of the cultural pacesetters as well as assuming a highly noticeable posture within Hebrew literature.

This book does not in any way claim or endeavour to provide an all-encompassing, exhaustive review of the depth and breadth of Israeli fiction across the two decades. Rather, the purpose of this book is to offer a representative sample of several genres that are illustrative of this watershed juncture in the history of contemporary Hebrew literature.

In exploring the minority discourses that have changed the face of Israel's literary milieu, I have grouped the dominant transformations into three key areas of research and enquiry: Second Generation Holocaust Literature, The Mizrachi Novel, and Detective Fiction. It is the aim of this book to engage in a content-and-form analysis of Israel's 'Other' voices and their concomitant motifs, structures and characters.

It is my belief that literature is reflective of collective changes that break apart dominating rigidities. As a result, the structure and philosophical agenda of the book is informed by the desire to investigate and spotlight the intrinsic repository of motifs, prevailing assumptions, and codes as portrayed in the fictional universe of the genres therein. This involves broaching a range of subjects, as well as achieving a vital and fundamental understanding of the new waves and categories of innovation in Israeli literature of the 1980s and 1990s.

In conclusion, since this book examines hitherto peripheral genres in Hebrew literature, I recognise that some of the topics expounded upon may be unfamiliar to readers. In response, at various points, a general literary and historical overview has been provided, as well as a summary of the central propositions and developments of each genre.

CHAPTER ONE

SECOND GENERATION HOLOCAUST LITERATURE

From its inception in 1948, the nascent Israeli state adopted an official position towards the remembering of the Holocaust and its dead. Its chief concern was the articulation of a totalising national version of the Shoah to the exclusion of all others. According to Yechiam Weitz, the Israeli government of the day, through its Holocaust and Heroism Memory Law, strove for an institutionalised position towards this event that dissolved the individual voice of the survivor (Weitz 1995: 133). In fact, the scheduling of this particular day of mourning to memorialise the murder of the six million Jews in Europe was not arbitrary. In the overall Zionist narrative, the Holocaust was ineluctably tied to other episodes and themes in modern Jewish history, specifically Passover and The War of Independence (Handelman and Katz 1995: 75, 83).[1] Therefore, Holocaust and Heroism Day temporally preceded Memorial Day and Independence Day by a week in order to elicit the public's identification of the Holocaust as an event triggering the coming into being of the state. In effect, this sequence of ceremonies meant that Israelis saw the Holocaust as representing the theme of 'death' that necessarily led to the establishment of Israel. The founding of Israel was constructed as a redemptive act symbolising the theme of 'revival'. On the whole, the message hammered home to Israelis was that there existed a connection between those who lost their lives in the 1948 War and those liquidated in the camps. Both were part of a single chain of events leading to the establishment of Israel.

Moreover, by allocating an official and central ceremony, the state promoted an overwhelming monolithic account that repressed the multiple

[1] The authors point out that the nexus between these events was made explicit in a speech by Prime Minister Levi Eshkol on Holocaust Day 1963, which they include in their essay. Eshkol stated: "The Martyrs and Heroes Memorial Day falls between the ancient Festival of Freedom and the modern Day of Independence. The annals of our people are enfolded between these two events" (Handelman and Katz 1995: 83).

and personal expressions of the survivors. And because Holocaust Day was clearly aligned with the anniversary of The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in 1943, the exemplar of Jewish bravery and struggle during the Holocaust, its underlying association was with heroism, reflected in its second title—"Heroism". For a majority of survivors, The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and its analogous symbolism, were actualities they did not partake or share in.

Weitz, appositely, outlines the concept of *statism* (*Mamlakhtiyut)*, a powerful tool wielded by Ben Gurion during the 1950s and 1960s. The purpose of *statism* was to suppress and efface personal tales and to crystallise one collective view of the Holocaust:

> One of its main motifs was 'negating the Diaspora', whose vulnerability and passivity was contrasted with the 'new Jewish man' who was seen as a self-confident, free citizen of Israel. The *Mamlakhtiyut* ideology sought to repress Jewish history in the Diaspora and chose in its place symbols and myths from the earlier periods of Jewish statehood, particularly from the time of the first Temple. In this statist concept, the Holocaust was the 'most salient and deplorable symbol of the Jewish plight in the Diaspora'… Thus, the memory of the Holocaust was greatly muted during the 1950s. The architects of *Mamlakhtiyut* sought to cultivate and emphasise the memory not of defeats—even glorious ones—but of victories, in accordance with the prevailing ethos of the new state (Weitz 1995: 143).

It may be said that the establishment of Yad Vashem (Israel's official Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority and Museum) by Israel's Parliament in 1953 further reinforced this aim, "This… expressed the national Zionist aspect of Holocaust memory and also the position which gave preference to national and united Holocaust commemoration over and above the particularistic commemoration of individual movement" (Weitz 1995: 143).

A few additional words are now in order concerning the mixed message conveyed by the founding of this apparatus. As it was named the Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority and in the main commemorated the bravery of Jews in Europe, it put the accent on valour—an emphasis that for a lengthy period clotted Israeli attitudes towards the Holocaust. To a large extent, this stifled real identification and understanding of the world of the Diaspora Jews, for whom survival in the camps was as much an act of heroism as was armed resistance (Porat 1991: 157-174). Lamentably, most Jews who either perished in occupied Europe or survived, were viewed by native Israelis as passive weaklings

who were led to their death like "sheep to the slaughter" and never offered resistance to their Nazi persecutors.

Instead of affording the survivors the respite they so craved, as well as the space for some psychological relief, the state, and its native born dealt the survivors a crushing blow. Such attitudes crippled any opportunity for the survivors to foster positive self-images away from the damaged self-esteem of the past. It followed that the native-born Sabras, fresh from a precarious victory in 1948, placed a psychological distance between themselves and the remnant of the Diaspora, whom they condemned as representing all that the new Israeli must shun (Hass 1995: 18-19).[2] For example, it was not uncommon for such jokes as: "How many Jews can you fit into an ashtray?" to be heard or for young Israelis to ridicule and refer to the survivors as *Sabon* (soap) at that time (Hass 1995: 18). Yigal Schwarz writes about the Holocaust's "theatre of shadows" that clashed with the image of the young euphoric Israel that reached its apotheosis after the 1967 Six Day War. He refers to the literal and figurative Holocaust victims as entities that although did not occupy an overtly physical space, cast a shadow that followed the generation of Israelis born in the 1960s everywhere (Schwartz 2005: 225).

Besides the insults and insensitive remarks hurled at the survivors for their apparent passivity, the survivors' silence can be ascribed to several other reasons. First, many felt guilty for staying alive. Secondly, many distrusted their own memories of a universe so incongruous with standard human experience. As a result, they found that it was not possible for them to open a dialogue with other Israelis, whose human experience was far removed from theirs. Thirdly, most survivors felt that the hell they had been subjected to was far too personal to share, especially with those Israelis who were unsympathetic to their pain. Not wanting to be viewed as different, the newcomers chose silence as a means of healing and forgetting.[3] Survivor and author Aharon Appelfeld recalls how the accusatory questions from native Israelis, thrust at members of his generation, drew them into a life of deep denial and stillness:

> So we learned silence. It was not easy to keep silent. But it was a good way out for all of us. For what, when all is said and done, was there to tell… There was a desire to forget, to bury the bitter memories deep in the

[2] See also Aharon Appelfeld's gut-wrenching account of the treatment he was subjected to upon arrival in Israel (Appelfeld 1994).

[3] Hass, a child-survivor and a psychologist who conducted interviews with many survivors reports that most suppressed their traumas, for they learned "that sympathy or compensation would not be forthcoming from others, who appeared uninterested in their Holocaust past" (Hass 1995: 4).

> bedrock of the soul, in a place where no stranger's eyes, not even our own, could get to them… How many years did that violent repression continue? Every year it changed colours, and covered another region of life. The moment a memory or a scrap of memory was about to float upwards we would combat it as one does battle with evil spirits (Appelfeld 1994b: 150-151).

Moreover, the 1948 War and the establishment of Israel were such historic and fateful tides in Jewish history that they overtook all others, including the Holocaust. The atmosphere of euphoria enveloped the survivors, who in their desire to belong to the Jewish state (which they saw as a triumph over their Nazi oppressors) assumed new identities and names, seeking to forge a new future for themselves. On another front, attending to the needs of housing, food and settlement meant that the state had very little time to dwell on the subject matter of the Holocaust (Appelfeld 1994b: 166-170). It was not surprising that memorialisation was confined to official state ceremonies. But there is more.

Central to any elaboration on this subject is the realisation that in the first decade of the state's existence, information on the Holocaust was skewed to suit the pillars of Israeli dogma, which viewed the Diaspora with disdain. Indeed, the events of the Holocaust served as evidence, according to Zionist thought, that the Jews of the Europe were actually responsible for their own fate mainly due to a blinkered vision regarding the political situation at the time (Yablonka 1998: 120-121). We can venture the general observation that many native Israelis coming of age in the 1950s and 1960s felt an intense sense of shame, perhaps even alienation, towards the millions who were exterminated, and whom they perceived as offering no resistance. In their eyes, the 1948 War of Independence, in which the infant state repulsed the combined might of the invading Arab armies, reinforced the difference between Israel and the Diaspora. This polarisation—between the Israeli 'nature' and the Jewish 'nature'—became a pervasive element in excluding the victim's perspective from many of the stories at that time (Ramras-Rauch 1985: 3-18).[4]

As should be made clear, in addition to a lacuna of historically credible perspective about the Holocaust in Israel there was also, as Shaked points out, "a significant process of suppression, accompanied by a powerful need to forget. The fear in the survivors' community of 're-opening unhealed wounds' was just as strong as the desire of many of

[4] On Israeli Holocaust literature see Devoken-Ezrahi (1980), and also Gershon Shaked's chapter on the breaking of convention in Holocaust literature in the 1980s (Shaked 1993: 95-119).