THE CANON AND THE CORE CURRICULUM

Israeli Literature's Achilles' Heel

Hannan Hever

During the last two decades, literature written by Israel's Arab minority has slowly begun to infiltrate the Hebrew literary canon. From the far-off margins of the culture of the Arab ethnic minority it is gradually percolating into the authoritative culture of the majority. Stories and poems written by Israeli Arab writers appear regularly in translation—not just in literary magazines or left-of-center reviews, but in literary supplements of the large-circulation dailies. Names such as Siham Daoud and Samih al-Qasim are now known to a broad spectrum of Israelis. Publishing houses have also shown an increasing interest in bringing Hebrew translations of Israeli Arab literature to the attention of the Israeli public.

Another stage in this evolving literary relationship may be seen in recent attempts by Israeli Arab writers actually to compose their works in Hebrew. From the perspective of power relations, it is striking that the more that the Arab minority in Israel reinforces its Palestinian identity, the more it makes its presence felt within the majority Hebrew culture. Especially today, in the shadow of the intifada, one cannot fail to see how the invigorating effects of political action are manifested not only in the strengthening of Palestinian identity, but in a rejection of the marginal status formerly stamped upon Israeli Arab literature by the majority culture.

The seeds of the present situation go back to 1967. Six months before the Israeli victory in the Six Day War, the Eshkol government decided to abolish the military rule still imposed on certain Arab populations within Israel. But the war introduced an entirely new dynamic: Israelis, suddenly confident after their sweeping military victory, regarded their own Arab citizens as still less of a threat. At the same time, however, the self-perception of the Israeli Arabs started to change. The distinctions between them and the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza began to decrease (as much in their own eyes as in those of the Israeli annexationists), and the Arab minority grew in strength and assertiveness. The political changes and the strengthening of Palestinian identity in the territories have thus increased the Israeli Arabs' sense of cultural potency.

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THE DETERRITORIALIZATION OF LANGUAGE

The literature of any ethnic minority takes up a fundamentally oppositionist stance within the majority culture, even though this oppositionism rarely appears in a pure or unambiguous form. This oppositionism in cultural politics is what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have called "minor literature." This literary and cultural approach is expressed in plot, style, and even characterization. But it is manifested most clearly in the way it deals with the relationship between the language of the majority literature and the national territory. The close tie between language and territory is, as many writers have pointed out, a fundamental element of modern nationalism. From the perspective of the national minority, however, this close tie offers invaluable potential for challenging the majority culture. Through what Deleuze and Guattari call "the deterritorialization of language," the minority literature seeks to break the bond that the majority literature has attached between language and territory. The ability of the minority to turn this territorial link against the ruling majority is conspicuous even when one glances casually at some of the Arabic texts recently translated into Hebrew—for example, the following poem by Shukieh Arouk:

A Letter

Somebody sent a letter
From Heaven to Earth.
The letter landed on the olive tree of longing
Next to the checkpoint roadblock.
Take away the lines,
Erase the word "homeland".
Nothing will reach the relatives
Except for red lines.

In his novel *Akhtayyeh,* Emil Habibi expresses his anxiety about "the existence within this land of the freedom to yearn for this land." The author's assault on this seemingly natural bond between language and territory is expressed via his references to the original Arab names of Haifa streets. Again and again, Habibi's story illuminates the critical and alienated perspective of the Arab minority toward the Hebrew world being spun around it:

> Here al-Nasra Street turned into Israel Bar-Yehuda Street; and King Faisal Square, in front of the Hejazi railroad station, has become Golani Brigade Street. Only in Arabic the name—as on most of the signs in the country—is misspelled: *Khatibat Julani,* which means "Golani's Betrotheds." And I, before I acquired the requisite military knowledge, thought that this Golani was some Hebrew Don Juan who had many girlfriends, but out of politeness they were all called his betrotheds.

Another example of this deterritorialization of language appears in Siham Daoud's poem "I Press The Letters To My Lips," in which she founds an alternative territory whose existence acts as a continual protest over the territory she has lost:

> O my land, I see my voice as the cycle of the seasons,
> A kind of memory that resides in children;
> And the letters of the alphabet
> Are like borders without darkness and earthquakes,
> A sort of scroll of time that teaches me to read maps
> And a memorial prayer to the soul of freedom.

Shamas and Habibi

The appearance of Anton Shamas's Hebrew novel *Arabesques* was an event in the history of Hebrew letters and an act of literary provocation in the anesthetized majority culture. It succeeded in fundamentally challenging some of the conventional wisdom concerning the boundaries of Hebrew literature. One of the central conflicts in the novel takes place between the protagonist—the writer Anton Shamas himself, who in the story travels to the United States to participate in an international writing program—and the Jewish Israeli writer Yehoshua Bar-On, whose apparent liberalism dissolves during the course of the novel to reveal underlying prejudice. While Bar-On expresses empathy for Shamas's position as a minority writer, a position that reminds him of the situation of Jewish writers in the Diaspora, he nonetheless refers to Shamas as "my Jew," and his empathy at times gives way to the standard discrimination of a paternalistic majority.

This Jewish-Arab confrontation allows Shamas to deal with the complicated question of cultural identity and to expose, *inter alia,* the Israeli habit of speech (and thought), which serves to blur the distinction between Israeli and Jew. (No doubt this feature expresses the Israeli schizophrenia whereby a political majority can nonetheless seek to retain the concepts and images of an ethnic minority.) The novel's provocative nature is confirmed by the fact that some Israelis have had difficulty acknowledging that *Arabesques* is an organic part of Hebrew literature.

The challenge Shamas poses in *Arabesques* is evident also in the way he creates and manages his protagonists, particularly in his clever use of twinned characters (doppelgänger) and in his ability to deny the reader any sure means of deciding which character's version of the events is to be accepted. Shamas's novel thus seeks fundamentally to undermine the standards of the narrator's authority as well as those that are supposed to guide the author, who is, after all, responsible for the unreliable narrator.

Treating the minority literature as folklore or ethnography is still another tactic adopted by those who want to soothe their liberal and pluralistic consciences.

In this manner, Shamas's central characters resemble the hero of Emil Habibi's well-known novel *The Opsimist,* which also violates a number of the standard conventions of minority literature. This picaresque novel recounts the disappearance of Sa'ad Abu al-Nahs al Mutasha'il, the "opsimist" who exists suspended between the world of the living and the dead. He is an "opsimist," he says, because he is unable to distinguish between optimism and pessimism; he manages to survive under the Israeli regime between 1948 and 1967 thanks to some help from outer space, as well as from his own wily devices.

Like Shamas's *Arabesques,* Habibi's novel frustrates his readers' expectations of a plot with a distinct climax and a hero who grapples with his problems and arrives at an autonomous moral and ideological solution. (This technique has been explored by David Lloyd in his work on minor literature in the context of Irish cultural nationalism.) By means of the opsimist's systematic confounding of the normal categories of optimism and pessimism, Habibi counsels his readers to adopt concepts of time and hope radically different from the progressive notion of time characteristic of the culture of the ethnic majority.

An ambivalent doubling structure also underlies Habibi's story "Finally the Almond Blossomed," which depicts a member of the Arab minority who for many years has assiduously cultivated the art of survival and evasion under the rule of the Jewish majority. The story's doubling of cities, places, descriptions of nature, and even patterns of thought and emotion almost rules out the possibility of a stable central character with whom

readers can identify. By virtue of his designation as "Mr. M" (in imitation of Kafka, whose works are frequently the archetype for any study of the literature of ethnic minorities), the hero is presented as a subject with only external functions, devoid of any autonomous moral or philosophical intention. In fact, the climax of the story takes place outside the consciousness of the protagonist, who is unaware that he himself is the friend whose beloved he is seeking. Mr. M's years in Israel between 1948 and 1967, years during which he internalized his identity as a member of the minority race, have stamped their image upon him. His current impotence, despite the new horizons that the Six Day War has opened for him on the other side of the old border, leaves him alienated and alone, deprived of personal and national identity. Habibi's presentation of Mr. M's struggle with his own cautious and evasive identity thus maneuvers the Hebrew reader into an ambivalent position that simultaneously includes elements of superiority and inferiority, acceptance and rejection, vis-à-vis a member of an ethnic minority.

Mr. M, who thus rediscovers his people and himself after June 1967, is also depicted through the analogy with the new Jewish situation and the opening of the territories. In so doing, Habibi makes the Hebrew reader realize that the 1967 War also opened new "territories" for Israeli Arabs. In general, minority literature subjects standard cultural concepts such as "homeland" and "exile" to a process of questioning and reexamination. The hero of Zahi Darwish's story "Winter and Exile" says:

> Because of my limited ability to endure, I sometimes give in to despair and melancholy. I look at the passing clouds opposite my solitary window, as they move eastward with majestic slowness. I follow in their wake, carry my feelings away to the farthest exile—the most difficult one. Exile among strangers is painful; but exile among relatives is like spiritual suicide.

Collectivism

Another conspicuous trait of minority literature is the systematic collectivism imposed on most details of the real world, including the world of emotions. This collectivism is rightly interpreted, chiefly by readers from the majority culture, as political: systematic politicization is sometimes evident in the sacrifice of the primacy of aesthetic norms such as uniqueness or originality. In fact, a minority literature that maintains its intimate connection with semifolkloristic writing and oral literary traditions can sometimes call into question the whole idea of stories' or novels' centering on individual characters who wrestle with intense moral and emotional conflicts.

For similar reasons, minority literature often adopts various forms of national allegory, which provide a collective dimension to even the most intimate corners of the soul. Zahi Darwish, for example, in his story "The Coat," molds a complex dynamic of father–son relations by means of a national allegory woven around the traditional family coat. This collectivism is rooted, in part, in the fact that the minority recognizes its relative weakness and therefore takes great pains to mobilize almost every possible source of strength.

This all-encompassing self-awareness is likewise evident in an allegorical poem by Samih al-Qasim that melds with great vigor and clarity the themes of love and struggle:

> She sat quietly
> In the corner of the coffeehouse at twilight.
> She waited seven years
> But he did not return to her.
> The cup fell from her hand
> And on the clean bench of the coffeehouse
> Her coffee painted
> A face with rifle and a rose,
> A songbird,
> And a bomb.

The Canon

Discussions of the relations between ethnic majorities and minorities frequently resort to the language of psychological repression and camouflage. The use of cultural categories such as these is generally based on a quantitative semantics that disguises the nature of the relationship between majority and minority. In other words, it blurs the fact that, first and foremost, power relations are what is at stake. Even the most enlightened democracy, which makes the preservation of minority rights a top priority, cannot eliminate the fundamental inferiority inherent in the minority's relative frailty.

The issue of power relations is evident in the literary canon. The reservoirs of authority that accumulate around the canon, that is, around the group of literary texts that have attained an elite status in a given culture, are an important concretization of cultural power. These are the texts that are disseminated by the society and its institutions, the texts that enjoy support or at least a priori legitimation from prestigious literary critics, the texts that fill the syllabi in schools and universities.

By its very nature, the decision to include certain texts in the canon involves a concomitant decision to exclude other texts. Most Arabic literature written in Israel remains banished from the Israeli canon. One may assume that the disdain of Hebrew readers and critics for Israeli Arab literature also attests to political motivations, not always conscious, that color their aesthetic judgment.

One relatively simple method employed by the majority culture in its struggle against the minority culture is ignoring it and banishing it to marginal status. The majority describes the minority's literature as shrill or simplistic, and therefore not worthy of association with the canon of the majority. Another approach taken by the majority culture is acculturation—swallowing up and assimilating the minority culture to the point of eradicating its special character as the literature of "others." Treating the minority literature as folklore or ethnography is still another tactic adopted by those who want to soothe their liberal and pluralistic consciences, but who are not willing to undertake a sensitive and fundamental investigation of the minority's artistic activities. Rather than recognizing the relative nature of their judgments, they maintain a tenacious grip on the distinction between what they define as aesthetic and unaesthetic, cultured and primitive.

In order to move from the remote margins to the canonical center, a minority adopts cultural patterns that bring it ever closer to those of the majority. But in order to infiltrate the majority culture and undermine the restrictive authority of the canon, the minority needs more than a strategy based on the slow and gradual accumulation of power. In order to make the most of its potential from its position of weakness, the minority must locate the soft underbelly of the majority culture—its Achilles' heel.

This minority strategy of locating and attacking the soft underbelly of the majority culture can be seen, for example, in the very fact that authors such as Naim Areidi and Anton Shamas have begun to write in Hebrew. This development calls into question the conventional boundaries of Hebrew literature. The appearance of an anthology such as *Soldiers of Water,* which contains works by a number of Arab poets and writers, attests to another stage in the process whereby the traditional national and ethnic borders of Hebrew literature are being redrawn. For this anthology of translations raises fundamental questions about the role of translation as a mediator between two different cultures. Thus, for example, there is no clear indication whether the works of Naim Areidi included in the book were written originally in Arabic or Hebrew. On a similar note, the lively dispute that erupted recently concerning Anton Shamas's translation of Habibi's *Akhtayyeh* revealed the increasing obfuscation of boundaries between translation and original: between Emil Habibi, the author in the original language, and Emil Habibi, the active collaborator in the translation of his own work, who thereby rewrites it in the language of the majority culture.

By blurring conventional cultural distinctions, the minority literature undermines the absolute validity of the canon established by the majority culture as well as the aesthetic principles that guide it. In so doing, the minority literature also calls into question basic cultural assumptions such as the superiority of original work over imitation, and it emphasizes its own massive dependence on earlier texts. One manifestation of this reliance on earlier texts is the interweaving in minority literature of the folk sayings within the narrative thread; these folk sayings serve an important role by delaying the unraveling of the plot and underscoring its popular and oral sources.

Previously a body of writing that accepted its marginal status in order to preserve its uniqueness, Arabic literature in Israel now poses an increasingly strong challenge to the canon of the majority. The power relations between majority and minority are not logical or static. They are political and historical, and they are therefore subject to change. As the minority literature becomes increasingly cognizant of its potential, it may find its place much closer to the core of the canon. In so doing it will also gradually leave behind its marginal role as the literature of an ethnic minority and will be incorporated—so we may hope—as a legitimate and potent partner in Israeli literature. □