



## REASSESSING ASHKENAZI RACISM AGAINST THE MIZRAHIS: ISRAELI WRITER, AYELET TSABARI'S MEMOIR IN CONTEXT

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### Abstract

According to the plan of the founding fathers of the state of Israel, the intended residents of the country were the Ashkenazim aka Occidental Jews. But in the absence of the Occidental Jews, six million of whom were murdered in the Holocaust, the Ashkenazi forefathers of Israel were compelled to import the Mizrahis i.e. Jews from the Arab lands to populate the newly established country. Because the Mizrahi Jews were culturally and biologically similar to the Arab Muslims, they were looked down upon by the hegemonic Ashkenazi community in Israel, which considered the Arabs, in an Orientalist grain, as simultaneously dangerous and culturally inferior. This paper has studied Mirzahi writer, Ayelet Tsabari's memoir, *The Art of Leaving* (2019) through the lens of Bhabha's theory of mimicry and unhomeliness. This paper aims to examine how the memoirist, a third generation Mizrahi Jew whose grandparents migrated from Yemen to Israel in the 1930s, has negotiated with the Ashkenazi pressure for cultural assimilation and for relinquishing her Arab-Yemeni cultural roots. In due course, the paper has also investigated how the formation of the memoirist's cultural identity was affected by her experience of being unhomed in the Israeli society. Finally, it has been argued that Tsabari's memoir has questioned the status quo and defied ideological interpellation aimed at the Mizrahi Jews by the culturally and politically dominant Ashkenazi community in Israel.

Keywords: Ashkenazi, Mizrahi, hegemony, interpellation, identity

People from the subordinate section of a society are often conditioned by the hegemonic power to perceive themselves as inferior to the dominant class in not unlike the manner the colonized people were programmed, as had been discussed by Bhabha

and the postcolonial critics, to believe that their colonizers were culturally superior to them. Bhabha observed that the colonized people often ended up engaging in the mimicry of the lifestyle of their colonizers out of their desire to be accepted into the colonizing culture. The

subordinate group in a society, too, often emulate, consciously or unconsciously, the ways of the dominant class owing to their wish to reap benefits from the existing power-structures. Mimicry is inseparable from what Bhabha calls unhomeliness which can be defined, somewhat simplistically, as the lack of the sense of cultural belonging. A person engages in mimicry only when she is unhomed because her sense of not belonging to any culture gives birth to her wish in the first place to belong to her desired culture, to find a cultural home, by means of mimicry of the manners and mannerisms of the said culture. The belief of her own inferiority which gives rise to mimicry, however, propels her to attempt to find a cultural home she considers superior to herself. Needless to mention that the person's endeavour proves futile because, even if she is able to adopt the ways of her sought-after 'superior' culture, she tends not to feel at home in that culture because of her innate sense of inferiority. Bhabha observed in his article *The World and the Home*: 'Although the "unhomely" is a paradigmatic post-colonial experience, it has a resonance that can be heard distinctly...in fictions that negotiate the powers of cultural difference in a range of historical conditions' (142). Bhabha discussed the concept of the 'unhomely' in the context of fiction but it can be agreed that in the works of non-fiction, as in non-fictional life writing, moments of unhomeliness can also be sighted since emotions in the world of fiction, after all, are exploited from the day-to-day world of reality. In light of Bhabha's theory of mimicry and unhomeliness, this article has studied Israeli Jewish writer, Ayelet Tsabari's memoir *The Art of Leaving* (2019). The hegemonic culture in Israel, indisputably, is the one which is upheld by the Israeli Occidental Jews aka Ashkenazim who perceive Israel as a Western nation. In the wake of the Holocaust, the extermination of six million Occidental Jews who were the intended residents of the Jewish state compelled the Ashkenazi founding fathers of Israel to import the Oriental Jews aka Mizrahim from different Arab countries to strengthen Israel

demographically against the threat of the 'Arab enemy' who was reckoned by the official Israeli establishment as simultaneously dangerous and culturally inferior. Because of the cultural and biological similarities which the Mizrahi Jews shared with their Arab neighbours, Mizrahi Jews were regarded as equally inferior by the white European Ashkenazis who formed the dominant class in Israeli society. In the face of the racism and discrimination against the Oriental Jews, which, I have contended, is a form of Orientalist derision on the part of the occidental Ashkenazis, the oriental Mizrahis suffer extreme cultural alienation. This paper has examined how the memoirist, a third generation Mizrahi Jew whose grandparents migrated from Yemen to Israel in the 1930s, has negotiated with the Ashkenazi pressure for cultural assimilation and for relinquishing her Arab-Yemeni cultural roots. The paper has also investigated how the formation of the memoirist's cultural identity was affected by her experience of being unhomed in the Israeli society. Finally, it has been argued how Tsabari's memoir has questioned the status quo and defied ideological interpellation aimed at the Mizrahi Jews by the culturally and politically dominant Ashkenazi community in Israel.

The idea of founding a Jewish state was, indeed, born in Eastern Europe to offer a solution to the issue of murderous anti-Semitism. A significant number of Jews who migrated to the land of Palestine prior to the creation of Israel in 1948 were of Eastern European descent themselves. These Jews, often glorified as the 'Pioneers' in the Ashkenazi narrative, often attempted to recreate in the new land the culture of those European countries they came from. Theodore Herzl, one of the principal proponents of Zionism, too, intended, in rather a racist manner, that the Jewish state in Palestine would 'form a portion of a rampart of Europe against Asia, an outpost of civilization as opposed to barbarism' (96). According to the plan of the founding fathers of Israel, the land

was, thus, originally meant to be a haven for the Ashkenazi Jews to protect them from millennia-old anti-Semitic persecution. But by the time the state of Israel was officially established, six million Jews were systematically killed in the Holocaust. The systematic murder of those who were to be the residents of the Jewish state led David Ben Gurion, the first prime minister of Israel to comment: 'The State was formed but could not find the people who had expected it' (Segev 157). In this circumstance, the Ashkenazi forefathers of Israel were forced to bring to Israel the Oriental Jews from different Arab countries so that Israel can be demographically strong to protect itself against any real and potential onslaught from the neighbouring Arabs who were considered by mainstream Israel as simultaneously threatening and contemptible.

Even though the newly formed state of Israel absorbed the Mizrahi population, the Mizrahi culture was disparaged by the Ashkenazis due to the cultural similarities the Mizrahis shared with their Arab neighbours. Because of their Arabness—their Arab music, Arab cuisine, Arab mannerisms and their dark skin as opposed to that of the white Ashkenazim—the Mizrahi Jews were not considered true Israelis on par with the white Ashkenazis. Many Ashkenazi Jews were, indeed, contemptuous against the idea of integration with the Oriental Jews. One quotation in particular is worth mentioning to exemplify the full extent of that contempt. Amnon Dankner, an Ashkenazi journalist with the Israeli liberal newspaper *Haaretz* voiced in 1983 his hatred against the Oriental Jews in rather shocking terms:

These [the Mizrahim] are not my brothers and not my sisters...They [those Ashkenazim who were in favour of the official integrationist policy] lay down the sticky blanket of the love of Israel and ask me to consider the cultural lack...they put me in a single cage with an enraged baboon and tell me, "OK, now you are together, start having a dialogue, there is

no other choice... speak nicely to him, toss him a banana, after all, you are brothers" (qtd in Shabi 50).

The popular Ashkenazi attitude towards the Mizrahim was, in effect, a classic case of Orientalism where the Ashkenazim assumed a *Western superiority* over the purported inferiority of the Oriental Mizrahim in order to maintain their hegemony over the Oriental Jews. The Orientalist attitude becomes all the more obvious when one considers the fact that the state of Israel officially undertook an agenda to transform the 'uncivilized' Oriental Jews into a 'civilized' population before integrating them into the mainstream society. One could get a glimpse of the nature of this 'civilizing' process by looking at a statement made by Ariyeh Deri, a Mizrahi Jew who held several ministerial offices in Israel: 'The great traumas of most Arab-speaking immigrants [the Oriental Jews] were the indiscriminant spraying with DDT that they all received upon arrival and the degrading immigrant camps' (qtd in Shavit 280). Deri further commented,

The veteran Ashkenazim of Labor [the ruling political party in 1950s' Israel] thought that most of the people who emigrated from the Arab world were primitive and therefore had to be put through a process of secular European indoctrination. The melting pot was a *Western* melting pot that was supposed to totally transform us. (qtd in Shavit 283)

The goal of this transformation was, as Rachel Shabi put it, 'to banish the marks of the Arab within the Jew' (6). The Ashkenazi aversion to the Arab traits of the Oriental Jews and the belief on their part that Oriental Jewish immigrants to Israel had to be purged of their Arabness as a prerequisite for becoming Israelis, echoed also in the words of David Ben-Gurion, the first prime minister of Israel: 'We do not want Israelis to become Arabs. We are duty bound to fight against the spirit of the Levant [the Arab Middle East], which corrupts individuals and societies'

(qtd in Shohat 6). It could be seen, therefore, that the Western Ashkenazi forefathers of Israel were bent on keeping 'Israeliness' uncontaminated by Oriental 'Arabness'. After being subject to years of Orientalist contempt from the Occidental Jews, most of the Mizrahi Jews eventually internalized the derogatory view of themselves as presented by the Ashkenazim. The aforementioned 'Western melting pot' worked so effectively that the Arab Jews, over the years, became ashamed of their own Arabness. Conditioned to relinquish their culture, they mimicked and adopted the cultural model upheld by the Ashkenazim. Majority of them, even, turned into Arab haters themselves. Explaining the Mizrahi hatred of the Arabs, Rachel Shabi argues: 'After so many years of learning to hate their own rejected Arab features and having to hide them, the Mizrahis simply projected all that revulsion onto the neighbouring Arab community—because self-loathing is hard to maintain and because, there, in the enemy, was the perfect outlet for it' (229). In many instances but not all, Arab persecution of the Jews in the Arab lands in the aftermath of the creation of the Jewish state also contributed to the Mizrahi contempt of the Arabs.

It should be mentioned here that Mizrahi Jews are economically disadvantaged compared to the Ashkenazim. Upon their arrival in Israel, they were deemed naturally suitable by the dominant Ashkenazi class for menial jobs. Shabi's observation is particularly illuminating in this regard:

The majority of university professors and students, TV presenters and Supreme Court judges (all but one, in fact) have Ashkenazi surnames; the majority of university cleaners, market stall traders, TV buffoon characters, and blue-collar criminals are Mizrahi in origin. The majority of residents of high-status city areas—the north of Tel Aviv, certain suburbs of Jerusalem—are Ashkenazi, while the neglected or outright slum parts are populated mostly by Mizrahis (18).

To this day, the glaring economic gap between the Ashkenazim and the Mizrahim persists. In light of this, it is no wonder that Ashkenazi cultural hegemony in Israel is a given especially when one contemplates Marx's and Engels' assertion that 'The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling *material* force in society, is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force' (58).

Ayelet Tsabari, born in 1973, is a Mizrahi writer whose maternal and paternal grandparents migrated from Yemen to Israel in the 1930s. Bhabha noted, 'In the stirrings of the unhomey...it has less to do with forcible eviction and more to do with the uncanny...social effects of...historical migrations and cultural relocations' (141). Tsabari's memoir revealed that effects of the cultural displacement of the first generation can induce unhomeliness in the latter generations too specifically when the society in the land of one's relocation is a racialized one. Besides, the genre of memoir, by virtue of its very definition that it is an amalgamation of the writer's description of her personal life and the important historical events that coincide with the described period in the writer's life, allowed Tsabari to take note of the historical developments in her country, that had a direct or indirect bearing on her life and the life of her community. The memoir has been published only a few years back in 2019, which explains why next to no research has been conducted on the memoir yet. Several newspaper reviews of the memoir, however, have been published. In her memoir, Tsabari engaged with different issues ranging from her discussion of her country's devaluation and suppression of her ancestors' culture to account of her personal life like the death of her father which left her devastated and rootless, her love of writing, her travels across various countries of Southeast Asia and North America, her search for her roots and finally her overwhelming struggle to come to terms with her complex identity as an Israeli of Arab-Yemeni descent.

Interpellated by the indoctrination of Ashkenazi hegemonic cultural discourse, Tsabari, sought to imitate the lifestyle typical of the Ashkenazis during her childhood and adolescent period. In her desperation to be accepted by the Ashkenazi culture, she decided to disassociate herself from the Arab-Yemeni part of her identity because, being an oriental Mizrahi was a deviation from the normative Israeli identity as per the implication of the popular Ashkenazi narrative. A rather lengthy section of her memoir is devoted to recounting her desperate attempts to make sure that she is not mistaken for a 'freha'. In the words of Tsabari, *The World Dictionary of Hebrew Slang* by Dan Ben-Amotz and Netiva Ben-Yehuda describes the freha as "a simple girl, vulgar, uneducated and lacking in class". (34). Tsabari in her memoir pointed out that Israeli popular culture considered the term 'freha' as synonymous with a typical Mizrahi girl. To prove herself superior to a 'freha', the dictionary image Ashkenazis associated with regular Mizrahi girls, she dressed like a Western hippie as was one of the popular trends among the Ashkenazi community in contemporary Israel, listened to sophisticated Western music that the Ashkenazim approve, expressed her assumed disdain for Mizrahi music and made references to her reading the classics of eminent Western writers. The memoirist confessed that, despite all her attempts not to be mistaken for a 'freha', she had been repeatedly called by that very slur by a number of Ashkenazi Jews. Her painstaking efforts to prove herself different from 'Mizrahi frehas', convey the extent to which she was conditioned to conform to the Ashkenazi cultural codes, values and ideals. As Tsabari stated:

I had spent a lifetime proving to unimportant people that I was complex [in opposition to the simple 'freha'], slipping into yet another patronizing label, that of a 'mishtaknezet' – a Mizrahi who is trying to "pass" as Ashkenazi, as if being cultured, educated and articulate

were qualities reserved for Europeans...I couldn't see that by striving to prove myself different, I was estranging myself from my heritage, my history, myself (35).

The above passage is resonant with the memoirist's feelings of acute unhomeliness. Her shame of her Arab-Yemeni background which she was conditioned to consider inferior prompted her to struggle to rid herself of her own cultural roots. Bhabha observed: 'The unhomely moment relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence' (144). The political phenomenon of Ashkenazi Israel's historical discrimination against the Mizrahi population, indeed, affected the personal day-to-day life of the memoirist as revealed in her memoir. Among others, specifically the incident, recounted by the memoirist, where the aunt of her Ashkenazi lover felt entitled to advise her nephew to end his relationship with her upon learning that she was of Arab-Yemeni background, pointed to the fact that in a racially marked society, moments of unhomeliness can intrude even into the most intimate spheres of life of the cultural 'other'. The statement made by Bhabha is particularly enlightening in this context: 'it is precisely in these banalities that the unhomely stirs, as the violence of a racialized society falls most enduringly on the details of life...how you can live, or not; what you can learn, or not; who you can love, or not' (149-150). But the ideology of Ashkenazi cultural supremacy was normalized by the dominant class to the point that the memoirist, during her impressionable years, simply mimicked the ways and then assimilated the precepts of the 'superior' Ashkenazi culture so that she can get over her unhomely moments. Her efforts were doomed to failure as the memoirist herself pointed out in the above passage from the memoir that her striving to imitate the Ashkenazis only made her subject to more ridicule and scorn from that community, which, combined with her own sense of inadequacy, contributed more to the estranging

sense of the unhomely in her psyche. However, it is to be noted that her desire for assimilation resulted from her yearning to belong to the mainstream society of her country, that alienated her community through extreme racialization.

Tsabari's memoir reflected on a number of instances of institutionalized discrimination practiced by the official Israeli establishment against the Mizrahi population. At school Mizrahi students specifically, were taught to 'correct' their Arabic-inflected Hebrew (that they picked up at home from their grandparents whose mother-tongue was Arabic in the Arab lands they hailed from) and to pronounce the Arabic words in the way the Ashkenazim do. The school curriculum scarcely offered anything concerning Mizrahi history and culture:

By the time I graduated from high school, I could discuss the Zionist movement and their immigration to Israel in detail, but I knew next to nothing about my own heritage, which along with other Mizrahi narratives, was only briefly covered in our history textbooks. In literature class, I was rarely taught works by Mizrahi authors, or by Palestinian authors for that matter, as though our country was a European enclave accidentally dropped into the heart of the Middle East, as though 20 percent of Israeli citizens weren't Palestinian Arabs, and Mizrahi Jews who came from Arab Lands didn't make up half the Jewish population (Tsabari 171).

The passage also points to the fact of mainstream Israeli establishment's historical disregard for the Palestinians in their midst. Besides, despite the fact that almost half of the Jewish population in Israel consisted of the Mizrahis, the radio-stations in Israel systematically excluded Mizrahi music till the 1980s and the record-industry was heavily biased against the artists of Mizrahi descent. The memoir recounted an incident about one singer

in particular. Ofra Haza, the globally known Mizrahi-Yemeni singer of Israel, received international recognition after winning the second place in the 1983 Eurovision Song Contest. Despite her extraordinary success, Israeli media did not take notice of her *Yemenite Songs*, an album of traditional Yemeni music until it was met with great acclaim in Britain. In Israel, the singer, the memoirist noted, had to struggle to find composers willing to write for her. Considering the deference with which Ashkenazi Israel looked up to Europe and the condescension with which it treated the Mizrahi population, it was not surprising to observe that the Israeli media recognized the artistry of a Mizrahi singer only after her achievement was validated by a European country. Dwelling on the current, twenty first century scenario regarding the Ashkenazi-Mizrahi division in her country, Tsabari later on wrote in her memoir:

It's been forty years since "The Freha Song" [a popular sensational song performed by Ofra Haza in 1979] took over Israel, and probably twenty years since anyone has called me by that slur. Things have changed in Israel: the disparities between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi have narrowed, partly because of inter-marriages; popular Mizrahi music has found its way into the heart of mainstream radio; and activists have begun calling the media out on their under-representation of Mizrahi characters, demanding to see more brown-skinned people in advertising and entertainment, and not just in the role of frehas, arsim, criminals and workingmen. Young Mizrahi poets have sidestepped the gatekeepers by crowdfunding their own books and launching their own poetry readings, and in 2015, Erez Biton became the first Mizrahi poet to win the Israel Prize for Literature...Still, only 9 percent of the academic staff in Israel are Mizrahi, and most key positions in places

like the Supreme Court and the media are held by Ashkenazi (37).

While the entire population of the Mizrahi Jews suffered discrimination at the hands of the dominant Ashkenazi class, Tsabari's memoir recounted how the Yemenite community she was a part of was specifically subject to exploitation. The incident the memoirist has referred to in particular is known in Israeli history today as the infamous 'Yemenite Children Affair'. Historical evidence corroborated that in the late 1940s and early 1950s, when a great influx of Yemeni Jews arrived in Israel, a number of children, majority of whom Yemeni and the rest Mizrahi, disappeared from the immigrant camps and the hospitals. The parents of the disappeared children, numbering between one thousand to five thousand, were told by the authorities that the children died even though neither the bodies were shown nor death certificates were issued. Many years later it was found out that, in most cases, those children were systematically abducted and given to childless Holocaust survivors i.e. the Ashkenazim upon the rationalization that the Yemenis were not fit as parents and that they have more children than they could effectively manage. Yemenis were also deemed naturally suitable for manual labour. The memoirist quoted Dr. Jacob Thon, an official associated with the Palestine office of the World Zionist Organization:

"Because they are satisfied with little, these Jews can be compared to the Arabs and in this respect they can even compete with them...If we get Yemeni families to settle down in villages, we could also have the women and girls work as cleaners and maids, instead of dealing with the Arab help". As he had hoped, Yemeni women soon began working at Ashkenazi homes (184).

It is, indeed, ironic to note that the same Oriental Jews whose inherent Arabness was a source of anxiety to the Ashkenazim were considered

useful for their alleged similarity with the Arabs.

Being the unhomey other, the cultural outsider as part of the Oriental Jewish community, the racism and discrimination the memoirist encountered in Israel naturally alienated her from her homeland. Positioned in the interstice between her Oriental mother-culture and that brand of Western culture promoted by the Ashkenazis, she was, in the words of Bhabha, 'a subject that inhabits the rim of an "in-between" reality' (148) where, she felt, that she belonged nowhere. Her belief in the inferiority of her mother-culture prevented her to consider it as a cultural home. On the other hand, her innate inferiority and the pervasive environment of Ashkenazi disdain against the Mizrahis in Israel made her endeavor to find a home in Ashkenazi culture equally unfeasible. Besides, losing her much beloved father at a very young age contributed more to her alienation, her displacement. Her growing estrangement from her country eventually prompted the memoirist to leave Israel and travel widely, across countries like America, Canada, Mexico, India, Nepal and Thailand for nearly a decade. That she traded her relatively comfortable life in Israel for a decade-long uncertain travel that often entailed severe financial crisis indicated that, psychologically unhomed, her search was for belongingness, for a home in a culture to which she could feel that she belonged. She was delighted when people in India mistook her for an Indian because of her brown skin like that of the Indians. She was equally elated when people in New York considered her to be affiliated with some other nationality. She confessed: 'In New York people think I'm Indian, Persian, Spanish, Turkish, Moroccan, Lebanese, Brazilian, Italian...I enjoy being claimed by so many nationalities...In my desperate wish to belong, I accept every invitation' (89). She further stated:

I titled my bank account during those years of travel "the wandering Jew fund". And, indeed, there is something deeply

Jewish about that somber, nostalgic yearning for a place where one can feel at home. Of course, historically, that pining was pointed toward Israel, the same country I had chosen to leave (182).

The millennia-old exile of the Jews was supposed to end with the founding of the Jewish state in Palestine. Their yearning for home was supposed to be realized with the creation of Israel. It is, therefore, truly ironic to contemplate that the very country which was to make the Jewish people finally at home led her, a Jewish woman, to feel unhomed to the point that she had to traverse the globe in search of belongingness.

Foucault said, 'Where there is power, there is resistance' (315). That is why, despite the insidious workings of some dominant ideology to naturalize the exploitation of the subordinate section in a society, the subordinate group eventually recognize their subjection as oppression at the hands of the dominant group and, often, actively attempts to resist it and, thereby, paves the way to the possibility of change. In Wadi Salib, part of the Haifa neighborhood in Israel, the first secular Mizrahi uprising took place against the Ashkenazim in 1959 for their mistreatment of the Mizrahis. This was followed by another uprising in 1970 in the neighbourhood adjacent to Jerusalem while a secular, cultural Mizrahi uprising occurred in the mid-1970s agitating the smug complacency of the Ashkenazi nation. Marx observed: 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past' (10). Mizrahi Jews too created history by asserting their agency in order to alter the direction of their fate in the face of the adverse socio-political and economic factors they inherited from the past. That Tsabari, too, engaged in her own personal battle to defy the ideological interpellation aimed at the Oriental Jews by the entire Ideological State Apparatus of Ashkenazi Israel, is manifested

when she decided to combat her unhomeliness in a different manner rather than opting for mimicry of the Ashkenazis. Her resistance to the pressure for cultural assimilation commenced when she returned to her homeland after her decade-long travel and decided to dig in her tradition that she once rejected. She developed an intimate bond with her grandmother whom she had hitherto found peculiar because of her traditional Arab way of life. Her frequent use of the term 'Insha'Allah' ['God willing' in Arabic] and other Arabic phrases was something completely alien to the memoirist up to that point. Her childhood regret that her grandmother was not modern and sophisticated like the grandmothers of her Ashkenazi friends was now, however, replaced with veneration for the strong and fiercely independent spirit she found out that her grandmother had possessed. Listening to her grandmother's stories about her Yemeni past, how she uprooted her life from a little mountainous village in Yemen and migrated with her family to Israel drawn by the promises of the Holy Land, now presented itself as a privilege for the memoirist to reconnect with her tradition. Upon learning that her grandmother was compelled to change her Arabic name, 'Salha' for the Hebraized name of 'Esther', the practice of which later became a national policy for all the immigrant Oriental Jews, the memoirist remarked: 'That new name was the harbinger of a new era, but it also represented an erasure of Savta's [grandmother in Hebrew] past, her culture and her language, an act of silencing done in the name of assimilation' (170). She, however, resolved to reinvent that tradition by making herself familiar with all the aspects of her Yemeni heritage that she learnt about from the stories told by her grandmother. That resolution of hers is reflected in the following passage: 'I want to know everything [about her culture], because the more I know, the more at home I feel in my own skin, because being here [at her grandmother's home], immersed in my culture and my history, anchors me (Tsabari 190). Mimicry causes othering of the self since it not



only instigates one to adopt the cultural manners and mannerisms of some other people considered superior by oneself but also pushes one to try to erase one's cultural origins and, thereby, to deny part of oneself. Her profound curiosity and absorption in her ancestors' tradition during her adult years, however, showed that she had re-embraced and reclaimed her Arab-Yemeni identity and in the process was no longer an 'other' to herself as she had found a cultural home where her mind was no longer homeless.

The memoirist might not have identified with her Yemeni cultural heritage during her childhood and adolescent years but it can be argued that she was already developing a nascent Yemeni identity. She stated in her memoir that, despite her proclaimed aversion to Oriental music, her body had a visceral reaction to the beats of Yemeni tunes propelling her to rise to her feet at the family weddings. Her identification with her Yemeni culture became obvious if one contemplated the fact that even as a child, when she was deliberately occupied with distancing herself from her Mizrahi cultural roots as a result of the Ashkenazi narrative's cultural conditioning directed to people like her, she could not help feeling proud of Ofra Haza, the Israeli-Yemeni singer who won the second place in the Eurovision Song Contest in 1983 'singing "Israel is Alive" in Munich, of all places' (Tsabari 21). Her writing clearly indicated that her pride in Ofra Haza stemmed from another reason also, apart from the one that the singer was of Mizrahi-Yemeni descent. Being Jewish, she was proud of the fact that another Jewish woman was being celebrated in that very place which was the epicenter of the Nazi propaganda for exterminating world Jewry.

Upon her research on her cultural heritage, later in her life she came to know about 'women's songs', a form of oral poetry Jewish Yemeni women composed and performed at social ceremonies. To become well versed in that rich literary tradition which was almost on the

verge of extinction in Israel, she hired a Yemeni singer to teach her those songs and to her amazement, 'the Yemeni words of my ancestors will roll out of my mouth effortlessly, as though they've been waiting for me to utter them all along' (Tsabari 186). She was mournful of the fact that her grandmother was not alive anymore to see her accomplishment: 'And I will wish my grandmother were there to hear me speaking her language [Arabic]' (186). Her enthusiasm to delve in her tradition along with her ecstatic pleasure in her ability to learn Yemeni songs her foremothers used to sing in their Yemeni village, showed a woman who has been able to transcend the conditioning of the hegemonic Ashkenazi narrative; a woman who has learnt to appreciate her cultural heritage and dared to defy the prevailing pressure for cultural assimilation.

During her years of travel, the memoirist, in Canada, also became at peace with the Arab part of her identity, that her country wanted her to erase and to associate it with the 'enemy'. Official Ashkenazi narrative, in fact, upheld a binary discourse which advocated that one could either be a Jew or an Arab, that the two terms were mutually exclusive and hence there could not be any such thing as an Arab Jew even when Mizrahi Jews like Tsabari can precisely be described by that very appellation. The memoirist explored her Arabness through her deep friendship with an Egyptian woman, Leyla who introduced her to her Middle Eastern circle of Muslim friends. The memoirist got to witness the human side of the 'Arab enemy' whose demonized caricature was all she had known from the normative Israeli narrative. Knowing Leyla's Arab Muslim friends through personal relationships, she discovered that their similarities with her far surpassed their mutual differences; differences which are routinely highlighted by the mainstream Israeli society. Reflecting on how those people made her feel like home, she wrote in her memoir:

My new friendships felt easy, a slice of home replanted in this foreign land. Our

kitchens smelled the same; our music used the same scales, the same beat. Their language [Arabic] was the language of my grandparents...a language I resisted studying in school, learning to associate it with the enemy rather than with my own heritage...I began thinking of myself as an Arab Jew, finding the term wonderfully romantic...surprised by how easily it rolled off my tongue. I became consumed by my Middle Easternness, infatuated with my Arabness (130-131).

So, it could be seen that she no longer found her Arab identity to be in discord with her Jewish identity. Her peace at reconciling the disparate parts of her identity demonstrated that she had discarded the normative Jewish identity the Ashkenazi cultural narrative constructed for her and, thereby, had been able to create her own unique cultural identity.

Through her memoir, the memoirist articulated her dissent against the cultural hegemony of Ashkenazi Israel. Her father, a lawyer and a well-known figure in the history of Israel for his philanthropic activities, was a closet-poet who wanted to study Hebrew literature at the Tel Aviv University but never got the opportunity to fulfil his wish. Tsabari quoted two lines from the English translation of one of his poems: 'A poet's craft is an artist's realm/ not for you, son of Yemen' (276). The lines reveal his tacit acceptance of the message from the Ashkenazi narrative that Yemenis are not cultured enough to engage in poetic cultivation since they are part of the 'uncultured' Mizrahi Oriental Jewish community. His daughter, the memoirist, however, challenged this notion by being an acclaimed Jewish Yemeni writer herself and, thereby, took part in the struggle waged by the Mizrahi writers today to carve their own distinct space in the cultural landscape of Israel. To quote Tsabari: 'Once I started writing, I knew I wanted to tell Yemeni stories...It was my chance to rectify my childhood experience of never seeing myself and my family in the books I

admired, an opportunity to celebrate the rich traditions of my community' (294). Her decision to be a voice for her community, therefore, indicated that she resolved to critically counter the Ashkenazi devaluation of her culture by foregrounding in her writing the history and culture of her community.

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