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# Factoring Asymmetry into the Equation: On Juxtaposing Palestinian and Israeli Literatures

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## Abstract

This article addresses a discursive problem with the study of Palestinian literature alongside Israeli literature: by focusing on the intersections between Hebrew and Arabic literatures, scholars have created a hybrid that precludes comparison between two separate entities. This article surveys the theoretical and political drawbacks of this approach and then moves to theorize Palestinian literature outside its pairing with Israeli literature as a global multilingual literary system that is major yet non-hegemonic. I suggest that Palestinian literature can be informed by theories of world literature, on the one hand, and inform world literature about the way diasporic literature moves in the world, on the other hand. Last, I discuss the novel *Tafṣīl thānawī* by ʿAdanīyah Shiblī in order to demonstrate a possible expansion of the grounds of comparison once a work of Palestinian literature like this one is read beyond its dialogue with Israeli culture.

## Keywords

Palestinian literature – minor literature – world literature – Hebrew-Arabic comparisons – ʿAdanīyah Shiblī – hybridity

In the last few decades, scholars of Hebrew literature have increasingly positioned it alongside Arabic literature in general, and Palestinian literature in

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particular.[1] These comparatist studies have emphasized the interconnectedness of Jewish and Arab cultures against a backdrop of rivalry between the Hebrew and Arabic languages and their speakers. This article suggests a shift in focus by understanding Palestinian literature not as one side of a pair but as a global system that has multiple contact points with many different cultures and languages as a result of the history of the Palestinian people. Rather than a minor literature that is subordinated to the hegemony of Israeli literature, I draw attention to the *major* spread of Palestinian literature, which affords different sets of comparisons. The first and second sections of the article sketch the problem at hand: the focus on hybrid cases of Palestinian-Israeli literature and the redemptive language of its scholarship. To replace an image of two traditions that are mutually exclusive with the image of ones bound to one another is a redeeming narrative that conceals other modes of comparison. Inasmuch as comparisons can bridge over political and social rifts, they can also restrict our understanding of literary systems that transcend national and political frameworks. In the third section of the article, I foreground the multifarious geographical and linguistic locations from which Palestinian literature emerges, thus repositioning it outside the Hebrew-Arabic duo and in the world. Considering the global spread of Palestinian literature offers new insights into the understanding of both minority literature, as described by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and of world literature, as discussed by Pascale Casanova, David Damrosch, and Franco Moretti. I then offer the term "non-hegemonic major literature" to describe the particular case of global literatures that are not grounded in the nation-state. The last section of the article takes ʿAdanīyah Shiblī's novel *Tafṣīl thānawī* (2017; *Minor Detail*, 2020) as an example of how a

1 See Kfir Cohen Lustig, *Makers of Worlds, Readers of Signs: Israeli and Palestinian Literature of the Global Contemporary* (London: Verso Books, 2019); Hannan Hever and Mahmoud Kayyal, eds., *Merhav Sifruti Aravi-Ivri* (An Arabic-Hebrew Literary Space) (Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute Press, 2016); Mahmoud Kayyal, *Selected Issues in the Modern Intercultural Contacts Between Arabic and Hebrew Cultures: Hebrew, Arabic and Death* (Leiden: Brill, 2016); Lital Levy, *Poetic Trespass: Writing Between Hebrew and Arabic in Israel/Palestine* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); Gil Hochberg, *In Spite of Partition: Jews, Arabs, and the Limits of Separatist Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Rachel Feldhay Brenner, *Inextricably Bonded: Israeli Arab and Jewish Writers Re-Visioning Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004). In this article, "Israeli literature" refers to literature written by Israelis post-1948, "Hebrew literature" to literature written in Hebrew throughout the ages, and "Jewish literature" to literature written by Jews in any language; "Arabic literature" refers to literature written in Arabic, and "Palestinian literature" to literature written by Palestinians, regardless of language or nationality.

Palestinian text can be read side-by-side with Israeli texts, but also in relation to English, French, German, and Korean literatures.[2]

Comparative literature as a discipline has prided itself on its cross-cultural juxtapositions and its methodology of bringing together disparate cultures through the study of genre, tropes, style, and form. The Israeli-Palestinian comparison has been an anomaly of sorts, given the dominance of comparative scholarship that focuses on closely related interactions between Israeli and Palestinian literatures such as the representation of the Other, writing in the language of the Other, or alluding to the Other's literary tradition.[3] This article asks what we stand to lose from such comparisons and what we stand to gain from considering other types of comparisons that reach beyond the region and its identity-based discourses.

## Mutually Exclusive or Inseparable?

Scholars of Hebrew and Arabic literatures have predominantly found grounds for comparison in the meeting points of these literatures. The intersections between Arabic and Hebrew are found, most often, in the writings of Palestinian authors who received Israeli citizenship after the mass exodus of Palestinians from their ancestral homeland in 1948, also known as the Nakbah. Given their Israeli education and familiarity with their surrounding culture, some of these authors write in Hebrew, or write about Palestinian life under Israeli rule, or allude to Jewish and Hebrew texts. Palestinian writers who publish in Hebrew such as Anton Shammas, Sayed Kashua, Atallah Mansour, Naim Ariadi, Aimen Sicksek, and Salmān Maṣālaḥah feature large in studies that compare Israeli and Palestinian literatures. Another comparatist location is Palestinian writers who have intimate knowledge of Jewish and Hebrew texts, albeit writing in Arabic, such as Imīl Ḥabībī, who was translated

2 This article joins other recent scholarly work on the globality of Palestinian literature, such as Refqa Abu-Remaileh, "Country of Words: Palestinian Literature in the Digital Age of the Refugee," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 52, no. 1–2 (2021): 68–96; Kfir Cohen Lustig, *Makers of Worlds*; Maurice Ebileeni, "Palestinian Writings in The World: A Polylingual Literary Category Between Local and Transnational Realms," *Interventions* 19, no. 2 (2017): 1–24, and *Being There Being Here: Palestinian Writings in the World* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2022); Nadim Bawalsa, *Transnational Palestine: Migration and the Right of Return before 1948* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2022).

3 To clarify, there are many studies on Palestinian literature that do not concern Israeli literature, that do not compare it to other literatures, or that perform many types of comparisons, some of which I refer to below. The aforementioned dominance regards the studies that compare Palestinian literature to Israeli or Jewish literature.

into Hebrew by Shammas, and Maḥmūd Darwīsh, who refers to studying the Hebrew Bible and the poetry of H.N. Bialik as key in his formation as a poet.[4] With the intention of shedding light on the pre-1948 affinity between Jewish and Arabic literatures and the people who produced them, scholars study Palestinian literature alongside Arab-Jewish literature from before and after the establishment of Israel, analyzing the works of writers such as Samīr Naqqāsh, Yizhaq Bar Moshe, and Almog Behar. It is therefore the finite overlap area of the literary Venn diagram of Hebrew and Arabic literatures that has been a focal point of the Hebrew-Arabic comparison. Less common are comparisons based on style or genre. That is to say, comparisons in this particular subfield are often based on historical, linguistic, and identitarian contact points that ground the comparison in the Middle East reality, be it the ongoing conflict and Israeli occupation, or Jewish lives in the Arab world.[5]

The premise of this comparatist scholarship is to counter the dominant separationist discourse. To study Hebrew and Arabic literatures side-by-side is to disprove that they are mutually exclusive. In the face of segregationist political agendas and social realities, these studies embrace an inclusive framework to enable a comparison that emphasizes a shared space of writing and the hybrid, complex identity of its writers.[6] The heightened attention given to the bonds between the two cultures has resulted in an understanding of the two as inextricably bonded; that "in contrast to the *deeply entrenched* perception of *unbridgeable* cultural, social, and political divergences between Arabs

4 On Maḥmūd Darwīsh's relations to Hebrew/Jewish literature, see: Khaled Mattawa, *Mahmoud Darwish: The Poet's Art and His Nation* (Syracuse NY: Syracuse University Press, 2014), 26–29. Hannan Hever, among others, refers to Ḥabībī, through Shammas' translation, as part of the Hebrew literary canon; see Hannan Hever, *Producing the Modern Hebrew Canon: Nation Building and Minority Discourse* (New York: New York University Press, 2002).

5 For examples of scholarship that studies Palestinian literature based on style and form, see Ahmad Harb, "Invisibility, Impossibility: The Reuse of Voltaire's *Candide* in Emile Habiby's *Sa'eed The Pessoptimist*," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (2010): 92–106; Liron Mor, "Humor and the Law of Rights: Voltaire's Cosmopolitan Optimism and Emile Habiby's Dissensual Pessoptimism," *Comparative Literature* 71, no. 2 (2019): 171–193.

6 On segregation in Israel/Palestine, see Daniel Monterescu, *Jaffa Shared and Shattered: Contrived Coexistence in Israel/Palestine* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015); Stéphanie Latte Abdallah and Cédric Parizot, eds., *Israelis and Palestinians in the Shadows of the Wall: Spaces of Separation and Occupation* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015); Yair Wallach, *A City in Fragments: Urban Text in Modern Jerusalem* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2020). On the fluid identity enabled by bringing Hebrew culture into conversation with Arabic, see Hannan Hever, "Hebrew in an Israeli Arab Hand: Six Miniatures on Anton Shammas's 'Arabesques'," *Cultural Critique* 7 (1987): 47–76; Almog Behar, "Ha-shiva el ha-nefesh ha-ʿaravit" ("The Return to the Arab Soul"), *Qore u-khotev*, August 26, 2009, https://almogbehar.wordpress.com/2009/08/26/.

and Jews, … the two literatures affirm a[n] indissoluble affinity";[7] that "in spite of partition, … frameworks … *bind* the Jew and the Arab to each other, *despite*, or even due to, their current animosity";[8] that a poetic trespass exists between Hebrew and Arabic that "transcends the Jewish-Arab divide";[9] and that in fact, "the Israeli-Palestinian conflict binds these two cultures in a way that creates an affinity."[10] That is to say, comparatist scholarship has hitherto zoomed in on the intersections between Israeli and Palestinian literatures, despite the chasms that exist between the two cultures. It has foregrounded the myriad bonds that Jewish and Israeli culture share with the Arab world—bonds that have often been silenced and trivialized.[11] In opposition to the Zionist formation of Israeli identity as detached from the Middle East and predominantly connected to the Western world, it has become an imperative to divulge the many ties that Israeli literature has with its most immediate corollary, or its enemy and Other—Palestinian literature.

Scholarship about the Hebrew poetics of Palestinian writers has long been dominated by the novels of Shammas and Kashua,[12] making their hybrid identity paradigmatic for comparatists of Israeli and Palestinian cultures. For instance, Anton Shammas has referred to his novel *Arabesques* as an Israeli novel and has underscored his Israeli citizenship while identifying as a Palestinian, and there is no doubt that *Arabesques* is a staple novel of Palestinian literature.[13] Shammas' identity as a Palestinian Christian and an Arab Israeli who writes in Hebrew has been self-proclaimed as that of a "babushka doll"

7 Brenner, 3; my emphasis.

8 Hochberg, ix; my emphasis.

9 Levy, 7.

10 I am quoting my own dissertation, for I am not an "objective" outsider to the discourse I am outlining but rather a part of it. Ella Elbaz, "Reaching for the Far-Fetched: Future-Telling in Contemporary Palestinian and Israeli Literature and Art" (PhD diss., Stanford University, 2020), 63.

11 Yochai Oppenheimer, *Me'ever la-gader* (Beyond the Wall) (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2008); Ketzia Alon, *Efsharut shlishit la-shira* (Tel Aviv: Hakibutz Hameuhad, 2011).

12 Levy, 17.

13 On Shammas and *Arabesques* as part of Israeli culture, see Gil Hochberg, "'The Dispossession of Hebrew': Anton Shammas's *Arabesques* and the Cultural Space of Language," in *Crisis and Memory: The Representation of Space in Modern Levantine Narrative*, ed. Ken Seigneurie (Weisbaden, 2003), 51–66; and Michael Gluzman, "Lizroq paḥit mashqe el tokh 'ha- Berekhah' shel Bialik: interxtextualiut ve-zehut post-colonialit be-arabesqot shel Anton Shammas" ["To Throw a Can into 'The Pool' by Bialik: Intertextuality and Postcolonial Identity in *Arabesques* by Anton Shammas"], *Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature* (2003): 327–347. On Shammas as a part of Palestinian literature, see Salma Khadra Jayyusi, ed., *Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 300.

in the sense that he embodies multiple identities that cannot be reduced to a single one.[14] *Arabesques* is a novel packed with intertextuality, including references to the Hebrew Bible, the national poet of Israel H.N. Bialik, and the works of A.B. Yehoshua, among other Hebrew texts.[15] Both Shammas' writing and his public persona therefore have made it impossible to differentiate in any clear-cut way between Palestinian and Israeli cultures as he embodies them.[16] The debate over these classifications has both political and intellectual ramifications, as became abundantly clear in the heated discussions between the Hebrew literature scholar Hannan Hever and the Arabic literature scholar Reuven Snir. Over four issues of the literary magazine *Alpayim* (1989–1991), each scholar offered a different reading of *Arabesques* as either a "minor" literature within the Hebrew tradition, or as an integral part of Palestinian literature and thus of Arabic and Middle Eastern traditions.[17] Sayed Kashua has also foregrounded his dual identity, by writing in Hebrew while at the same time calling himself an Israeli Arab or an Israeli Palestinian, even though his writing highlights the impossibility of such hybrid identity in an exclusively Jewish state.[18] Treated at times as Palestinian literature, at other times as part of Hebrew or Israeli literature, Kashua's works are most often read as either between the two national traditions or as belonging to both of them. My claim is not that the hybrid model does not fit the analysis of Shammas and Kashua, but rather that the dominance of these two authors in the critical comparatist

14 Anton Shammas, "Ashmat ha-babushka" ["The Guilt of the Matryoshka Doll"], *Politika* 5–6 (February–March, 1986): 44–45.

15 Gluzman; Hever, "Hebrew;" Yael S. Feldman, "Postcolonial Memory, Postmodern Intertextuality: Anton Shammas's *Arabesques* Revisited," PMLA 114, no. 3 (1999): 373–389; Shai Ginsburg, "'The Rock of Our Very Existence:' Anton Shammas's *Arabesques* and the Rhetoric of Hebrew Literature," *Comparative Literature* 58, no. 3 (2006): 187–204.

16 It should be noted, however, that in recent years Shammas has expressed his distance from this hybridity, writing that "Hebrew, in the last two decades or so, seems to have bowed out gracefully from my linguistic state of mind, and the bilingualism I cherished for decades is no longer a distinct part of my lingual identity." See Anton Shammas, "Can the Bilingual Speak?," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 61, no. 2 (2022): 197.

17 Yael Dekel and Eran Tzelgov, "The Hope of Salman Masalha: Re-Territorializing Hebrew," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 22, no. 1 (2020): 3. The debate is recounted in Batya Shimony, "Shaping Israeli-Arab Identity in Hebrew Words—The Case of Sayed Kashua," *Israel Studies* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 146–169.

18 Sayed Kashua, "The No Man's Land of the Israeli Palestinian," in Karen Grumberg, ed., *Place and Ideology in Contemporary Hebrew Literature* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2012): 123–157. Gil Hochberg has suggested that this tension in Kashua's work between supposedly contested national identities points to the failure of national discourse, rather than to a failure to perform a "correct" identity. See Gil Hochberg, "To Be or Not to Be an Israeli Arab: Sayed Kashua and the Prospect of Minority Speech-Acts," *Comparative Literature* 62, no. 1 (2010): 68–88.

field of Hebrew-Arabic has all but precluded modes of comparison that are not based on the hybridity of their writers and their texts, such as comparisons based on form, genre, trope, or style.

The hybrid model of the Israeli-Palestinian comparison has not only been applied to Palestinians who write in Hebrew. It has also been used to analyze Arabic novels that articulate complex mirror images of Palestinian and Jewish historical atrocities—mainly the Nakbah and the Holocaust—for instance, Ghassān Kanafānī's *ʿĀ'id ilā Ḥayfā* (*Returning to Haifa*, 1969), Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin* (2006), Rabaʿī al-Madhūn's *Maṣāʾir: kūnshirtū al-Hūlūkūst wa-l-Nakbah* (*Destinies: Concerto of the Holocaust and the Nakba*, 2016), and Ilyās Khūrī's *Bāb al-shams* (*Gate of the Sun*, 1998).[19] These novels, albeit in varied and disparate ways, illuminate the reflecting mirrors at play in the histories of the Israeli and Palestinian peoples. Hybridity here does not only mean amalgamation, but a degree of interconnectedness that is inescapable. The hybrid model turns to the past as much as it attends to present-day structures of codependence. This is partly because Historic Palestine is located precisely where Israel stands today, so that when Palestinian writers who have lived in Israel, such as Majd Kayyāl, Ibtisām ʿĀzim, or ʿAdanīyah Shiblī, depict the landscape of Palestinian lives, they are often compelled to include Israeli cities, characters, and language. It therefore seems warranted and perhaps even unavoidable to focus on the meeting points of the two literatures—how one represents the Other—as the two nations are geographically, politically, historically, and socially intermingled.[20]

However, it is important to discern different types of codependence: political occupation is surely different from mutual dependence. Uncovering the undeniable intercultural bonds between Palestinian and Israeli cultures has been seen as having the potential to heal a long-lasting chasm between the nations. This liberal discourse understands comparisons between Israeli and Palestinian cultures as having the power to bridge over political rifts. The case of inseparability is then read as laying the groundwork for a "utopian unification

19 On comparing the Holocaust and Nakbah in Palestinian and Israeli literature, see Honaida Ghanim, "When Yaffa Met (J)Yaffa: Intersections Between the Holocaust and the Nakba in the Shadow of Zionism," in *The Holocaust and the Nakba: A New Grammar of Trauma and History*, ed. Bashir Bashir and Amos Goldberg (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 92–113.

20 On how hybridity in fact involves the concealment of "Arabness" in a non-literary context, see Liora Sion, "Passing as Hybrid: Arab-Palestinian Teachers in Jewish Schools," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 37, no. 14 (2014): 2636–2652.

of the language of Arabs and Jews"[21] or as providing "a potentially common memory of the place and the basis for the imagining of a common future."[22] The prominent Arabic-to-Hebrew translator Hannah Amit-Kochavi describes a naïve belief, prevalent since the 1993 Oslo Accords, according to which making the literature of the Other accessible through translation "could bridge the deep cultural gap between Arabs and Jews, affect readers' attitudes, contribute to Arab-Jewish coexistence and even change the political situation."[23] Clearly, the stakes of comparison are neither neutral nor trivial in the case of Palestinian and Israeli literatures; comparing involves real impact on the objects compared. The redemptive language corresponds to qualities attributed to the object of research. Writing in Hebrew as a Palestinian has been interpreted as a "dissent" from the colonizer, an "invasion" of the culture of the Israeli majority, and "a form of cultural attack against Jewish cultural hegemony, a mode of free expression for Arabs who are censored within Arab culture, and an opportunity to highlight the treatment of Arabs in Israel."[24] Writing in Arabic about the Holocaust, or writing in Hebrew about the Nakbah, have been said to have the potential to nurture empathy, unveil layers of hateful denial, and construct a shared, codependent culture.[25] Coupling Israeli and Palestinian literatures has been framed as an act of scholarly defiance that is seen as going against established hierarchies with the liberal prospect of patching together a diverse and more integrated linguistic, literary, and political space.

## Against Hybridity

But there is another side to this coin. If comparisons can bridge over political divides, they can also drive apart. The scholarship quoted above grants the written word reconciliatory power to amend long and deep disputes among Jews and Arabs. If indeed we are to believe in this power, and I do, we must

21 Hever, "Hebrew," 76. This does not necessarily reflect the political views of the people whom I cite; my aim is to sketch out a certain utopian discourse that is prevalent across the field.

22 Norma Musih, "Between Knowing and Understanding: Israeli Jews and the Memory of the Palestinian Nakba," *Cultural Studies* (2021): 1–22.

23 Hannah Amit-Kochavi, "Hebrew Translations of Palestinian Literature—From Total Denial to Partial Recognition," *TTR: traduction, terminologie, rédaction* 13, no. 1 (2000): 56.

24 Rachel S. Harris, "Hebraizing the Arab-Israeli: Language and Identity in Ayman Sikseck's to Jaffa and Sayed Kashua's Second Person Singular," *Journal of Jewish Identities* 7, no. 2 (2014): 36.

25 On empathy, using Dominick LaCapra's theory, see Bashir and Goldberg; Hannan Hever, "Introduction," in *Al tagidu ba-gat* [Tell It Not in Gath] (Tel Aviv: Zochrot, 2009).

also consider the possibility that comparisons can damage, fracture, mask, and steer us away from the object of research. As R. Radhakrishnan says in "Why Compare?," "Any act of comparison is predicated on an unavoidable deracination and a yoking together that one hopes is not violent. The two works to be compared are deterritorialized from their 'original' milieu and then reterritorialized so they may become cospatial."[26] To juxtapose two cultures is to reposition them, an act that can be seen as violent because "[comparisons] are inevitably tendentious, didactic, competitive, and prescriptive. Behind the seeming generosity of comparison, there always lurks the aggression of a thesis."[27] Ilyās Khūrī, for instance, rejects the thesis that representing the Other nurtures empathy. Instead, he suggests, literature that tells the narrative of its "enemy" offers a mirror to the self rather than a window to the Other, and as such results in the objectification and reduction of the Other.[28] Shira Stav, studying Israeli representations of Palestinian history, identifies a problematic dependency on the Holocaust in many such texts, "as if 'their' catastrophe is impossible to understand without 'our' catastrophe, which is, of course, *the* catastrophe."[29] It is only through comparison, Rosemary Sayigh observes, that the Nakbah is included in trauma studies—a field dominated by the paradigm of the Holocaust—and otherwise it remains outside frames of knowledge.[30] Divulging the commonalities of Palestinian and Israeli cultures and the meeting points of Hebrew and Arabic literatures can be violent when portraying Palestinian and Israeli literatures as two comparable national canons with equal means and space of production. They are not, as I show below.

The gains that come from comparing Hebrew to Arabic literature are not only political but also scholarly: historically, modern Hebrew literature has been studied predominantly against the backdrop of European literary history.[31] Jewish literature, in its myriad languages, has also been studied chiefly

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26 Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan, "Why Compare?," *New Literary History* 40, no. 3 (2009): 456.

27 Ibid., 454.

28 Elias Khoury, "The Mirror: Imagining Justice in Palestine," *Boston Review*, July 1, 2008, 36.

29 Shira Stav, "Nakba and Holocaust: Mechanisms of Comparison and Denial in the Israeli Literary Imagination," *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* 18, no. 3 (2012): 89.

30 Rosemary Sayigh, "On the Exclusion of the Palestinian Nakba from the 'Trauma Genre,'" *Journal of Palestine Studies* 43, no. 1 (2013): 51–60.

31 See, e.g., the literary histories of Hebrew literature studied by Joseph Klausner, Dan Miron, and Gershon Shaked. On the embeddedness of Hebrew literature in Europe, see Shimon Halkin, *Muskamot u-mashberim be-sifrutenu* [Conventions and Crises in Hebrew Literature], and Menachem Brinker, *Ha-sifrut ha-ʿivrit ke-sifrut eropit* [Modern Hebrew Literature as European Literature], cited in Gideon Tikotzky, "Self-Fashioning in Front of a Distorting Mirror: Interwar Jewish Literature Gazing at Classical Chinese Poetry, or Second-Order Modernism," *Dibur: Literary Journal* 9 (Fall 2020): 103.

in its various connections to Western history. To bring Hebrew literature into conversation with Arabic literature is both natural—given the many Jewish communities of the Arab world preceding the establishment of Israel, and the current position of Israel amid the Middle East—and enriching, opening the world of Hebrew literature to its complementary East.[32]

When it comes to the discipline of Palestinian studies, the gains are less obvious. Given the aforementioned examples of how specific Palestinian writings are indisputably coiled with Hebrew and Jewish texts, the comparison is equally natural. Yet such a comparison obfuscates the various ways in which Palestinian and Israeli literatures are hardly comparable. Israeli literature is grounded in a national telos, which manifests itself in institutions and a language that foster a more or less holistic identity, despite the nation's inner irreducible diversity and its diasporic history. Israeli literature is rooted in geography that circumscribes its beginnings and ends, including the deviations from that geographical center (for example, literature written by Israeli émigrés), deviations that can be acknowledged as such thanks to this steady center. Palestinian literature, on the other hand, has evolved in spaces of exile. Palestinians today are a minority not only in Israel and across the Arab world (except in the occupied Palestinian territories), but also around the Western world, with communities in the US, the UK, South America, and Europe. The very idea of a national literature must be reconsidered without a nation-state. Palestinian literature also has a unique status of sharing a major language with established nation-states; although Arabic is a minority language within Israel, it remains a hegemonic language beyond Israel.[33] Without assuming the existence of unitary features within either literature, we can observe the imbalance between the two that has far-reaching ramifications in terms of both the form and content of literary production. Their incomparability is thus based on political, institutional, civil, geographical, and linguistic differences in status. The very structure of Palestinian culture is distinct from that of Israeli culture, and the amalgamation of the two obscures these profound incongruities.

Comparing Israeli and Palestinian cultures risks ironing out these differences and putting one side of the equation to work for the other. If one is seen

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32 Yet this field has been marginalized, also due to the marginalization of Arab Jews and Palestinians in Israel. See Ella Shohat, *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Yehouda Shenhav, *The Arab Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion, And Ethnicity* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2006).

33 On the gradually diminishing number of Arabic speakers in Israel and the status of Arabic in the public sphere, see Yehuda Shenhav, Maisalon Dallashi, Rami Avnimelech, Nisim Mizrahi, and Yoni Mendel, "Yedi'at 'aravit be-qerev yehudim be-israel" [Knowledge of Hebrew Among Jews in Israel], Van Leer Institute, 2015.

as mirroring, expanding, or subverting the other, then we are thinking in utilitarian terms. To be an Other serves the formation of the Self in this deadlock. Shammas's *Arabesques*, for instance, has been described as the foil and Other of Hebrew literature, as expanding Hebrew literature to include non-Jews and the Hebrew language to include Arabic idioms and syntax, and as unsettling Israeli political and literary discourses.[34] Salmān Maṣālaḥah, a Palestinian poet who writes in Arabic and Hebrew, has been viewed similarly as "creat[ing] an inner split in the language of his poetry" that serves to expose the soft underbelly of Hebrew literature.[35] As such, Palestinian literature stays in the shadow of Israeli literature, assisting its formation as a hegemonic canon, whether by challenging or affirming it. The focus on Palestinian literature written in Hebrew or on Palestinian literary representations of Israeli/Jewish history deems Palestinian literature dependent on its occupying other.

Ultimately, the groundbreaking and important research on the inseparability of Israeli and Palestinian cultures has come to occupy a primary place in Palestinian literary studies. While not representative of the entire field of Palestinian studies,[36] the comparison has shaped our understanding of a distinct section of Palestinian literature, in which indivisibility has been highlighted. However, the amalgamation of Israeli and Palestinian literatures is predicated on the condition of limiting our objects of research to works that fall within the overlap area of the Venn diagram. If the two literatures are supposedly shackled to one another and the comparison between them is incumbent, then indeed we are not comparing the literatures so much as uniting them. When Israeli and Palestinian literatures are inseparable from one another, we are left with *one* hybrid creature rather than two comparable entities.

We come to see a two-fold image of the Hebrew-Arabic comparison. To study the convergences of Palestinian and Israeli literatures is both warranted

34 Bruria Margolin, "Shqi'im 'arviyim ba-lashono shel Anton Shamas be-'Arabeskot'" ("Arabic Sediments in the Language of Anton Shammas in *Arabesques*"), *Balshanut 'ivrit* 52, no. 6 (2003): 53–60; Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, "Belonging Destabilized: Anton Shammas's Arabesques," in *Passages of Belonging* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019): 126–137; Yiftach Ashkenazi and Omri Grinberg, "'You Prefer Your Enemies Simple and Well Defined': Reading Anton Shammas' *Arabesques* as a Novel that Strategically Resists Interpellation," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 21, no. 2 (2019): https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.3576.

35 Hannan Hever, "Lashon mitpatzelet" ("Bifurcating Tongue"), *Haaretz*, March 1, 2004, https://www.haaretz.co.il/literature/1.949503.

36 Studies that focus exclusively on Palestinian literature written in Arabic include the books of Bashir Abu Manneh, Ibrahim Taha, Manar Makhoul, Ahmad H. Sai'di, and Joseph Farag, and studies comparing it to other national literatures include the research of Ahmad Rasmi Qabaha (Arabic-English), Tahia Abdel Nasser (English-Spanish), Maurice Ebileeni (Danish-Spanish-English), and Wael Salam (English-English), among many others.

and valuable inasmuch as it goes against the grain—that is, against the idea that the Hebrew and Arabic languages and the cultures with which they are affiliated are at odds with one another. At the same time, doing so equates asymmetrical literary systems and depicts them as especially pertinent for one another. Shedding light on the theoretical downsides of this inclusive comparatist framework, we see that the bridging discourse produces a compound that cannot easily be redivided. Such discourse selects the cases that justify studying Palestinian and Israeli identities, writings, and cultural knowledge in tandem, as an entangled couple. To yoke two conflicted national traditions together is to sustain the subjugation of one to the other and restrict the degree to which each can be understood independently of the other.

To argue against hybridity as a theoretical model for studying these two literary traditions does not mean losing sight of the unsettling effect that the trespasser hybrid introduces into the colonial project, impeding processes of segregation and the colonizer's wish for ethnic purity. On the contrary, to read Palestinian literature without its Israeli Other detaches the colonial subject from structures of hybridity, translation, mimicry, and liminality. Lital Levy, as well as Yael Dekel and Eran Tzelgov, show through a reading of Salmān Maṣālaḥah's Hebrew poem *Hatikva* (The Hope) that the utopian faith in the ability of cross-cultural writing to bridge over political differences is saturated with despair, pointing to the impossibility of coexistence, and illuminating the potential monstrosity of the hybrid creature.[37] When I go against hybridity, I am not rejecting its disruptive powers. I am arguing that Palestinian literature can be read beyond the hybrid model, beyond the region of Israel/Palestine, and beyond a minority discourse that constrains it to particular interpretations. I am calling for considering what literary independence looks like for Palestinian literature.

## Beyond Minority Discourse

The comparison of Palestinian literature to Israeli literature risks overlooking key methodological and theoretical insights when it comes to global literary systems. What we might overlook when we read Palestinian literature mainly in its relation to Israeli culture is its independence as a literary tradition as well as its connections to many other literatures. Given its global spread, Palestinian literature has evolved in more than one site, offering the fields of Arabic literature and comparative literature a vital example of literary circulation across

37 Levy, 285–297; Dekel and Tzelgov, "The Hope," 10.

multiple locations. To go beyond minority discourse, I suggest, unshackles Palestinian literature from its binary pairing with Israeli literature on the one hand, and places it as part of world literature on the other hand, as a principal model for comparing asymmetrical transnational literatures.[38]

Ever since the mass exodus of Palestinians in 1948 during the Nakbah, the social fabric of Palestinian life has been deeply severed.[39] Many Palestinians, forced to leave their homeland, became refugees who resettled in various locations around the world, including other parts of the Middle East region, various European countries, and North and South America. Others remained in the new state of Israel or in the occupied Palestinian territories, where they lived under Israeli rule, disconnected from the Arab world and the Palestinian diaspora. Some Palestinian communities today have suffered multiple expulsions, such as the Palestinian refugees who fled Syria during the civil war that began in 2011. This profound fracturing of Palestinian society has resulted in the creation of cultural pockets, or disparate communities each in touch with its surrounding culture and to varying extents with other Palestinian groups around the world. An example of such an enclave is the Palestinian community that was established in Beirut after 1948. This was a prominent cultural and political hub for the Palestinian diaspora, providing a home for the poet Maḥmūd Darwīsh as well as hosting several centers that were among the first to conserve and study Palestinian history and culture, such as the Palestinian Research Center, the Palestinian Cinema Institution, and the Cultural Arts Center of the PLO. This changed after the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon,

38 This article takes its cue from scholarly efforts to rethink diasporic literature as well as the concept of world literature in other literary traditions, such as Lital Levy and Allison Schachter's reading of Jewish diasporic literature, Jason Frydman's reading of the African diaspora across the Atlantic and the Middle East, and Rossella Ciocca and Neelam Srivastava's reading of world Indian literature. See Lital Levy and Allison Schachter, "Jewish Literature/World Literature: Between the Local and the Transnational," *PMLA* 130, no. 1 (2015): 92–109; Jason Frydman, *Sounding the Break: African American and Caribbean Routes of World Literature* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014); and Rossella Ciocca and Neelam Srivastava, "Introduction: Indian Literature and the World," in *Indian Literature and the World*, ed. Rossella Ciocca and Neelam Srivastava (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 1–32.

39 On the events of the Nakbah, see Nahla Abdo and Nur Masalha, eds., *An Oral History of the Palestinian Nakba* (London: Zed Books, 2018); Ahmad H. Sa'di and Lila Abu-Lughod, eds., *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007). On the concept of the ongoing Nakbah, see Ilyās Khūrī, "al-Nakbah al-mustamirrah," *Journal of Palestinian Studies* 89 (Winter 2012), 37–50. On the fracturing of the nation, see Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

during which these centers were looted by the IDF,[40] thus undermining the institutional stability that had previously allowed for a degree of Palestinian cultural preservation.[41] Today, the prominent venue for Palestinian thought, *The Journal of Palestine Studies*, is published simultaneously in Beirut and the US, in both Arabic and in English. The journal connects the scholarship of writers based in the Arab world and in the US, with key figures such as the Lebanese writer Ilyās Khūrī and the Palestinian historian Rashid Khalidi serving as editors of the journal. Another example of a Palestinian cultural enclave outside of Historic Palestine is the art and literary scene that grew around the Palestinian writer Jabrā Ibrāhīm Jabrā (1920–1994) in Baghdad. "A true Renaissance man … [and] a strong force for modernism in the Arab world," as Issa Boullata describes him, Jabrā's activities throughout his life drew together various cultural influences.[42] Jabra studied literature at Exeter, Cambridge, and Harvard; in 1944, he established the Arts Club at the Jerusalem YMCA, and, having fled Palestine after the Nakbah in 1948, he established the influential Baghdad Modern Art Group, together with Jawād Salīm in 1951, and in 1977 started serving as cultural counselor at the Iraqi Ministry of Culture and Information. A skilled English-to-Arabic translator, Jabrā produced Arabic translations of William Shakespeare's plays, William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, and James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, among other works. As such, Jabra was a connective power between several cultural worlds, spanning from West to East.

This social and cultural exilic structure has produced both connections and disconnections among the many Palestinian communities. Many are the conditions for segregations: the mobility restrictions on Palestinians within the occupied Palestinian territories and between the occupied territories and Israel; the lack of diplomatic relations in the past between Israel and various Arab countries that host Palestinian refugees; and the bureaucratic hurdles intent on preventing the return or visitation of Palestinians to Palestine/Israel are but a few of the factors keeping Palestinians out of touch with one another.[43]

40 Rona Sela, "Seized in Beirut: The Plundered Archives of the Palestinian Cinema Institution and Cultural Arts Section," *Anthropology of the Middle East* 12, no. 1 (2017): 83–114, and Rona Sela, "The genealogy of colonial plunder and erasure—Israel's control over Palestinian archives," *Social Semiotics* 28, no. 2 (2018): 201–229, as well as Sela's movie, *Looted and Hidden—Palestinian Archives in Israel* (Israel, 2017).

41 Michael C. Hudson, "The Palestinians After Lebanon," *Current History* 84, no. 498 (1985): 16–39.

42 Issa J. Boullata, "Living with the Tigress and the Muses," *World Literature Today* 75, no. 2 (2001): 214.

43 On the legal obstacles preventing Palestinians from returning to Palestine, see Kathleen Lawand, "The Right to Return of Palestinians in International Law," *International Journal*

It is no surprise, therefore, that several projects of the twenty-first century have taken advantage of contemporary virtual realities to establish common social spheres where Palestinians can interact and cultivate shared culture. In lieu of national institutions that collect and preserve Palestinian heritage, festivals such as Palestine Writes create common virtual meeting places;[44] research projects such as PalRead trace Palestinian literary production across countries and languages;[45] Nathalie Handal's *The City and the Writer: A Literary Map of Palestinian Writers* connects Palestinian writers to cities all around the globe in an online blog;[46] the mobile app iNakba allows users to virtually explore Palestinian towns and cities as they were before the Nakbah;[47] and online archival projects such as Palestinian Journeys, and the Palestinian Oral History Archive, with its complementary map, give virtual access to Palestinian history, culture, and places.[48] Of course, virtual collectivity is limited in the type of rights and abilities it affords; yet such undertakings are a token of a common will to overcome the dire consequences of exile, while also speaking to the geographical breadth of Palestinian culture.

Another agent of cultural transference has been translations, which have been especially key in connecting Palestinian communities that speak various languages other than Arabic. Ghassān Kanafānī's work, for example, has been translated into 23 languages, thus exceeding the major West European languages; it is now available in Indonesian, Danish, Japanese, and Bosnian, among other languages. The global distribution of Kanafānī's prose is indicative of a global interest in Palestinian literature, and of a literary system that transcends the obstacles mentioned above.

The globality of Palestinian literature is apparent not only in its translations but also in the various languages in which it is written. Alongside writing in Arabic and Hebrew as mentioned above, Palestinian Americans such as Randa Jarrar, Hala Alyan, Suheir Hammad, Susan Muaddi Darraj, along with British Palestinian Selma Dabbagh, write in English; Olivia Elias, Layla Nabulsi, and Karim Kattan write in French; Lina Meruane, Mahfud Massis, Diamela Eltit,

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*of Refugee Law* 8, no. 4 (1996): 532–568; on restrictions to the mobility of Palestinians, see Julie Peteet, *Space and Mobility in Palestine* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017) as well as the reports of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. The memoirs of Faīṣāl Ḥūrānī, Murīd Barghūthī, and Fawaz Turki, among many others, are personal accounts of such hurdles and restrictions.

44 https://www.palestinewrites.org/.

45 https://www.geschkult.fu-berlin.de/en/e/palread/index.html.

46 https://wordswithoutborders.org/read/article/2015-09/the-city-and-the-writer-map-of-palestinian-writers/.

47 Launched by Zochrot; can be found on the Google Play app store.

48 https://www.paljourneys.org/en/home; https://www.aub.edu.lb/ifi/Pages/poha.aspx.

and Rodrigo Hasbún write in Spanish; Ramsey Nasr writes in Dutch; and Yahya Hassan and Ahmad Mahmoud write in Danish. To group these writers together does not do justice to the diversity of their writings; a closer reading of these works would reveal divergences in form (poetry, novel, short stories, spoken word, and drama) as well as in genre (historical novel, science fiction, stream of consciousness, autofiction, and more). The scope of this corpus does not imply discontinuity, however, these writers share many themes such as displacement, nostalgia, identity crises, yearning to return to Palestine, and many more. They also often share a certain canon that serves as a point of reference for their own work.

The global spread of Palestinian literature does not mimic the typical structure of a minor literature. Palestinian literature written in Hebrew has been classified as a minor literature, albeit with qualifications, as it seemingly satisfies the three characteristics of minor literature as it was defined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: it is written by a minority group in a major language; "everything in [it] … is political;" and "everything [in it] takes on a collective value."[49] When Maurice Ebileeni critically considers the relevance of Deleuze and Guattari's definition to Palestinian literature, he acknowledges that "most available criticism demonstrates that it is nearly impossible to separate individual Palestinian literary odysseys from political and collective concerns. As Palestinian-American critic and poet Lisa Suhair Majaj puts it, 'whether we wish it or not, Palestinian memory, like Palestinian history, is always already political.'"[50]

Yet the larger body of global Palestinian literature eludes such a circumscribed definition. In making this claim, I follow Ebileeni's argument that "although these writings [non-Arabic Palestinian literature] have only marginally entered the Palestinian mainstream, I think it is necessary for literary critics to bring them together and classify them under a single category" by understanding that "recent global dynamics have linked literary productions by Palestinians in the West with those by authors who have remained in the 'homeland.'"[51] Indeed, I wish to expand on what Ebileeni calls "global networking" by going beyond the idea of Palestinian literature as minor/ity discourse, in order to reconsider with which texts we should compare Palestinian texts, beyond the Hebrew-Arabic couplet.

49 Gilles Deleuze and Guattari Félix, *Kafka: Toward A Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 16–17.

50 Ebileeni, "Palestinian Writings," 268. The quote is from Lisa Suhair Majaj, cited in Ebileeni, "On Writing and Return: Palestinian—American Reflections," *Meridians* 2, no. 1 (2001): 113–126.

51 Ibid., 262.

The multilingualism of Palestinian literature challenges its status as a minor literature both within the Arabic literary tradition and vis-à-vis a corpus of Israeli literature. The fact that Palestinian literature is written today in numerous countries and in multiple hegemonic languages on the one hand subjects it to the definition of minor/ity literature, while on the other hand its multilingualism disentangles it from a particular minor-major relationship. Without being anchored in the nation-state, Palestinian literature remains a "refugee" in the sense that it escapes hegemonic discourse, even when written in hegemonic languages. It also surpasses the Arabic-speaking world, as some Palestinian refugees grow distant from the language of their ancestors. As such, non-Arabic Palestinian literature does not particularly challenge Hebrew literature but rather modulates transnational, diasporic culture that is intertwined within greater world systems of literary production. Any initiative to compare Palestinian literature should therefore bear in mind its wider extensions to the world it inhabits, beyond Palestine or the Middle East.

To sustain the discourse of Palestinian literature as a minor literature presents a skewed image of a literature that is regional or that resists travel. As long as it is viewed as a minor literature, Palestinian writing is limited to being an Other for a specific, single Self. On the other hand, to approach Palestinian literature as a *major* literature, albeit a non-hegemonic and non-sovereign one, opens up the discourse in a few ways: it allows us as readers and scholars to become attuned to various, diverse strands of influence and intertextuality; it shifts the focus away from political and national frameworks that prioritize particular intersections with other cultures and makes way for non-ideological formalistic readings; and it sheds light on how Palestinian literature wanders across multiple cultural sites, where its various tropes and metaphors resonate differently.

Rather than *comparing* Palestinian literature—or, that is, situating it as part of a couplet—I suggest understanding it in global terms. World literature has opted for the image of transference over comparison. As the Warwick Collective puts it, world literature "might be understood as the remaking of comparative literature after the multicultural debates and the disciplinary critique of Eurocentrism."[52] By way of emphasizing the movement of texts on a global scale through dissemination, translation, and adaptation, not only may world literature have something to offer Palestinian studies, but also and no

52 Warwick Research Collective: Sharae Deckard, Nicholas Lawrence, Neil Lazarus, Graeme MacDonald, Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee, Benita Parry, and Stephen Shapiro, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 4.

less importantly, Palestinian literature can inform world literature as it continuously moves in and out of world literature status in terms of readership and reception.

World literature as an emerging discipline of the early twenty-first century proposes that we understand literature as an economy in which certain texts move through the world according to their capital.[53] As in economics, texts circulate neither freely, nor with equal measure. Pascale Casanova and Franco Moretti, borrowing from the Marxist lexicon, emphasize the power dynamics that are at play with regard to literary distribution, unveiling the forces that allow certain texts to be central, circulate widely, and receive scholarly and artistic attention, while others are peripheral, untranslated, and do not leave their place of origin. In short, it is the study of literary asymmetry, or in Moretti's words, of a literary ecosystem that is "[o]ne, and unequal: *one* literature (*Weltliteratur*, singular, as in Goethe and Marx), or, perhaps better, one world literary system (of inter-related literatures); but a system which is different from what Goethe and Marx had hoped for, because it's profoundly unequal."[54] Casanova illustrates how independence from the political and the local is the mark of world literature; that is, literary works that carry "universal" truths about human nature and objective aesthetic value can transcend the nation(alistic) and become international. Literature that gains world capital depends, therefore, on the nation and the nation-state in order to compete on a global level, Casanova expounds.[55] So what does it mean for Palestinian literature to be worldly, but without a nation-state? Can we think of Palestinian literature apolitically? How do we factor in the literary capital of Palestinian texts that are eminently unequal to Israeli texts in their possibility of being written, being translated, crossing borders, and reaching diverse audiences?

The place of Arabic in the world-system of literature has been discussed before. Michael Allan in *In the Shadow of World Literature* demonstrates how the "normative force of world literature" defines literary sensibilities and values—what we recognize as literary and semiotic knowledge in Egyptian literature.[56] Bashir Abu-Manneh criticizes Casanova in his introduction to *The Palestinian Novel* for her association of politicization with the dependency of "small literatures:" "[according to Casanova] writers need to free themselves not

53 Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M.B. Debevoise (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2004): 9–44.

54 Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," *New Left Review* 1 (2000): 56.

55 Casanova, *World Republic*, 34–40.

56 Michael Allan, *In the Shadow of World Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 7.

only from the nation (which simply grips their imaginaries) but from any kind of politics as well, which simply ruins their artistic autonomy and puts them in a position of dependency in the world republic of letters. An a-political modernism is the route to literary independence and global authority. Realism is the form of literary dependence."[57] As Abu-Manneh shows through his reading of the Palestinian novel, Realism in the global south can also be an emancipatory force, as it is closely associated with revolutionary and anti-colonial fiction.[58] Following in Abu-Manneh's footsteps, it is not my intention to rid Palestinian literature of its political context, but rather point out its material conditions that preclude exclusively local monolingual study. Rather than depoliticizing it, to study Palestinian literature against the backdrop of world literature means to follow the ways in which Palestinian politics, images, tropes, and metaphors encounter multiple foreign languages in a mutually influential process for both the Palestinian literary system and other literary systems and traditions with which it comes in contact. To "go global" here means to consider further the effects of occupation, ethnic cleansing, and globalization on literary production in the case of an exilic literature. While scholars of world literature predominantly trace the dissemination of literature from the center to the fringes, Palestinian literature is a case of a disseminated, fragmented literature that moves into powerful literary centers. Maḥmūd Darwīsh, for instance, is widely acknowledged as a prominent modern poet: his work has been translated into most major languages and has been widely studied in the West, and he lived in Europe for close to a decade (mainly in Paris, and shortly in Moscow). He cannot be read only through the national lens. Yet, the paucity of studies that read his poetry side-by-side with other great non-Arab modern poets speaks volumes. Not to contest that the Palestinian struggle for independence holds an important place in Darwīsh's poetry, I nonetheless suggest that considering his place in the international literary sphere changes the way we understand center-periphery, international-national, and hegemonic-minority relations. The national locality metamorphoses when there is no nation-state and the nation (such as it is) is spread across different countries. While national/ist and political content might lower a literary text's capital, rendering it unintelligible to foreign readers, or even untranslatable,[59]

57 Bashir Abu-Manneh, *The Palestinian Novel: From 1948 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 11.

58 Ibid., 11, 19.

59 I refer here to Emily Apter's concept of the untranslatable—that which is lost in translation—but also to Aamir Mufti's critique of Casanova's argument, where he shows that non-Western literature (including literature in Arabic) is not read as such until it is "discovered" by the West by means of philology. See Emily Apter, *Against World Literature:*

the material reality of Palestinian literature's circulation among foreign (i.e., non-Palestinian) readers changes the equation. The many interconnections between Palestinian and Israeli literatures demonstrates this, if only through forced assimilation. Palestinian literature does not have to be translated into Western languages to become a part of world literature; it has become a part of world literature by means of exile.

In other words, I am theorizing Palestinian literature paradigmatically, and not exemplarily, as a non-hegemonic major literature. The first characteristic of a non-hegemonic major literature is that it is not implicated with the nation-state and sovereignty. It is neither defined by nor limited to a particular language that binds it to a certain geography, and it is not institutionalized by a homogenous group of people. It therefore does not pay tribute to a certain political agenda but rather evolves its politics through its interactions with other regimes and other exilic communities. Secondly, and consequently, a non-hegemonic major literature has many lines of contact with other literatures. It cannot afford isolation, it is bound to be compared with other literatures, it travels through many different worlds, and it communicates on a global scale, with agents such as authors, translators, and critics moving from one cultural center to another, transferring along with them ideas and forms that receive different manifestations in each place in which they take root. Content-wise, a non-hegemonic major literature reflects and documents the global journeys of Palestinians in their exiles. To go beyond minority discourse is to better grasp the extensive reach of exilic literature and its impact on hegemonic as well as other minority literatures.

## ʿAdanīyah Shiblī's *Tafṣīl thānawī* as World Literature

This section offers a brief example of how an expansion of the grounds of comparison for Palestinian literature can divulge stylistic connections to multiple literary systems. I take as a case study the novel *Tafṣīl thānawī* (*Minor Detail*) by the Palestinian author ʿAdanīyah Shiblī (b. 1974). The following does not intend to provide an exhaustive analysis of this highly intricate novel, but to demonstrate the paradigm sketched above.[60] *Tafṣīl thānawī* affords multiple

*On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London: Verso Books, 2013), and Aamir R. Mufti, "Orientalism and the Institution of World Literatures," *Critical Inquiry* 36, no. 3 (2012): 458–493.

60 For a close-reading of Shiblī's novel, see, Ella Elbaz, "Documenting the unarchivable: *Minor Detail* and the archive of senses." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 59:5 (2023): 607–619.

types of comparisons. First, the novel's socio-political junctures with Israeli literature and history invite a reading that foregrounds these intersections, following the approach described in the first section of this article. However, I then move past the Israeli-Palestinian comparison, by paying attention to the novel's multilingual and formalistic aspects. I also consider the novel's reception in order to argue that its literary capital is not restricted to the region or to local readership.

The first part of *Tafṣīl thānawī* tells the story of the capture, rape, and murder of an anonymous Bedouin girl by an Israeli commander and his platoon in the Negev desert. The story is based on a true event referred to by the IDF as the "Nirim Affair," after the name of the outpost where it happened in 1949. The second part of the novel centers on a Palestinian woman from Ramallah who, many years later, comes across a newspaper article mentioning the rape and murder and takes a minor detail in it as an invitation to attempt to unearth more information about the girl's story.

Most actions undertaken by characters in the first section of the novel occur in silence. This silence is broken only by non-human sounds, made either by objects or the girl:

> راحت عمليَّة الحفر تجري بسكون يكاد يكون مطبقًا، خلا حفيف المجراف وهو يحمل الرمل ويرمي به، وأصوات متفرِّقة كان مصدرها الجنود في المعسكر تناهت إليهم من خلف التلال، بحيث أفقدها البعد حدَّتها، وجعلها مبهمة أشبه بالهمهمات. ثم علا صوت صراخ حادّ على حين غرّة. كانت الفتاة تُوَلْوِل وهي تركض فارّة. ثم سقطت فوق الرمل قبل أن يُسمَع في الفضاء صوت الطلقة التي استقرَّت في الجانب الأيمن من رأسها. وساد الهدوء من جديد.[61]

> The digging continued in almost perfect silence, aside from the shovel's scraping as it lifted and tossed the sand, together with the sounds of soldiers back in the camp, which arrived from over the hills as vague murmuring, the distance having dispelled the clarity of their voices. Suddenly, a sharp scream tore through the air. The girl was wailing as she ran away, then she fell to the sand before the sound of the gunshot was heard. Silence prevailed again.[62]

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61 ʿAdanīyah Shiblī, *Tafṣīl thānawī* (Beirut: Dar al-Ādāb, 2017), 59.

62 Adania Shibli, *Minor Detail*, trans. Elisabeth Jaquette (New York: New Directions, 2020), 50.

First comes the fall, then the sound of the gunshot. The girl's death is muffled; her cry is merely "wailing" ("tuwalwil") rather than an intelligible word. Silence engulfs the act: before her scream, and after. Nor do we "hear" the internal thoughts of either perpetrator or victim. That which speaks are the background sounds: the shovel, the distant soldiers. When human speech is heard throughout the first section of Shiblī's novel, it is often orders from the commander, delivered succinctly; when the girl is told what to do, a hand gesture suffices. The girl repeatedly does not use language; instead "when the door opened and the girl emerged, [she was] screaming and sobbing. … The girl continued sobbing and screaming after she was forced into the hut. … Meanwhile, the girl's wailing faded into a barely audible weeping."[63] Her words are not transcribed; the narrative does not document them. We see her from outside the hut; a door opens and closes; she emerges and fades away, as the sound of her voice diminishes; actions are done to her, and she is rarely depicted as active. When the commander rapes the girl, he puts his hand over her mouth so that the dominant sounds are the squeaking of the bed and the howling of the girl's dog. In this context, Shiblī has spoken of the contrast that she sees between the Palestinian experience and that of the famed Arab heroine Scheherazade: whereas the latter defers death by speaking, the Palestinian keeps silent as an act of survival.[64]

I highlight the theme of silence in the novel because silence is a well-known trope in Palestinian literature. The question of how to give voice to the voiceless—or more broadly, how to narrate silenced histories and portray acts of ethnic cleansing—is a persistent one. The loud and troubling silence of Shiblī's Bedouin girl echoes that of the three Palestinian men who die in silence in the back of a truck in Ghassān Kanafānī's *Rijāl fī al-shams* (*Men in the Sun*, 1962). Jabrā Ibrāhīm Jabrā positioned silence at the core of his novel *al-Baḥth ʿan Walīd Masʿūd* (*In Search of Walid Masoud*, 1978), in which the missing person is persistently made present.[65] More recently, Ibtisām ʿĀzim magnified this silence in her novel *Sifr al-ikhtifāʾ* (*The Book of Disappearance*, 2014), which imagines that all Palestinians vanish one day into thin air. In narrating the Nakbah, authors such as the Lebanese Ilyās Khūrī and the Egyptian Raḍwā ʿAshūr repeatedly revert to the trope of silence as an active mechanism

63 Shibli, 48.

64 The Mosaic Room Podcast, *Talk—Adania Shibli: I'm Not to Speak my Language*, October 24, 2019.

65 On Walīd Masʿūd as an allegory for Palestine, see Emily Drumsta, "Words Against Erasure: The Persistence of The Poetic in Jabrā Ibrāhīm Jabrā's *In Search of Walid Masoud*," *Middle Eastern Literatures* 19, no. 1 (2016): 69–70.

of remembrance.[66] The "absentee" who needs to break the silence of his or her alleged absence in order to affirm her presence has also been a recurrent character in Palestinian culture.[67]

There is more to unravel in how silence is constructed in Arabic and Palestinian literature, to be sure. But when Palestinian silence is compared with similar tropes in other literatures—what does the comparison look like? The figure of the silent Palestinian has been often compared to its parallel in Israeli literature. A possible comparison could have been A.B. Yehoshua's *Facing the Forests*, in which the nameless Palestinian's tongue has been amputated, or S. Yizhar's *Khirbet Khizeh*, where soundless are the Palestinians who turn their backs on the soldiers who expel them. Ilyās Khūrī marks this shared trope between Palestinian and Israeli literature, and asks, "what is the meaning of two absolute justices if one of the two has no tongue?"[68] Differently put: how can we compare self-silencing and forced silencing? What might seem a commonality—the figure of the silent Palestinian—is in fact a mark of difference. Another comparison can be drawn, as the perpetrator in *Tafṣīl thānawī* mirrors another perpetrator: the Nazis. The commander in *Tafṣīl thānawī* is obsessed with cleanliness, orderliness, and proper form. He washes himself constantly and any unclean smell repulses him deeply. The irony escapes him that overseeing ethnic *cleansing* is a dirty business. Shiblī's minimal, stoic—indeed, clean—language when describing the atrocity meticulously, in the orderly fashion that the commander demands, resonates with another atrocity that was executed methodically, its narration coiled with silence: the Holocaust.[69]

However, the same trope—the silence of the persecuted subject—and a similar style—the sterile descriptive language—can be found in many other literatures. In Shiblī's case, it would also be extremely pertinent to look beyond the Arabic and Hebrew traditions, as other than these two languages she also knows French, German, English, and Korean. Shiblī has also lived for extended periods of time in the US, the UK, and Berlin, other than in Palestine and

66 On the silence motif in Khūrī, see Bashir and Goldberg, "Introduction;" and in ʿAshūr, see Nashef Hania AM, "Suppressed Nakba Memories in Palestinian Female Narratives: Susan Abulhawa's *The Blue Between Sky and Water* and Radwa Ashour's *The Woman from Tantoura*," *Interventions* (2021): 1–19.

67 Two prominent examples are Imīl Ḥabībī's *al-Waqāʾiʿ al-gharībah fī ikhtifāʾ Saʿīd Abī al-Naḥs al-mutashāʾil* and the movies of Palestinian director Elia Suleiman.

68 Elias Khoury, "Rethinking the Nakba," *Critical Inquiry* 38, no. 2 (2012): 265.

69 On the Holocaust as resisting representation and speech, see Andrew Leak and George Paizis, eds., *The Holocaust and the Text: Speaking the Unspeakable* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

Israel. Shiblī's exposure to and familiarity with several cultures thus invite a reading of her work beyond the limits of one region and its languages.

Can we, for example, think of Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" when we discuss elective silence? If silence is an act of resistance, as Shiblī notes, it is also an active refusal to participate in machineries of modernity. Like Bartleby, the Bedouins in the Negev "would prefer not to" be centralized in cities and leave their way of living in the desert, in defiance of the Israeli government's attempts to urbanize them.[70] The silent girl remains present in Shiblī's fiction, despite her erasure from history, bar IDF reports. Shiblī as an author refuses to partake in a conversation, as if among equals, when she does not fill the girl's silence with words, but lets it resonate as such.

English-language literature provides more grounds for comparison than first meets the eye. Kfir Cohen Lustig compares Shiblī's work with that of Henry James.[71] Shir Alon demonstrates striking resemblances between *Tafṣīl thānawī* and Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother*.[72] Iyad Malouf associates the haunting, ghost-like figure in Palestinian literature with the English 19th-century gothic novel.[73] The deterioration of army ethics under settler-colonial rule also sustains comparing *Tafṣīl thānawī* to J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Indeed, a "state of emergency" that justifies the capturing, torturing, and killing of the native "barbarians," as in Coetzee's novel, does not stray far from the narrative of *Tafṣīl thānawī*.

Looking at another language that Shiblī knows, more comparisons come to light. The narrative of *Tafṣīl thānawī* prioritizes detailed action sequences over passages of interior exposition. As readers, we watch these actions unfold without necessarily understanding the rationale behind them:

> قبل الجولة، عرّج على إحدى السقيفتين التي اتّخذها مسكنًا له، حيث باشر بنقل أغراضه، التي كوّمها في السابق قرب المدخل، الى إحدى زاوية الغرفة. بعدها، حمل صفيحة معدنيّة كانت بين الأغراض وسكب منها الماء في وعاء صغير، ثم أخرج من داخل حقيبة قماشيّة

70 For the Israeli policy of demolitions in the Negev, see Eyal Weizman and Fazal Sheikh, *The Conflict Shoreline: Colonization as Climate Change in the Negev Desert* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2015).

71 Lustig, 233–234.

72 Shir Alon, "The Ongoing Nakba and the Grammar of History," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, June 3, 2021.

73 Paper presented at the conference *Comparing the Literatures*, Stanford University, November 30, 2021.

على شكل كيس منفشةً، بلّلها بالماء المصبوب في الوعاء، ومسح بها وجهه مزيلاً العرق عنه. عاد وغسلها من جديد، ثم خلع قميصه ثانيةً، ومسح منطقة الإبطين.[74]

> Before the patrol, he stopped by one of the huts, which he had taken as his quarters, and began moving his belongings from the entrance, where he had stacked them, to a corner of the room. Then he took a jerry can from the stack, and poured water from it into a small tin bowl. He took a towel from his kit bag, dipped it in the water he had poured into the bowl, and used it to wipe the sweat from his face. He rinsed the towel, then took off his shirt and wiped his armpits.[75]

The description goes on like this, as we witness the commander's silent ritual of cleaning himself time and again. The camera-like eye, external to the character and focused on his activities, is characteristic of the *nouveau roman* as Alain Robbe-Grillet understood it:

> [I]n the initial novel, the objects and gestures forming the very fabric of the plot disappear completely, leaving behind only their *significations* … but in the cinema, one *sees* the chair, the movement of the hand, the shape of the bars. What they signify remains obvious, but instead of monopolizing our attention, … what appears as essential … are the gestures themselves, the objects, the movements, the outlines, to which the image has suddenly (and unintentionally) restored their *reality*.[76]

Throughout *Tafṣīl thānawī*, we see the objects, the movements in action. The commander's obsession with cleaning is not described so much as it is "seen" in repeated scenes like the one quoted above; its significance—his need to clean the girl before defiling her, to remain physically proper as he acts inhumanely—remains unstated, and therefore more powerful. Like the silence—of the desert, of the archives, of the sobbing girl—that speaks volumes, Shiblī's focus on daily routines accentuates the horror. We see the girl fall, we hear the gunshot, but the text does not state "she died." The effect of this

74 Shiblī, 8.

75 Shibli, 9.

76 Alain Robbe-Grillet, *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1989), 20. Thank you to Hamutal Tzamir who helped think about Robbe-Grillet in this context.

way of writing, as Robbe-Grillet depicts, is tantalizing, as it brings the viewer into contact with reality so that the silenced war crime becomes tangible.

Another connection between Shiblī's novel and the *nouveau roman* can also be drawn, interestingly, via its similarities with the work of Marguerite Duras. Duras not only depicted torture during war in similar language in *La Douleur*, but also speaks about writing along similar lines as Shiblī. In an interview, Shiblī recounts how words have their own agency when she writes. "I'm their kind of employee," she says. "This is the problem when you think you have a position of power over language. … I think it's so coincidental, almost like you don't have a role. … Things happen … and I say it's a coincidence because I feel I don't have control over the process."[77] Compare this with what Duras writes in *Écrire*: "So long as the book is there, shouting that it demands to be finished, one keeps writing. One is forced to keep up with it."[78] The book forces itself on the writer, and the writer obliges, not via intention, but from the position of the unintentional: "Writing is the unknown. Before writing one knows nothing of what one is about to write."[79] For both writers, the words come of their own free will and a writer's role is to capture them.[80]

A comparison can also be drawn between *Tafṣīl thānawī* and Albert Camus' *L'Étranger*, where the recurrent depictions of intense heat and putrid smells are complicit in the unravelling of a murder. The emotional dissociation of both novels' protagonists and their lack of interiority is reflected in the two texts' stylistic similarities, with terse, descriptive sentences that create suspense, leading up to a heinous crime.

Shiblī is also familiar with German literature, and cites Robert Walser, Bertolt Brecht, and Rainer Werner Fassbinder as authors whom she reads.[81] Comparisons can also be drawn between *Tafṣīl thānawī* and *Homo Faber* by Max Frisch: both Shiblī's commander and Frisch's protagonist Sabeth believe in the supremacy of man-made order, until it is disrupted by a natural force—in both cases, the bite of a venomous creature. Both works also address the theme

77 David Naimon, *Between the Covers—Adania Shibli Interview*, undated: https://tinhouse.com/transcript/between-the-covers-adania-shibli-interview/.

78 Marguerite Duras, *Writing*, trans. Mark Polizzotti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 11.

79 Ibid., 44.

80 Silence and the unspeakable play a major role in Duras' work, specifically around war and colonial atrocities; see Daniel Just, "The Poetics of Elusive History: Marguerite Duras, War Traumas, and the Dilemmas of Literary Representation," *The Modern Language Review* 107, no. 4 (2012): 1064–81.

81 David Naimon, *Between the Covers—Adania Shibli Interview*.

of transgressional sexual acts.[82] Beyond these comparisons, Shiblī's knowledge of Korean might open further avenues for possible comparative study.[83]

The author, as well as her work, thus afford a broad spectrum of comparisons, across linguistic and formal boundaries. *Tafṣīl thānawī* has been translated to English, French, German, Italian, and Swedish, and has received worldwide attention since its English translation was shortlisted for the prestigious International Booker Prize. In the global literary system, such prizes raise the capital of the novel and affirm its worldly value. For Kfir Cohen Lustig, Shiblī is the starting point of a Palestinian literature that faces outward, to global readership.[84] *Minor Detail* ceases to be minor once it travels the world through translation, and uncoincidentally as it moves from a non-Western language to major Western languages. The "minor" detail of the novel—be it the forgotten girl, the brutality of the acts against her, or the news item found by the woman who searches for traces of the story—turns monumental when the novel receives global attention. Its travels tell the story of ongoing dispossession, not only of the Bedouin girl, but of the literature of her people.

It might seem unjustified to take *Tafṣīl thānawī* as an example of worldly Palestinian literature. *Tafṣīl thānawī* was written in Arabic and by a Galilee-born author; there are many Palestinian novels written outside Israel or Palestine in languages other than Arabic that are more evidently part of world literature. Moreover, to some extent, *Tafṣīl thānawī* affirms the hybrid paradigm: one of its protagonists is Israeli, the Palestinian history that it narrates is entangled with Israeli history, and it takes place within the borders of Israel. Yet the involvement of the novel with Israeli culture is merely a starting point, not an endgame, and as such this novel enables the expansion of the Palestinian-Israeli comparison, as it exemplifies how the entanglement of the two cultures should not restrict interpretations to their intersection.

As the borders of comparisons expand, another difficulty arises: generalizations take over. Different atrocities are juxtaposed: the Nakbah, the Holocaust, Nazi occupation, slavery, and apartheid. The trope of silence on the global market loses its specificity. Takayuki Yokota-Murakami explains that once we compare, we assume categories and thus produce universals; if a Western figure of Don Juan can be compared to an Eastern Don Juan, then there is "Don Juanism" at the bottom of both. "Universalism [has] an ambition to bridge

82 Thank you to Andreas Lehnertz for suggesting this possible comparison.

83 E.g., Hwang Sok-yong is a Korean author who depicts war crimes, focusing particularly on the cruelty of Korean soldiers against the Vietnamese people. Thank you to Nicolas Braessas for pointing out this possible comparison.

84 Lustig, 193.

civilizations as well as nations," he explains.[85] Indeed, the promotion of a generalized comparative method that assumes a universal core from which all depictions of atrocities emanate and produces a trope—silence, in this case—that bridges cultural and literary differences is not my intention here. My discussion of Shiblī's novel did not propose a genealogy with a particular origin, within which Shiblī's work is a spin, as Yokota-Murakami illustrates with the figure of Don Juan. Instead, I have aimed to show that Shiblī's novel converses with world literature in numerous ways—directly and indirectly, through language as well as style—and that it can be read alongside more than its immediate opponent, that is, Israeli literature. I suggest studying *Tafṣīl thānawī* as a center—rather than a core—to which several other literary works can be shown to connect, with each line shedding light on a *particular* aspect of the novel. Inasmuch as the comparison between the Israeli and the Nazi commander brings out a specific game of mirrors that positions the Bedouin girl as a particular type of victim, so does reading *Tafṣīl thānawī* alongside Coetzee, Duras, or Hartman elicit other particular power dynamics, characterizations, and tones of narration.

85 Takayuki Yokota-Murakami, *Don Juan East/West: On the Problematics of Comparative Literature* (New York: SUNY Press, 1998), 22.