Space of Transit, Place of Memory:
Ma'abarah and Literary Landscapes of Arab Jews

by *Piera Rossetto*

Abstract

The Sifrut ha-ma'abarah (transit camp literature) represents a narrative space where contemporary Israeli authors of Middle Eastern origin tell the stories forgotten, considered insignificant, and often repressed of the "oriental Jews" (Mizraḥim),[1] *who emigrated to Israel from North Africa and the Middle East during the 1950's and the 1960's.*
After a brief historical introduction on the ma'abarot (transit camps), I aim to unravel the experience of the ma'abarah as a "place of memory" and a "narrative place." My reflections are based on the concept of "space/place" as conveyed from a human geography perspective. In this framework, I suggest different "literary declensions" through which ma'abarah might be interpreted, and in particular as a narrative place of defiance, resistance, and exile.

En Route towards *ma'abarah*

When exploring the relationship between history and memory, national narrative and personal *mémoires*, it is difficult to sketch a map of the inextricably connections that bind them together, and draw the blurred boundaries of a complex reality, which asks us to repeatedly ponder on the location of a memory within history and of a history within memory.
In the case of Jewish mass immigration from Arab countries to Israel in the 1950s and 1960s, I choose to explore the relationship between history and memories, in respect to *ma'abarot*, through the perspective of literature and autobiographical texts written by first and second generation immigrants. This perspective highlights the point of view of the non-hegemonic group, as conceived in postcolonial and subaltern studies, within the history of State building and nation building processes in Israel as portrayed by official narrative.

---

[1] Different terms have been used to identify the protagonists of mass immigration to Israel, adding more than one element of complexity to the academic discussion about it: *Sefardim*, *Bnei edot ha-mizraḥ*, *Levantinim*, Oriental Jews, *Mizraḥim*, Arab Jews, to quote the most widespread along with national affiliation such as Moroccan Jews, Iraqi Jews, etc. In this essay, I will use different terms, in accordance with the source and period of time I am referring to, though I am aware of the peculiar nuances of each of them. For a discussion of the terms see, Ella Shohat, "The Invention of the Mizrahim", *Journal of Palestine Studies* 29/1 (1999): 5-20; Ella Shohat, "Rupture and Return. Zionist Discourse and the Study of Arab Jews", *Social Text 75* 21/2 (2003): 49-74; Lital Levy, "Reorienting Hebrew Literary History", *Prooftexts* 29/2 (2009): 127-172.

In addition to this, I suggest reading the texts through the prism of space/place concept, as explored from a human geography perspective, since it has proved to be a key-concept in disclosing the full potential of literature as a "mediator of memory," as I shall demonstrate in this essay.

> It was after midnight when the plane landed at Lod, the doors opened and a youngster entered holding a special gadget and sprayed an acid smelling substance into the already thick and heavy air within. Four hours of flying in a cargo plane equipped with narrow and flimsy seats made from steel and cloth, had left me exhausted and disoriented. The seats were tightly packed one in front of the other, so much so that those who were travelling in front of me for the short duration of flight vomited continuously and dirtied my trousers. I don't remember when they sprayed us with DDT, but it was sometime after we had left the plane and I remember clearly the tasteless, lukewarm tea and the thin piece of black bread that they gave us. In my naivety I actually thought it was a piece of chocolate cake. Basically these are my memories of that long night and the early hours of the 24 June 1951, the day in which I became a citizen of the State of Israel.[2]

When Shimon Ballas, Israeli author of Iraqi origin, published in 2009 these *mémoires*, his autobiography, almost sixty years had passed since the foundation of the State of Israel and the waves of mass immigration of thousands of Jews from North Africa and the Middle East to Israel.

Ballas arrived to Israel from Iraq in June 1951 together with his family: his mother, brother and sister. They arrived carrying with them only one tin suitcase each, according to the Iraqi law which granted the Jews freedom of emigration in exchange for renouncing their Iraqi citizenship.[3] Once in Israel, they were assigned a precarious tent in Migdal Bet, one of the three *ma'abarot* (transit camps) on the outskirts of Ashkelon.

It was only many years after that experience, that literature "gave back" to the wider public of readers the stories of these new immigrants who arrived to Israel full of expectations, illusions, and steeped in a culture deeply "other"/different from that which was imposing itself as the Israeli mainstream culture. For many, the impact was traumatic.

---

[2] Shimon Ballas, *Be-guf rishon*, (s.l.: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2009), 5 [Hebrew]. Shimon Ballas has been professor of Arab literature at Haifa University. In 2009 he published his autobiography, *Be-guf rishon* (*First Person*). I thank the author for the pleasure I had in meeting him in Tel Aviv last September 2011. If not otherwise indicated, this and all the other translations from Hebrew are mine. I thank Tsipora Baran for her supervision on them. I wish to thank also Anna Waite for the help in translating the text from Italian to English.

[3] In March 4th 1950, the Iraqi Senate approved a bill allowing the Jews residents in Iraq to leave the country. On their part, the Jews that wanted to leave had to renounce their Iraqi citizenship. The law did not specify means or routes of transportation, neither had it been clear what they could carry with them. Eventually, they were allowed to carry one suitcase each. See: Sadok H. Masliyah, "Zionism in Iraq", *Middle Eastern Studies* 25/2 (1989): 216–237.

In its official website, under the title "Ingathering of the exiles," the Jewish Agency states: "During the first four years of its existence, while struggling for survival, the country absorbed over 700,000 immigrants! The need for temporary housing resulted in the establishment of ma'abarot or transit camps."[4]

This description fails to recognise that the arrival in Israel was, for many immigrants, far from being a "homecoming." Samir Naqqash, Israeli author of Iraqi origin, sums up with great efficacy: "They get us on lorries, like cattle, like cows and donkeys, to take us into a barren land, covered with bushes (…) It was like an endless awful nightmare."[5]

The mass immigration that took place in Israel between the end of the 1940s and the first half of the 1960s represents a complex phenomenon, as confirmed by the following data: in the first three years following the foundation of the State of Israel (1948-1951), the Jewish population of the country (about 650.000) doubled due to the arrival of about 685.000 new immigrants. At the beginning of the Sixties, the population almost tripled due to further waves of immigration, especially from North Africa.

In a very short period of time, different types of hosting facilities were created to accommodate the new immigrants: immigration camps, transit camps, labour camps, quarantine camps.[6]

The turning point was determined in 1950 by Levy Eshkol, at that time head of the Settlement Department of the Jewish Agency, who established the first *ma'abarot*. These facilities were conceived as a planning instrument within the first national master plan, adopted by the Israeli government in 1951, and in particular as a necessary transitional stage while new development towns were constructed in different parts of the country, mostly along its surrounding borders.[7]

Besides this aspect linked to territorial planning, the *ma'abarah* was also marked by a peculiar government system that affected the status of "citizen" for

[4] http://www.jafi.org.il/JewishAgency/English/About/History, accessed 04/10/2011.

[5] *Forget Baghdad*, directed by Samir (Switzerland, 2003).

[6] It could be argued that the State of Israel, before and immediately after its declaration, was going through such hardships that there were no many other options to "absorb" so many thousands of immigrants arriving to the Country than by placing them in these precarious hosting facilities. Nonetheless, I am of the opinion that the most controversial issue in this respect is not the outcome (e.g. the *ma'abarot*) of the choice, rather the choice in itself to bring to Israel so many thousands of immigrants, following the idea of the "One Million Plan" unveiled by Ben Gurion in 1944. For a discussion of this topic in relation with the history of Jews from Arab countries see, for instance, Esther Meir-Glitzenstein, *Zionism in an Arab Country: Jews in Iraq in the 1940s*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2004); Maurice Roumani, *The Jews of Libya. Coexistence, Persecution, Resettlement*, (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2008).

[7] Arieh Sharon, "Planning in Israel", *Town Planning Review* 23/1 (1952): 66-82; Roy Kozlovsky, "Temporal States of Architecture. Mass Immigration and Provisional Housing in Israel", in *Modernism and the Middle East. Architecture and Politics in the Twentieth Century*, eds. Sandy Isenstadt and Kishwar Rizvi, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), 139–160.

ma'abarah's residents,[8] for instance in regards to freedom of movement and equal access to employment opportunities, thus leading to an ethnic based division of labour and created relationships of dependence between the two major groups constituting the Israeli society: the veterans, of Ashkenazi origin and the new immigrants, mostly from Arab countries.[9]

Living in ma'abarot

Dvora Hacohen provides us with interesting details about the living conditions in the *ma'abarot*.[10] Initially *ma'abarot* were made up of tents, then canvas huts (a wood structure with canvas walls) or tin cabins, and finally wooden shacks of about 16m² for each family, or 25m² in the case of a large family. The 1950-1951's winter was particularly severe, with heavy snow falls across the country, and these temporary structures didn't protect the people from the cold. Ballas remembers that time:

---

[8] Ibid., 139. Roy Kozlovsky speaks of the "suspension of the status of citizen". In a personal conversation with Kozlovsky, I asked the author to further explain this concept. The scholar pointed out that what he meant to argue in his essay was that while of course being citizens with equal rights on a formal level, immigrants were not equal in the power they held, one can be equal in terms of civil and political rights, while still being marginal and unable to enter civic society on an equal level with others. In practice, new immigrants were more easily used by the state for its project of population dispersal, because they were intentionally put in a temporary housing and living situation so they could be later sent to another place according to a preconceived plan. In practice, they did not have the ability to live where they wished, although they had this "legal" right. (29 August 2010, personal conversation with the author). In a time were location (center or periphery) revealed to be crucial for the outcome of the immigration, Aziza Khazzoom underlines the fact that objective limitations existed to the right of freedom of circulation in the country: "Movement of the immigrants was sometimes also controlled after they had been placed. Indirect control occurred through food coupons. There was a shortage of food from about 1949 to 1952, and individuals were issued food coupons. These coupons could be redeemed however only in the area of residence". See Aziza Khazzoom, *Shifting Ehtnic Boundaries and Inequality in Israel. Or, How the Polish Peddler Became a German Intellectual*, (Stanford Univesity Press, 2008) 23.

[9] Deborah Bernstein, "Immigrant transit camps – the formation of dependent relations in Israeli society", *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 4/1 (1981): 26-43; Deborah Bernstein and Shlomo Swirsky, "The Rapid Economic Development of Israel and the Emergence of the Ethnic Division of Labour", *The British Journal of Sociology* 33/1 (1982): 64-85; Esther Meir-Glitzenstein, "Class, Ethnicity, and the Rise of Immigrant Leadership; Beer-Sheva in the Early 1950s", *Israel Studies* 5/2 (2000), 78-106. As we have seen earlier, freedom of movement was indirectly limited and controlled. Only immigrants who had family members in the areas of major economic development (Tel Aviv and central areas of the Country), able to support them through the black market, could afford to leave their place of residence and count on their hospitality. This would result in facilitating the process of getting a job where it was much easier to find it. Needless to say that this was the case mainly of immigrants of Ashkenazi origin who had more connections with Ashkenazi veterans. In very few cases this was possible for Mizrahi immigrants, as it was for Shimon Ballas: see Ballas, *Be-guf rishon*, 51-52.

[10] Dvorah Hacohen, *Immigrants in Turmoil*, (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 129-161. Dvorah Hacohen is professor of Modern Jewish History at Bar Ilan University.

> To stay in a *ma'abarah* was like being catapulted into a new world. A world where humans lose their private spheres and expose every aspect of their lives to the eyes of the others, whether it be in a tent, inside a shack or outside (…) Initially, when we lived in a *ma'abarah* our tent flapped in the wind at the start of the storms. After a while we lived in a wooden shack without electricity and water. Living conditions in our *ma'abarah* were no different from the other camps and I tried to adapt to my new way of life and gain some satisfaction from the on-going political action.[11]

Water was supplied through central taps, with constant problems regarding quantity and quality. Cold water showers were shared by the residents, and although there should have been one shower for every 16 residents, the facts were that only a few worked. There were also problems also over sanitary conditions: "The toilet 'fixtures' were sewage pits, which were often quite shallow and filled up very rapidly creating mud, filth and stench. On average there were four families per pit, but in many large ma'abarot there were as many as 100 people per 'toilet'."[12] *Ma'abarot* were without electricity, kerosene lamps were used in tents and huts, thus leaving *ma'abarah* mostly in the dark. Poor maintenance of the roads and insufficient public transport set *ma'abarah* in a condition of isolation from the nearby villages. Several commissions of inquiry were appointed to investigate living conditions in *ma'abarot* and a report from 1955 stated: "In Tel Yeruham there is no phone and the nearest doctor is 53 kilometres away…garbage is collected once every two weeks…in Tira an average of 5.5 people live in one room, in Kurdania 336 people share one shower, in Karkur there is one toilet for 53 people."[13]

Burocracy and isolation

The burocratical apparatus set up to provide the residents of the *ma'abarot* with the different services needed, was inefficient and disorganised, often marked by the internal competition and rivalry, rather than by the mutual cooperation among the different bodies operating in the camps. It was by then clear that managing services in the camps, also meant exerting a sort of power on the immigrants themselves, this social distortion was also evident during later waves of immigration to the country.[14] Despite the attempt to demonstrate

---

[11] Ballas, *Be-guf rishon*, 40–42.

[12] Bernstein, "Immigrant transit camps – the formation of dependent relations in Israeli society," 29.

[13] Kozlovsky, "Temporal States of Architecture. Mass Immigration and Provisional Housing in Israel," 151.

[14] Esther Herzog, "The Bureaucratic Absorption of Ethiopian Immigrants in Israel: Integration or Segregation?", in *Between Africa and Zion. Proceedings of the First International Congress of the Society for the Study of Ethiopian Jewry,* eds. Steven Kaplan, Tudor Parfitt and Emanuela Trevisan Semi, (Jerusalem, 1995), 189-202. For a more detailed and in-depht study of dependence relations close to those that had been created in the 1950's see also: Esther Hertzog, *Immigrants and Bureaucrats: Ethiopians in an Israeli Absorption Center*, (Berghahan Books, 1999).

that positive relations were established between burocrats and new immigrants,[15] actual competition and rivalry among the services providers had a detrimental effect on immigrants, making it even more difficult to find a solution to their problems.

A further frustrating fact was that the new immigrants felt themselves isolated and lonely in respect to the *Yishuv* and the residents of the villages that, although located not far from the camps, were in fact out of reach for them. Immigrants complained that nobody from the veteran residents were visiting them and showing interest in their living conditions, as it was observed and reported by the social workers on duty at the camps. The following passage is taken from a social worker's report to the Jerusalem Post on 14.05.1950:

> There is a feeling of loneliness and isolation among many of the newcomers, and this, in addition to the hardships of insufficient housing and unemployment, tends to make them bitter and suspicious towards the settled community. I have often in my visits to the districts housing the new immigrants looked in vain for the old resident of the *Yishuv* who might have come out to see for himself how his homecoming brother is faring. There are of course many organizations that have extended their activities to the new places of settlement, but I should like to see any effort on the part of the individual citizen to come and help them start (…).[16]

Deborah Bernstein reports that by the end of 1950, approximately 40 *ma'abarot* were established, increasing to 127 by the end of the following year, home for about 250.000 residents.[17] In 1951, 75% of their residents were "oriental Jews," a percentage that reached 83% in 1952. This data clearly proves that the vast majority of those who experienced living in *ma'abarot* were Arab Jews.[18]

---

15 Elihu Katz and Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt, "Some Sociological Observations on the Response of Israeli Organizations to New Immigrants", *Administrative Science Quarterly* 5/1 (1960): 113-133.

16 Henry Brian Megget Murphy, "The Resettlement of Jewish Refugees in Israel, with Special Reference to Those Known as Displaced Persons", *Population Studies* 5/2 (1951): 168. There were some positive exceptions to this lack of interpersonal relationships. An example is represented by *Shurat ha-mitnadvim*, an organization of volunteers, founded by members of MAPAI students' circle at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem between 1951 and 1952. See, Paula Kabalo, "Mediating Between Citizens and a New State: The History of Shurat ha-mitnadvim", *Israel Studies* 13/2 (2008): 97-121.

17 Bernstein, "Immigrant transit camps – the formation of dependent relations in Israeli society," 28–9. Deborah Bernstein is professor at Sociology Department at Haifa University.

18 For a discussion of the term Arab Jews see: Yehouda Shenhav, *The Arab Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006). For a discussion of the term "Arab Jew" in comparative historic perspective see also: Emily Benichou Gottreich, "Historicizing the Concept of Arab Jews in the Maghrib", *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 98/4 (2008): 433-451; Lital Levy, Historicizing the Concept of Arab Jews in the Mashriq", *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 98/4 (2008): 452-469. In his autobiography, Ballas recalls the sensation caused by his statement in several interviews in 1991. The author affirmed to define himself as an Arab Jew that had taken on the Israeli identity and started to write in

When Iraqis arrived to Israel, about 125.000 people between 1950 and 1951, were faced with the reality of *ma'abarot* as their new horizon, as "the place where the open sky of the Promised Land sunk to the height of the canvas walls of the winter rain-soaked tent."[19]
In many respects, Ballas's biography coincide with some of the most relevant stages of the mass immigration to Israel and bears witness to the deep changes that affected Israeli society at different levels. The peculiarities of the so called "*edot ha-mizraḥ*" (the oriental communities), contributed to form a framework of social complexity that encompassed issues of politics, economics, identity and culture.

Sifrut ha-ma'abarah, a Narrative in Transition

> The rays of sun, spread lazily here and there on the ground. A strong wind blew the dry leaves and the rubbish. It whistled through the *badonim*, banging creaky bathroom doors and whipping up the corrugated iron sheets above the showers. The wind brought with it sounds from afar of car horns and the racket of the noisy city.[20]

While the mass immigration years were framed in pictures, newspapers articles and reportages that up to now witnessed eloquently the precarious conditions of life in *ma'abarot*, there were no personal witnesses left by the immigrants themselves, written at the time of the events. The main reason can be traced to the fact that most immigrants did not know Hebrew when they arrived to Israel, and coping in the harsh living conditions forced them first and foremost to try and meet basic needs for survival, such as finding a job to support the family.
In the following years, however, the experiences lived by immigrants in *ma'abarot* eventually found a way to be expressed, albeit from different perspectives. Literature represents one of the ways for such expression, so that it is possible to identify, in Israeli literature, a corpus of literary works sharing similar aspects, known as *Sifrut ha-ma'abarah* (Transit camp literature).[21]
Nancy Berg maintains that the definition of *Sifrut ha-ma'abarah* encompasses literary works written by authors, mostly of Iraqi origin emigrated to Israel, that aimed to depict living conditions in *ma'abarot*, starting from their own

---

Hebrew, but still deeply rooted in Arab culture. While the affirmation of a Jewish Romanian, Jewish Russian, or even Jewish German identity did not cause any sensation, Ballas underlines how unnatural, contradictory, and senseless appeared at that time the combination of the two terms, Arab and Jew, in a single identity. See: Ballas, *Be-guf rishon*, 130.

[19] Ruth Tsoffar, "Forget Baghdad: Roundtrip to the Promised Land", *Anthropological Quarterly* 79/1 (2006): 137.

[20] Ballas, *Ha-ma'abarah*, (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1964), 61-62 [Hebrew].

[21] In 1964, Shimon Ballas published his novel *Ha-ma'abarah*, up to now considered the work that influenced, inspired, and started the *Sifrut ha-ma'abarah* (Transit camp literature).

personal experiences.[22] Three novels are considered to be the most representative works of this corpus: *Ha-ma'abarah (The Transit Camp),* by Shimon Ballas (1964); *Shavim ve-shavim yoter (All Men Are Equal, But Some Are More)*, by Sami Michael (1974); *Tarnegol kapparot (Scapegoat)*, by Eli Amir (1983).[23]
Although *mémoires* of personal or family experiences might be affected by time passing by, and distort the true historical events that had generated them,[24] nevertheless they represent an essential piece needed to reconstruct the "*milieu humain et culturel*" in which the events took place.
Principally, literature seems to be asked to provide events with a meaning, to heal traumas, to create a space in which it might be possible to bring together divided memories. In this respect, the *sifrut ha-ma'abarah* appears like the narration of personal and collective stories that are so deeply human, that they go beyond the boundaries of geography, culture, history, and religion. This is the reason why, in this essay, I intend to devote my attention to the works that voiced the memories bound to *ma'abarah*.[25] Nevertheless, I will concentrate not only on the first generation of *Mizraḥi* authors, but I will also include narrative voices from the second generation, those who might have heard of *ma'abarah* within their family circle.[26]

Ma'abarah: from space to place

In her compelling essay about the history of Israeli Literature, Lital Levy points out the need to draw a new "map" of Hebrew Literature tracing "geographical-

---

[22] Nancy Berg, *Exile from Exile. Israeli Writers from Iraq,* (State University of New York Press, 1996), 67.
[23] Shimon Ballas, *Ha-ma'abarah,* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1964); Sami Michael, *Shavim ve-shavim yoter,* (Tel Aviv: Boostan, 1974); Eli Amir, *Tarnegol kapparot,* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1984). See: Nancy Berg, "*Sifrut HaMa'abarah* (Transit Camp Literature): Literature of Transition", in Kevin Avruch and Walter P. Zenner, *Critical Essays on Israeli Society, Religion, and Government. Books on Israel, Volume IV,* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 189-190.
[24] In Ballas's autobiography, for instance, the author refers to an article he read on the *National Geographic Magazine* while he was working as junior assistant at the office of Senate member Ezra Menachem Daniel in Baghdad (See, Ballas, *Be-guf rishon*, 12). Ballas remembers the poignancy of the article, a reportage complete with photographs, about *ma'abarot* in Israel and the regret of not having shown it to his mother before she decided to emigrate with him. I retrieved the article, discovering that, actually, it did not deal with *ma'abarot* in Israel, but with Palestinian refugees' camps in Jericho. See: Maynard Owen Williams, "Home to the Holy Land", *The National Geographic Magazine*, 98/6 (1950): 707-746.
[25] Beyond this reason, it is worth noting that there are no English (or other Western languages) translations from Hebrew of the oldest novels, thus limiting the readers' access to them.
[26] For a comparison between first generation and second generation *Mizraḥi* authors, see: Shmirit Feld, "Nicus, hitnagedut ve-toda'ah ba-yizug ha-mizraḥiut ba-sifrut ha-israelit", *Meḥkare' Yerushalaim be-sifrut 'ivrit*, Yerushalaim 38 (2009): 321-328 [Hebrew]. The essay is a review of Batia Shimoni, *'Al saf ha-geulah – sipur ha-ma'abarah: dor rishon ve-sheni* (Universitat Ben-Gurion ba-Negev, 2008)[Hebrew]. Among the authors of second generation *Mizraḥi* we can enlist: Ami Bouganim, Ronit Matalon, Tova Murad Sadka, Dorit Rabinian.

literary coordinates" that will include the heritage of the literary, poetic, and journalistic productions of Arab Jews from various countries of the Middle East. This claim introduces geographical terms in an essentially literary discourse,[27] an approach that doesn't appear to be uncommon, when considering the fruitful tradition of dialogue between geography and literature. It remains an interesting prism through which historical experiences of mass immigration and *ma'abarot* can be read, both at an individual and a general level.

In considering the notions of space and place, I decided to turn to the contribution given to this field of studies by geographer Yu Fu Tuan, considered to be one of the most influential scholars in humanistic perspective within humanistic geography.[28] In a particularly effective synthesis, the scholar maintains: "When space feels thoroughly familiar to us, it has become place."[29] What at the beginning is an undifferentiated "space," continues Tuan, becomes a "place" as we get to know it better and endow it with value. Space remains a rather abstract concept until, through experience, we "bind" ourselves to that space thus transforming it into "a meaningful location."[30]

Investigating more deeply the concept of "experience," Tuan explains:

> Experience is a cover-all term for the various modes through which a person knows and constructs a reality. These modes range from the more direct and passive senses of smell, taste, and touch, to active visual perception and the indirect mode of symbolization. (…) Experience thus implies the ability to learn from what one has

---

[27] Lital Levy, "Reorienting Hebrew Literary History: The View from the East", *Prooftexts* 29/2 (2009): 133-137.

[28] Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place. The Perspective of Experience,* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977). Key concepts such those of space and place have been analised and explored from several perspectives, suggesting different anthropological, sociological, and cultural interpretations of these notions (see for instance the works of H. Lefevre, Michel de Certau, M. Augé). In this essay, I priviledged the perspective on space/place as conveyed by "humanistic geography," a new approach developed by geographers like Yi-Fu Tuan, Anne Buttimer, and Edward Relph. Notwithstanding the fact that their oeuvres need to be reconsidered after so many years have passed since their first publication, it is also undisputed that they still offer plenty of meanings and insights. See: David Seamon and Jacob Sowers, "Place and Placelessness, Edward Relph", in *Key Texts in Human Geography*, eds. P. Hubbard, R. Kitchen, and G. Vallentine (London: Sage, 2008, 43-51). Since its publication, Yi-Fu Tuan's essay *Space and Place* has confirmed to be an essential point of reference in the discussion about space and place. The author considers how people perceive and conceive space, how they create connections with their house, neighborhood, nation, and how much perception of space and place is influenced by the sense of time. Humanistic geography aims at studying territory in a perspective that places the "subject" at the core of every territorial representation. In this respect, territory is analysed from the point of view of how human beings perceive, live, and interpret it.

[29] Tuan, *Space and Place. The Perspective of Experience*, 73.

[30] According to the definition of "place" given by Tim Cresswell, professor of Social and Cultural Geography at Wales University. Tim Cresswell, *Place. A short Introduction,* (Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 7.

> undergone. To experience is to learn; it means acting on the given and creating out of the given.[31]

In this framework of concepts, the *sifrut ha-ma'abarah* might be interpreted as one of the possible instruments that permit us "to know" and thus "to experience" the *ma'abarah*, although historically it is an experience that belongs to the past. Whether we are considering personal *memoires* of first generation immigrants or reported *mémoires* by second generation immigrants, in both cases literature collects these historical experiences of *ma'abarah* and it becomes an essential instrument giving readers an insight into an otherwise "far" experience.

The *sifrut ha-ma'abarah* as Place of Memory[32]

In her stimulating work on cultural memory, Aleida Assman suggests considering "writing" and "places" as "mediators of memory," among those elements that "establish and facilitate cultural memory providing it with a sound support and interaction with our human memory."[33] On one hand, as Assman maintains, both in literature and in poetry the mediation of "writing" shares the project of an eternal lasting (*eternamento*), considered since ancient times, the act of "writing," the most reliable mediator of memory.[34]
On the other hand, suggests the scholar, we refer to "memory of places" in an evocative way, without making it clear if this expression relates to places enriched with an immanent memory or more simply to the fact that places themselves are the object of memory.[35] However, as Assman affirms, "Memory of places is completely different from places of memory. In fact, while memory of places is deeply rooted in a place and cannot be parted from it, places of memory are characterised by their intrinsic capacity of transmission."[36]
Weaving together these insights, I propose to interpret *ma'abarah* as a "place of memory" due to its capacity of transmitting, through the mediation of writing, the peculiarity of an experience lived out in a place that no longer exists. The mediation of writing goes beyond the limits of the memory of place, as it is no longer possible to access it. It represents a writing that reconciles the past and

---

[31] Tuan, *Space and Place. The Perspective of Experience*, 8-9.
[32] Using the notion "place of memory," I am aware of the foundamental contribution given to the subject by Maurice Halbwachs and Pierre Nora, most notably by elaborating the notions of "*mémoire collective*" and "*lieux de mémoire*". Nevertheless, in this essay I shall try to elaborate a different frame of reference for the notion of "place of memory," based on the combination between Tuan's concept of place and Aleida Assmann's notion of memory.
[33] Aleida Assmann, *Ricordare. Forme e mutamenti della memoria culturale,* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2002), 21, translated from the original text: Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*, (München: Beck, 1999).
[34] Ibid., 201.
[35] Ibid., 331.
[36] Ibid., 348.

the present without "mediating", namely compromising those aspects of disappointment and contradiction that marked the arrival to Israel.
The following passage is taken from Sami Michael's novel *Shavim ve-shavim yoter*. There is no doubt that one of the most appalling and strongly remembered event of those days is represented by the DDT spraying, that "welcomed" the new immigrants on their arrival at the airport in Israel. Part of the personal and collective memory, this event surrounds the main character of Michael's novel marking the symbolic end of his father as "a man both respected and influential within the Baghdad community." After his arrival to Israel, his father, together with his entire world, disappears, swallowed up in a white cloud.

> Despite my father's expectation, Shaul was not there to greet us on the runway. There weren't even beautiful air hostess to welcome us, instead from under the air stairs a group of employees all dressed in grey made their way towards us. My father paused a moment at the top of the air stairs and then with a dignified walk he slowly descended…we knew that he concealed his bitter disillusion only because it was an important moment. It was an impressive, yet futile effort. It took about five minutes for the new homeland to transform my father from an energetic man in peak form into a helpless, afflicted wreck. While he descended the air stairs we were all excited and anxious to feel the appeal of Israel that we had dreamed of. Suddenly the grey group appeared and one of them produced a large piece of equipment, poised ready to spray. Before we knew what was happening – a white cloud of DDT enveloped Abu Shaul, a man both respected and influential within Baghdad community. Through this cloud we saw my father lift his hand towards the spray gun; it was a silent protest. Hair, moustache and eyebrows turned white. The silk tie, the starched shirt and his elegant suit instantly changed into dusty rugs. After that humiliating moment and them treating him like the head of a herd of animals, I saw my father, silently, try to maintain his dignity by refusing to sneeze. Tears streamed from his eyes, his face muscles contorted like a tormented mask…and everything seemed disfigured, ugly and revolting. The spasms lasted only a few moments but my father had won, he hadn't sneezed. There and then I witnessed the last victorious moment of Abu Shaul's life. The creature that later left the airport was no longer my father, all that remained was his pride. My mother supported my father as he got into the truck, he was exhausted from the incident. We travelled for only two hours, but the journey seemed endless. Madeleine clung to me the whole time, her body shaking against my arm, but I was indifferent as my eyes were only for my father. It's like this, we all have our idols and my father was ours, but after that humiliating moment, we felt ourselves lost.[37]

[37] Michael, *Shavim ve-shavim yoter*, 18-19.

***Ma'abarah* as Narrative Place**

The place, remembered and revisited through memory or eventually physically in reality, becomes the starting point for the narration, it "starts to talk," firstly to the author that visited it, giving light and life back to the memories bound to it. For many *Mizraḥi* authors, going back to their homeland became impossible almost from the very first day of their immigration to Israel. As highlighted by Ballas, as author he was able to keep alive the memory and links between the homeland and his childhood city, to such an extent that years later he illustrated on a piece of paper the topography itself. In this respect, it could be argued that literature in general and *sifrut ha-ma'abarah* in particular, plays a significant role also in keeping alive the imagined community of origin.

> Perhaps the two houses where I grew up still exist today! A young Iraqi friend I met in Paris, showed me a typical tourist map of the city (Baghdad, TN). I found myself looking at streets, gardens, marketplaces, bridges and building blocks built on the outskirts of the city. "I have another map" I told him, "a map of lanes that turn and crisscross each other. I could sketch it onto a piece of paper; every curve, every niche, every arch, every window, and the sharply protruding walls of the houses, acute angles where men of the night stop and urinate. I remember them all." "Many areas were destroyed, yours could be one of them," answered my friend. Destroyed or not, my neighbourhood was still there, in its place. The world of our childhood goes beyond time, it is an entirety of experiences that cannot be dismantled or exhausted by words. The world of childhood experiences cannot be retold without paying the price of imprisoning them in time frames, and at the cost of binding them to a taut chain of cause and effect. At the end of the day our childhood stories are just stories.[38]

In the *sifrut ha-ma'abarah*, it is the *ma'abarah* itself, with its tents and shacks, that acts as a narrative place. Not space but place, because even the most common and apparently insignificant daily acts were charged with intense feelings for those who lived in *ma'abarot,* no matter how much time they had spent there, years or weeks.

The short novel *The Croassroad* by Tova Murad Sadka, opens with the description of the arrival to the *ma'abarah* of a new group of immigrants. Naiim, the main character, is present when they arrive and this sight reminds him of his own arrival to the country from Iraq. In the course of time, he managed to leave the *ma'abarah* and gain a better social position opening a business, a small grocery. Nevertheless, he couldn't remain indifferent as the image of this difficult arrival and the anticipation of hard times ahead, times

[38] Ballas, *Be-guf rishon*, 38.

already known to him. Together with him, the reader is involved in a mixture of sadness, at the sight of the contrast between the silk dresses and the heavy luggage, and of pity for the new comers that, in their *naïveté*, had just began to measure the distance between Baghdad and Israel.

> "New immigrants!" someone called, and everyone rushed out to look at the newcomers. Naiim and the Shullmans followed.
> The new immigrants, forty men, women and children, approached slowly. They looked lost and bewildered. The men wore tailored suits; the women silk dresses, nylon stockings and dainty high-heeled shoes. Naiim smiled sadly. He remembered his own emigration. He remembered the scorching heat at Baghdad's airport verandah, with policemen and guards alla round. Since clothes were all one could take and the weight allowance was so limited, he, like his fellow immigrants, had carried his coat and jacket over his arm. As he stood looking aimlessly about, a policeman shouted at him. "You sit down, you with the coat. Trembling from cold, for sure."
> The immigrants struggled with their luggage. Feet sinking in the sand, they bent down and pushed the heavy trunks, their coats and jackets dragging along. Reaching the tents, they stopped to catch their breath and were amothered by relatives, friends and acquaintances.
> "Where are your beds and blankets?"
> "We left them on the road," the immigratns said. "Too heavy to carry. We'll sleep on the ground…or the trunks…."
> "Oh, no. You'll get sick. This is Israel, not Baghdad. It's damp and chilly at night. We'll go back with you and help you get them"
> (…) The grievances began pouring on Naiim and the Shullmans, in Arabic and mostly in broken Hebrew: The immigrants were being dropped far off from the Maabarah; they were given narrow folding steel beds, thin straw mattresses, flannel blankets and then left to themselves. Most of them had small children and it was an ordeal to carry the luggage, the bedding and the children too.
> The Maabarah was practically in the desert; scorpions and snakes were in the deep sand. "So we have to carry the children on our shoulders all the time," the mothers and grandmothers said. "And they keep crying. They're used to the cradles in cool basements with electric fans." Meanwhile, the necessities of everyday living were not available: the milkman, the bread man, the waterman and the gasman came if and when they pleased, and if one needed something in between one had to take that long walk to the bus station and then wait and wait for the bus. Getting rations from the grocery was as bad. The grocer had only one song: "No delivery yet." Whether it was true or whether he was a swindler, the immigrants had to go back and forth for their rations.[39]

[39] Tova Murad Sadka, *Farewell to Dejla. Stories of Iraqi Jews at Home and in Exile,* (Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 2009), 114-5. Tova Murad Sadka was born in Baghdad and emigrated with her family to Israel in 1951, and from there to Usa in 1967.

The *ma'abarah* represents a narrative place, namely a space that become familiar also to those who had not experienced it personally. The public debate that developed in Israel at the beginning of the 1980's regarding the position of *Mizraḥim* within Israeli society contributed also to this familiarity. This debate involved a wider public, to which the harshness, difficulties, and troubles that the immigrants underwent during mass immigration were disclosed.
The *ma'abarah* became a narrative place and the stories took on tones and nuances much more complex than those, merely vindictive, assumed by some Israeli literary critics.[40] As a matter of fact, the *ma'abarah* appears like a narrative place composed by a variety of complex elements, among them: defiance, resistance, and exile.

"Literary declensions" of *ma'abarah*

Narrative place of defiance

In the following text, taken from Eli Amir's novel *Scapegoat*, Nuri, the main character, travels from the kibbutz where he lives to the *ma'abarah* to visit his family. Approaching the tents, he describes them a "surreal mosaic" made up of faded colours. The tailor-made suits worn by the immigrants were almost a living witnesses of the decline of these people, the Iraqi suits seemed to regret the time when a fresh flower peeped out from the button-hole of their lapel.

> Next to the tents people were setting on crude stools knocked together from broken boxes or planks, or on vegetable and fruit crates which had found their way here from a nearby citrus grove or kibbutz yard. Others sprawled on beds pulled half-way out of their tents, getting in the way of passers-by and contemplating the chickens or a goat nibbling at the vegetable leaves. The men wore striped Iraqi suits of a faded blue, brown, or black, with ridiculously wide lapels and buttonholes that remembered many a carnation. There were no carnations in the buttonholes now, and the big patches on their knees and elbows spoke louder than words of the decline of these elegant suits and of their owners, who had lost everything. Here and there, like a sign of things to come, khaki shirts and trousers were putting in an improbable appearance and merging with the colour of the tents and barren ground.[41]

Something else struck Nuri's look. Patches of vegetables were threaded between the tents, small portions of life that immigrants strove to cultivate.

[40] According to Ghershon Shaked, late important scholar and critic of Israeli literature, the works by authors immigrated from Arab countries had to be separated from the rest of Israeli literary production, set a part in a kind of "subgenre" of minor literary value. See: Ghershon Shaked, *Modern Hebrew Fiction,* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), 184-5.
[41] Eli Amir, *Scapegoat*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987), 210-211.

And yet, they would have never succeed not even in approaching the abundance of Baghdad's markets, where Nuri's thoughts run: piles of fruit and vegetables, rich and juicy, rising up like small hills on the stalls. No doubt the immigrants were also aware of this disparity, yet nevertheless they decided to engage in the struggle of gaining, not only from the desert, but just tiny signs of victory.

> I rushed towards the tents. They disappeared behind the bends in the road and reappeared again, row upon row of them with their tent poles, pegs, washing blowing in the wind. So different from the tents of our summer camps in the woods next to the kibbutz. So many tents, and so similar to each other. Where was my family's tent? Patches of vegetables were threaded between the rows of tents like a green spotted snake. Mint and parsley, with here and there a few tomatoes and marrows in the pitiful beds. They would never be able to resurrect the markets of Baghdad here. They would never approach the abundance of fruit and vegetables in Baghdad, not even on the kibbutz. Pile upon pile, rich and juicy, rising as high as hills, behind which Nabil and I would play hide-and-seek, running to and fro among them until darkness fell, when the amount of food abandoned in the market-place would be enough to feed an entire *ma'abara*. And here my fellow Iraqis were trying to grow themselves a few pathetic tomatoes![42]

In some respects, this experience recalls that of "defiant gardens," as defined by Kenneth I. Helphand, professor of Landscape Architecture at Oregon University: "(…) gardens created under extreme or difficult environmental, social, political, economic, or cultural conditions or situations. They all represent acts of adaptation to their challenging circumstance, but they can also be viewed from other perspectives, as sites of assertion and affirmation."[43] In this context, the term "gardens" encompasses both gardens and vegetable plots, usually associated with circumstances of political and social stability, rather than to extreme conditions as those explored by Helphand. As observed by Reuben Rainey, professor at Virginia University's School of Architecture, defiant gardens "(…) exist not in harmony with their settings but stand in opposition to them, calling attention to their existence and almost demanding response from their human visitors. They are catalysts that empower humans to survive by subverting and defying dehumanizing situations (…)."[44]

---

[42] Ibid., 210.

[43] Kenneth Helphand, "Ghetto Gardens. Life in the Midst of Death", in *Jewish Topographies: Visions of Space, Traditions of Place,* eds. Julia Brauch, Anna Lipphardt and Alexandra Nocke (Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008), 84. See also: http://defiantgardens.com/, accessed 04/10/2011.

[44] Reuben Rainey, "Defiant Gardens: Making Gardens in Wartime," review of *Defiant Gardens: Making Gardens in Wartime,* by Kenneth Helphand, *Site/Lines* 2/2 (2007): 17-18.

I do not mean to compare *ma'abarah* to a "war context," and yet life conditions were so extreme, tough, and humiliating that I would argue that the act of cultivating vegetable plots, against all odds, near to the tents might be interpreted as an act of defiance: firstly, against the harsh life conditions themselves, and secondly, against the Israeli authorities that had placed immigrants in *ma'abarot*.
In this extremely precarious setting, also keeping one's own traditional food could be seen as an act of "daily defiance," not only considering the food shortage at that time and the difficulty in obtaining the food people were used to. More significantly, food itself became the symbol of a culture, in this case the Arab culture, that had to be relinquished in order to embrace the Western one, a more "modern" and advanced also as far as food was concerned.[45]

> As Naiim approached the huts, he smelled red-poached eggs.[46] There must be some Iraqis in the Maabarah; who else cooked eggs that way? With all the hardships and the scarcity of eggs, they managed to maintain their traditional Sabbath morning meal. Naiim remembered with regret the lavish Sabbath winter brunches back in Baghdad. The red poached eggs, the chicken, its skin stuffed with meat, its soup cardamom-flavored, all with the special taste of overnight cooking on low heat; while here was the aura of deprivation; deprivation of food, clothing, housing; even the air smelled of deprivation.
> "Good morning," Esther's father greeted Naiim and let him into the four-by-five wooden hut. Three narrow high risers were set against its walls, with a steel trunk under each one of them. At the entrance, by the tiny window, wooden shelves were set on bricks, serving as counter for a few dishes, two pots and a kerosene lamp. A small wooden table and two chairs stood in the middle.[47]

Narrative place of resistance: (dis)continuity and (dis)contiguity

Hanan Hever depicts the *Mizraḥi* immigration to Israel in terms of territorial contiguity and cultural continuity combining the countries and cultures of the immigrants origins. This point of view adds further geographical-literary coordinates to the interpretative framework in which reading the *sifrut ha-ma'abarah*. Ballas's novel *Ha-ma'abarah* opens with the sign, written in Arabic, of a café set up in a shack of the *ma'abarah* and unfolds with the description of its owner Shlomo Khamara, a Jew from Baghdad, and his idea of starting off the business. The place is even more meaningful to the author if we think of the well long established tradition of cafes in Baghdad and the important place

[45] Ella Shohat recalls the humiliation experienced as a child in school because, to her classmates, the snack she brought with her from home "stank" of the typical Arab spices. See: *Forget Baghdad*, (2003).
[46] Many Jewish families eat *Cholent* or *Chamin* for lunch on Shabbat. It is prepared on Friday and allowed to cook at low temperature all night long. Recipies vary according to the different traditions.
[47] Murad Sadka, *Farewell to Dejla. Stories of Iraqi Jews at Home and in Exile*, 123.

given to this location in Ballas's autobiography, as well as in other Iraqi authors' biography.[48] Having to find a name for the café, Khamara choose for "Victory Café" (in Arabic), actually the name of a café in Baghdad, owned by Hajj Hassein A-Na'imi, most probably a Muslim friend of him.

> "*Maqhā an-Nassr li-sāhibihi Šlomo Hamara*" (Shlomo Khamara's Victory Bar). These words hang above the front of the wooden shack which sits near to the tarmacked road leading to the *ma'abarah* of Oriah. They invite you to sit on one of the stools, scattered in front of the door. You can listen to songs flowing from the radio and restore your soul with a small glass of tea or a cup of steaming hot coffee. Shlomo Khamara stands near to the door, smiling warmly and feeling very proud of himself as he awaits those arriving from Tel Aviv. The coach stops, the doors open wide and the travellers tumble out carrying their baskets and bags – a lively and varied line follows the route, its sides glistening as their feet move forward down the road. The crossroads is near the café and once there, they scatter down pathways and separate out in every direction of the *ma'abarah*. Khamara greets the passer-by with one hand on his chest, sometimes adding on a nickname. Chatting with the people, asking about work, the house and children and generally how they were keeping. Some would stop and chat, then carry on their business. Shlomo enters in the shack and he glances over the people sitting down and asks if anybody wants anything. He then walks towards the back door and pushes aside the curtain and enters in his house. Khamara's house is identical to the other houses in the camp, made from black cloth and unrefined, it's known as a *badon* (shack, TN). Surrounded by oil burning stoves, buckets, saucepans and dishes his wife Lulu sits on a low and narrow sofa. She's busy cooking and preparing the drinks for the clients in the bar, as she does every day. "*Wa Allah*, do you know what happened?" he asks her and without looking up, she repeats the question "What happened?", prompting him to tell her all that he had heard and seen from the travellers on the street. Khamara knows

[48] See also: Naïm Kattan, *Adieu, Babylone. Memoires d'un Juif d'Irak,* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1975). From a more contemporary perspective, Ella Shohat adds further insights by reflecting on cyberspace and its implication in postcolonial and diaspora studies, centring on the experience of a cyber cafe. Shohat describes the Gawat Izzawi (Izzawi's Cyber café), of which she is a member, and which refers to an actual popular café in Baghdad: "The electronic-mail café name functions as a chronotope, expressing nostalgia for both a place and a period, since Iraqis from diverse religious backgrounds and ethnic communities used to socialize in the physical Gawat Izzawi. Exilic nostalgia is freely exercised in the "private" public sphere of the electronic Gawat Izzawi, a community of intimate strangers." See: Ella Shohat, "By the Bitstream of Babylon. Cyberfrontiers and Diasporic Vistas", in *Home, Exile, Homeland: Film, Media, and the Politics of Place*, ed. Hamid Naficy, (New York and London, 1999), 213-232. In addition to this aspect bound to memory and nostalgia, Shohat underlies the possibility for people otherwise separated by both physical and ideological borders, to meet and interact: "Therefore, Iraqis, Iranians, Moroccans, and Egyptians who grew up in Israel and never had the possibility of meeting peoples inhabiting their countries of origin now engage via the Net". Ibid., 229.

> everything about the residents of the camp; their desires and deepest emotions. His need to feed his curiosity pushes him to ask questions, investigate and scrutinise the affairs of those around him. The wooden shack that acted as the café was built about one year ago and made from old planks of wood from a packaging crate. He had nurtured the idea to open a café during his first days at the camp, but it had been impossible to fulfil his dream after the accident left him bedridden. At that time, he had worked like many other immigrants on a farm, but one day a heavy load from one of the machines fell onto him, breaking his ribs. He was hospitalised for eight months after which he was unable to lift heavy loads. Weak and depressed, he stayed at home and reflected upon the questions that weighed heavy in his heart. How to make money? How to build the bar? He spoke to his friends and the well informed amongst them encouraged him by saying it really wasn't a problem. It was just necessary to get the authorisation from the director and within a few days the shack would be up. The packaging crates could be bought from *Tnuvah* and then the supporting roof beams could be attached to the tent poles. The stools and tables were only a question of sawing and screwing them together, so generally it wouldn't cost a lot of money or time! Eliahu 'Ini was amongst the important and influential people of the *ma'abarah*, he took out of his pocket150 *lirot* and gave it to Khamara saying "Pay me back when you can." He then went to ask for the authorisation for the shack from the director. The shack was built quickly and once finished and furnished inside, Khamara leaned towards his wife and with an emotional whisper:
> "What shall we call it?"
> His wife stared in amazement.
> "What name?"
> "I think…*an-Nassr*", he said stroking his beard. "Why call it *an-Nassr*?"
> Quietly, immersed in his thoughts he lowered his head.
> Eventually, he spoke as if speaking to himself.
> "Do you remember Hajj Hassein A-Na'imi a Bāb-Lagā? It was *an-Nassr*. There were few men like Hajj Hassein. God will remember him. He told me "Ya Abu Fuad, don't go as you will regret it!"
> The Arab letters were hand painted on the face of the shack the day after and all thanks to his friend, Meir the local barber. That same day Khamara leaned once again towards his wife and whispered "Have you seen the sign? *An-Nassr…bi-idān Allāh intassarna*! (With the help of God we have won!)"[49]

As Hever notes, the building of the café in the *ma'abarah* signifies, on one hand, taking a clear stand, gaining a foothold in the Zionist space. On the other hand, it means placingan Iraqi place on the Zionist soil, even assigning to

[49] Ballas, *Ha-ma'abarah* , 7-9.

it an Arab name.[50] As a result, the final exclamation of victory could certainly point to the fact that Khamara and his friends managed to find, thanks to the café, a source of income that will restore their dignity and offer them a way to integrate into the new country. At the same time, it could also refer to the pride of having established, in a hostile environment, a small piece of Baghdad where it was possible to somehow feel "at home." The café represents a symbolic space, imbued with the cultural and traditional heritage of the Arab world, the origins of the immigrants, and in this sense its presence in the Israeli space challenges the implicit request within the Zionist project of "building the new Jew:" to free all Jews from the negative legacy of existence in diaspora.[51] It also challenges the Zionist discourse of a barren, deserted, and unpopulated land that had to be reclaimed, regenerated, and repopulated by bringing back home Jews from the diaspora dispersion. Before the arrival of the Jews from the diaspora, the 1948 war, and the arrival of the pioneers, the original inhabitants of the land, the Palestinians, made their mark upon the territory and some are still visible. Ballas is not afraid of integrating them in his writing, as if to signify that the Baghdadi café is not a foreign body in its place because of its "Arab origins." On the contrary, that space was already "Arab" and the café could represent a kind of "alternative space" to the polarization between Jewish space and Arab space.[52]

> Ballas makes no effort to erase, obscure or conceal these remains, and he can discern no contrariety between the Palestinian village and the *ma'abara*. (…) the *ma'abara*'s space can comprehend the former existence of what stood there before, of the Arab space and the Palestinian village that were violently eradicated, for this historical Arab presence does not threaten the new space.[53]

[50] Hanan Hever, "Lo banu min ha-yam: kavim le-giyografia sifrutit mizraḥit", *Teoria u-vikoret* 16/16 (2000): 190 [Hebrew].

[51] Trevisan Semi has recently demonstrated the impact of such a discourse by sionist narrative and practice in the case of Moroccan Jews in Israel. The scholar focuses on two main points: on one hand, she considers the steps taken by Zionism in order to deny and erase the culture of origin of *mizraḥim*; on the other hand, she articulates the question of "hégémonisation du fait juif" either as a consequence or a possible drift of the process of negation of the socio-cultural context of origin. See, Emanuela Trevisan Semi, *Porosité des frontières et le contexte oublié: quelques réflexions à partir d'une recherche sur « l'absence » des juifs au Maroc*, paper presented at the international conference *Les judaïsmes: une socio-anthropologie de la diversité religieuse et culturelle*, Toulouse 26-29 October 2010, http://www.akadem.org/sommaire/parcours/module_9506.php (accessed 21/11/2011).

[52] In this sense, it could be possible to interpret the café in the *ma'abarah* through the prism of "third space" as elaborated by Homi Bhabha, thus enhancing its role of "alternative space" between Zionist space and Arab space.

[53] Hanan Hever, "We Have Not Arrived from the Sea: a Mizrahi Literary Geography", *Social Identities* 10/1 (2004): 48.

As a result of this vision, Ballas embodies in the novel the description of the remains of a Palestinian house that was used, after 1948 war, as an office for the employment bureau.

> A few hundred metres away from the shack on the east side of the road heading towards *ma'abarah*, there was a low stone house with arches. It was the employment office, surrounded by an unstable wall, bushes and a pile of stones. It had once been a large house until one day during the war it was reduced to just one small room. The room had two windows, the one facing the forecourt was dotted with rocks and thorns and crisscrossed with barbed wire. It was closed from the inside and the thick roller shutter was lifted half way up, just enough to see the employee inside. The second window faced a vegetable plot but was blocked by a grey block of cement. If you stood in the forecourt of the stone house, the road stretched out in a straight line and glistened from behind the rocky and thorny landscape. In the opposite direction, a field full of vegetables dominated the landscape, it belongs to the nearby *moshav*, their red roofs visible across the carpet of swaying vegetables.[54]

In a context perceived as hostile to them, new immigrants felt the need for a place that could make them feel "at home" and where they could finally develop a "sense of place" and a sense of belonging. It is worth noting that this need permeated also the religious sphere, as it is witnessed by the acts and practices of cult adopted by North African Jews in the area of *ma'abarot* and new development towns.[55]

Narrative place of exile: between issues of levantinism and gender

Commenting on Yitzhak Gormezano Goren's novel *Kayẓ Alexandroni*[56] (*An Alexandrian Summer*) (1978), Ghershon Shaked maintained that the novel was "Another nostalgic-folkloristic novel (…) Alexandria is for Goren what

54 Ballas, *Ha-ma'abarah*, 169.

55 For a discussion of the topic see, Eyal Ben-Ari and Yoram Bilu, "Saints' Sanctuaries in Israeli Development Towns. On a Mechanism of Urban Transformation", in *Grasping Land. Space and Place in Contemporary Israeli Discourse and Experience*, eds. Eyal Ben-Ari and Yoram Bilu, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 61-83; Yoram Bilu, "Reconfigurer le sacré: le culte des saints juifs marocains en Israël", *Archives Juives* 38/2 (2005): 103-123; Haim Yacobi, "From State-Imposed Urban Planning to Israeli Diasporic Place. The Case of Netivot and the Grave of Baba Sali", in *Jewish Topographies: Visions of Space, Traditions of Place*, eds. Julia Brauch, Anna Lipphardt and Alexandra Nocke, (Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008), 63-80; Doron Bar, "Mizrahim and the Development of Sacred Space in the State of Israel, 1948-1968", *Modern Jewish Studies* 8/3 (2009): 267-285.

56 Yitzhak Gormezano Goren is an Israeli author of Egyptian origin. For a discussion see: Emanuela Trevisan Semi, "Israele come diaspora ed Egitto come centro nella trilogia alessandrina di Y. Gormezano Goren", in *Il mio cuore è a Oriente, Studi in onore di Maria Luisa Mayer*, eds. Francesco Aspesi, Vermondo Brugnatelli, Anna Linda Callow and Claudia Rosenzweig, (Milano, 2008), 759-769.

Aleppo is for Shamosh. Although his literary technique is more complex and interesting, here too the standard Zionist narrative is set against a secret wish to return to the native land."[57]

In her essay on Gormezano Goren's works, termed as "Alexandrian trilogy,"[58] Emanuela Trevisan Semi considers the experience of *ma'abarah* lived by the author and his family who emigrated from Egypt to Israel when he was ten years old. In *Ba-derekh la-iẓtadion* (*The path to the Stadium*) (2003), defined by Trevisan Semi as "a kind of biography of the father and an autobiography of the author disguised by the author's freedom of inventing," for Robi, the son, the time of *ma'abarah* represents,

> the golden time of infancy and adolescence because, even if they were without electricity, water, and *comforts*, to Robi, a ten years old boy, the *ma'abarah* signified the freedom to run about in the fields, discovering trees and nature. As a matter of fact, Gormezano made a film from this experience, and the opening scene shows seven couples dancing a tango in a shack to the music of Julio Iglesias (…) Indeed Gormezano, with a fine sense of humour, delightfully describes the Egyptian immigrants, filled with joy of living, that they managed to create a 'middle-class lifestyle in the shack', despite the hostile harsh conditions.[59]

Some important elements can be highlighted in this description of *ma'abarah*: a stinging irony, a will of not resigning oneself to present conditions, a sense of defiance in the struggle to recreate that particular Levantine world left behind in Egypt, at least physically speaking. In addition to this, Ronit Matalon provides the Levantine experience of *ma'abarah* with further nuances, as she describes it in her novel *Ze im ha-panim eleynu* (*The One Facing Us. A Novel*) (1995).[60]

Particularly striking is the comparison between the two figures, the father and the mother, and, in a broader sense, the contrast between the masculine and the feminine. Father and mother, man and woman, living the immigration experience in general and yet particularly that of *ma'abarah* in a completely different way. It might be argued that a gender difference could be identified in their approach to the same experience.

The father is represented as the symbol of the Levantine world, a complex universe that escapes definition but nevertheless evokes language and culture crossings, besides the unique middle-class lifestyle of the Jewish community in

[57] Shaked, *Modern Hebrew Fiction*, 185.

[58] Trevisan Semi refers to *Kayẓ Alexandroni* (1978); *Blanche* (1986) and *Ba-derekh la-iẓtadion* (2003).

[59] Trevisan Semi, "Israele come diaspora ed Egitto come centro nella trilogia alessandrina di Y. Gormezano Goren," 766-767.

[60] Ronit Matalon was born in Gane' Tikvah (Israel) to a family of Egyptian descent. For a discussion of the novel's themes see: Itzhac Levtov, "Kismah shel ha-opẓya ha-levantinit", *Davar*, April 28, 1995: 27-28 [Hebrew].

Egypt.[61] In those years, all immigrants arriving to Israel experienced a sense of displacement that took on a particular connotation in the case of the Egyptian community, as Hochberg points out, as they left the old home, which was never a homeland but was home (Egypt), for the new homeland, which was never home (Israel).[62]

> He (the father) had come to Israel grudgingly, following Mother, who had followed Uncle Moise and Edouard and Aunt Marcelle and Nona Fortuna, who, in turn, had not been thrilled about coming but had accepted it. They stuck him on Uncle Moise's kibbutz, where he was supposed to work in the fields. Within a week, though, he went back to wearing his suits and raw silk handkerchiefs. He wanted to be the kibbutz secretary or something like it.
> "You haven't even begun to understand how the place works," Uncle Moise said. "What's the big hurry?"
> "I'm not interested in understanding," Father answered.
> He moved to the city, leaving Mother behind. She didn't hear from him for a year. She darned the kibbutz members' socks until her eyes nearly fell out and downed meal after meal of beans and rice. "If you'd shot those things from a rifle, they'd have hit the wall and bounced right back," she said.
> He reappeared one day out of the blue, bringing gleaming ripe mangoes, fine soap, marzipan, and a yellow fox stole with a pointy nose and erect triangular ears.
> "Where am I supposed to wear this?" she asked. "To the dining hall?"
> "We're leaving," Father said. He had found a place.
> Uncle Moise was sceptical. "Just what kind of place?"
> Father explained at great length, in flawless Hebrew. For three months he had devoted himself to learning the language. He had devoured the Bible and the newspapers and now spewed forth the Hebrew that would one day fill his political pamphlets, a mixture of low journalese, clichés couched in biblical syntax, and verses from the books of Isaiah and Jeremiah.[63]

Feeling deprived of her Levantine identity and forced to engage with a new one in order to survive, the mother clings to the house, where she can somehow recreate her world and master it as a "queen," even if it is only a shack:

> He took them to a *ma'abarah*, a tent camp for immigrants. Within two weeks, theirs was a "model tent." To Father's astonishment Mother

---

[61] On the levantine question see the illuminating essay of Gil Hochberg, " 'Permanent Immigration': Jacqueline Kahanoff, Ronit Matalon, and the Impetus of Levantinism", *Boundary 2* 31/2 (2004): 219-243.
[62] Ibid., 229.
[63] Ronit Matalon, *The One Facing Us. A Novel* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998): 170-171.

> hung bright curtains, arranged flowerpots, sewed her own lamp shades, and weeded, hoed, and planted, taming the surrounding plot of earth and threatening "the bastards who throw their garbage everywhere."
> "It's only a tent, Inès," he said, trying to reason with her.
> She did not want to hear. "It may be a tent, but for the moment it's our home."[64]

Conclusions

Not long ago, I was given a yellowish copy of Sami Michael's novel *Shavim ve-shavim yoter*, a copy found in a used books flea market in Tel Aviv. In the first page, I discovered a hand written dedication in Hebrew:

> "June 1978
> To Shlomo, this book describes well what we also went through. I hope you will find the time to read it and will enjoy it, Menashe and Bina."

In a nutshell, this dedication embodies the reason for choosing Literature as a source for unravelling history, with a specific emphasis on a "first person" perspective, the very title Ballas choose for his autobiography. Like Menashe and his friend Shlomo, many others will also identify themselves in the writings of Ballas, Michael, Amir and the many other authors that succeeded in conveying the experience of *ma'abarah* with richness of nuances, tones, and perspectives.

Indeed, the richness of nuances, viewpoints, and insights characterising the *sifrut ha-ma'abarah*, earns the right of place it inside and not on the margins of the canon of Israeli literature. Allowing us, as readers, the opportunity to become familiar with the experience of mass immigration and life in *ma'abarot*, this literature allows us a closer look at the cultural, social, and religious traditions that formed the common heritage of entire communities, a heritage that struggled to survive once transplanted in a different context.

It could be certainly inferred that the *sifrut ha-ma'abarah* portrays history as pictured from the point of view of "the other," the history of State building and nation building seen from the perspective of the non-hegemonic group. Furthermore, it embodies the history of a glorious past lived in diaspora and ended up wrapped in a cloud of DDT, as symbolised, in Michael's novel, by the son that watches helplessly his father's decline.

It is worth noting that history pictured from the point of view of "the other" is a recurring theme in Ballas's works, such as *Ve-hu aḥer* (*He is Different*) (1991) or the short novel *Iya* in *Otot Stav* (*Signs of Autumn*) (1992), where the author describes the Jews leaving Iraq from the perspective of a Muslim housemaid.

---

[64] Ibid., 171.

As a final remark, I would argue that this reflection on *sifrut ha-ma'abarah* belongs to the stream of postcolonial studies, and in particular of subaltern studies that aim at providing readers with what Edward Said defined an "integrative knowledge," capable of filling in the gaps of a history portrayed by the hegemonic group.[65]

Indeed, this remark open a wider field of research in which it would be worth comparing the *sifrut ha-ma'abarah* and other "subaltern" literatures in the world, trying to point out what is specific (or not) to Israel.

It could be discussed, for instance, if Ballas's novel might be ascribed to what Barbara Harlow defines as "Resistance Literature," but the context in which this literature developed (the movements of national liberation in the so called "Third World") seems not to encourage such ascription.[66] The *sifrut ha-ma'abarah* has certainly given voice to the humiliation suffered by the Mizrahim and have somehow claimed the existence and value of the historical, social and cultural past of the so-called *edot ha-Mizraḥ* (Eastern communities). However, it did not this calling for the "destruction" of what was certainly perceived as the dominant component of the company (in this case the Ashkenazi one), as it is found in other examples of "Resistance Literature."[67] It could also enrich the discussion to draw a line of comparison between the *sifrut ha-ma'abarah* and the works written by immigrants to Europe in the 1950's and 1960's. Albert Memmi and Franz Fanon represent but two essential examples. Nonetheless, this reflection would lead us beyond the aim of this essay and should instead deserve a further elaboration of its own.

In the frame of Israeli cultural context, I would maintain that *sifrut ha-ma'abarah* represents an "integrative knowledge," able to fill in the gaps of a history made by the hegemonic European Ashkenazi group and dovetails with the contribution of the "new historians" to the revision of Israeli historiography. As recently shown by Trevisan Semi, history pictured from the point of view of "the other" has proved to be an interesting perspective when interpreting also the history of Moroccan Jews.[68] Amongst others, it has the advantage of including a plurality of voices otherwise left at the margins of a canon not only literary.

In this respect, is undoubted that the appeal towards the emergence in Israeli literature of what could be termed as "*Mizraḥi* geographical-literary coordinates" is, on one hand, a call to bring back to the core of Israeli literature those works that have been kept for a long time at its margins, and

[65] See the entry "Subaltern Studies", by Alessandra Di Maio in: http://www.culturalstudies.it/dizionario/lemmi/subaltern_studies.html, accessed 04/10/2011.

[66] Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature*, Methuen, New York, 1987.

[67] Ibid., 30.

[68] Emanuela Trevisan Semi, "Double Trauma and Manifold Narratives: Jews' and Muslims' Representations of the Departure of Moroccan Jews in the 1950s and 1960s", *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 9/1 (2010): 107-125.

on the other, a call to acknowledge, without hesitation, the world they come from, the Arab world.

Piera Rossetto first graduated in "Lingue e Culture dell'Eurasia e del Mediterraneo" at Ca' Foscari University in 2008, with a research on the history of the Jewish community of Baghdad between the 1920's and the 1950's and a translation from Hebrew of Sami Michael's novel "Storm among the palm trees." In 2011, she obtained her second level degree in "Asia Meridionale e Occidentale: Lingue, Culture e Istituzioni" at Ca' Foscari University with a research on mass immigration to Israel from Arab countries between the 1940's and 1960's and a particular focus on Transit camp literature (*Sifrut ha-ma-abarah*). She is currently PhD candidate at the same university with a research on Libyan Jewish Diaspora (1948-67) and enrolled in a doctoral co-tutorship with EHESS (Université Toulouse II – Le Mirail).

How to quote this article:
Piera Rossetto, *Space of Transit, Place of Memory: Ma'abarah and Literary Landscapes of Arab Jews*, in "Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of Fondazione CDEC", n. 4 November 2012
url: www.quest-cdecjournal.it/focus.php?id=315