In the last few years, the fields of Sephardic and Mizrahi Studies have grown significantly, thanks to new publications which take into consideration unexplored aspects of the history, literature and identity of modern Middle Eastern and North African Jews. However, few of these studies abandoned the Diaspora/Israel dichotomy and analysed the Jews who moved to Israel and those that settled elsewhere as part of a new, diverse and interconnected diaspora.

*Contemporary Sephardic and Mizrahi Literature* argues that the literary texts produced by Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews who migrated from the Middle East and North Africa in the 1950s and afterwards, should be considered as part of a transnational arena, in which forms of Jewish diasporism and postcolonial displacement interweave. Through an original perspective that focuses on novelists, poets, professional and amateur writers – from the Israeli poets Erez Biton and Shva Salhoov to Francophone authors such as Chochana Boukhobza, Ami Bouganim and Serge Moati – the book explains that these Sephardic and Mizrahi authors are part of a global literary diaspora at the crossroads of past Arab legacies, new national identities and persistent feelings of Jewishness. Some of the chapters emphasise how the Sephardic and Mizrahi past and present identities are narrated, how generational and ethno-national issues are taken into account and which linguistic and stylistic strategies the authors adopted. Other chapters focus more explicitly on how the relations between national societies and different Jewish migrant communities are narrated, both in today’s Israel and in the Diaspora.

The book helps to bridge the gap between Hebrew and postcolonial literature, and opens up new perspectives on Sephardic and Mizrahi literature. It will be a valuable resource for students and scholars of Jewish and Postcolonial Studies and Comparative Literature.

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Contemporary Sephardic and Mizrahi Literature
A Diaspora
*Edited by Dario Miccoli*
Contemporary Sephardic and Mizrahi Literature
A Diaspora

Edited by Dario Miccoli
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List of most recurring Hebrew terms

‘Aliyah (pl. ‘aliyot, lit. “ascent [to Zion]”)  the migration of a Jew to the Land of Israel.

Ashkenazi (Jew)  a Jew from Central or Eastern Europe and, more broadly, a Jew of European descent.


Mizrahiyut  Easterness, Eastern identity.

Mizug galuyiot  “ingathering of exiles”. The term refers to the melting pot ideology upon which the process of migration to the Land of Israel, and the absorption into a new Jewish national culture, was to be based.

Sephardic (Jew)  a Jew whose ancestors came from the Iberian Peninsula. More generally and with reference to contemporary times: a diasporic Jew of Middle Eastern or North African descent.

Shlilat ha-golah  “the negation of the Diaspora”. This expression refers to the idea that, after migrating to the Land of Israel, the Jews were to abandon and negate their previous diasporic history and memory.

The book follows a simplified version of the scientific transliteration system from Hebrew into English: “‘ ” stands for ‘ayin, “’” for ‘alef, “v” for vav, “h” stands both for heh and het, “kh” and “k” for kaf, “q” for qof, “tz” for tzade and the sign “-” between two or more words indicates the construct-case. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Hebrew and other languages are of the chapter authors.
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In the last few years, the fields of Sephardic and Mizrahi Studies grew significantly thanks to new publications that took into consideration unexplored aspects of the history, literature and identity of modern Middle Eastern and North African Jews, both before the birth of the State of Israel and after 1948, and the migration of Jews to Israel, Europe, the US and elsewhere.¹ Some of these studies abandoned the Diaspora/Israel dichotomy and analysed, in a comparative manner, the writings of Jews who moved to Israel or settled elsewhere as part of a diverse yet interconnected global diaspora. More generally, literary scholars and theorists showed a growing interest in discussing notions of world literature and questioned the existence of literary spaces that, especially in the case of migrant communities and in postcolonial contexts, extend across different continents and are written in many languages.² Last but certainly not least, the field of Memory Studies – starting with seminal works of Halbwachs, Ricoeur, Nora and others – has by now demonstrated eloquently how the past and the present intermingle and are constantly re-envisioned in multiple ways both at the individual and communal or national level.³

Taking these three points into consideration, Contemporary Sephardic and Mizrahi Literature argues that the texts produced by Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews migrated from the Middle East and North Africa in the 1950s and afterwards, should be considered as part of a transnational arena, in which forms of Jewish diasporic identity and postcolonial displacement interweave and bring about entangled processes of memorialisation and heritagisation of one’s past and present history. By focusing on the literary works of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewish authors in contemporary Israel and in the Diaspora – written in languages such as Hebrew, French, English, Spanish and Italian – the volume discusses crucial issues of Jewish identity and ethnicity. It connects them to contemporary Israeli society, to North African and Middle Eastern (Jewish) legacies and to the memories of a now vanished – yet not forgotten – past. This suggests a new understanding of the Jewish Diaspora as an experience constructed through memory and as an act of perpetual becoming, which translates and is transmitted in the present and, at the same time, as if it were like part of the present itself, based upon “an existing virtual archive of private and public images”⁴.
A few words on definitions are due. First, with the expression “Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews”, this volume refers only to Jews born in Middle Eastern and North African countries and their descendants. The authors of the chapters, depending on the object of their study and the theoretical approach utilised, may categorise them either as Sephardic, Mizrahi or Arab Jews. In any case, here the term “Sephardic” is to be understood as referring not to the whole of the Sephardic diaspora – which existed also outside the Arab Muslim world in places as different as the Netherlands, Italy, Bulgaria and Greece5 – but only to those Jews of Sephardic origin who lived in Arab Muslim countries, nowadays scattered in Israel and throughout the Diaspora.

Mizrahi (Hebrew: “Easterner”), on the other hand, refers to a Jew of Middle Eastern or North African ancestry who lives in Israel. This category gained usage in the State of Israel after the migrations from the East and, whereas it had not been utilised before then, gradually became the prevalent one in order to indicate the ‘edot ha-mizrah (“Eastern ethnicities”). By utilising the term Mizrahi, we do not mean to underscore the internal diversity of Mizrahi Israelis – something which numerous scholars, from Ella Shohat to Yehudah Shenhav and Sami Shalom-Chetrit aptly demonstrated – but to acknowledge the centrality that the term, for better or worse, has acquired over the last decades in Israel and in the academic debate more generally. Lastly, some of the contributors to Contemporary Sephardic and Mizrahi Literature evoke the notion of an Arab Jew. This term, which was utilised sporadically already in the early twentieth century by Arabic-speaking Jews living in places such as Palestine and Iraq – and which for instance is still in use in its Spanish translation judío arabe in Latin America to indicate the descendants of Jews from the Middle East and North Africa – has now been reassessed as a definition that highlights the historical bonds that existed among Jews, Muslims and Christians of the Ottoman and post-Ottoman world as regards language, culture and in some cases even national identity. Scholars like Shenhav and others further interpret it as a category that can contribute to a rapprochement between Jews and Arabs, Israelis and Palestinians.6

What these definitions have in common is the fact that they end in constructing new identities for different Jewish diasporas whose main and sometimes sole common denominator, prior to the migration, was their being non-Europeans or non-Westerners. In other words, these definitions created contemporary diasporas that slowly substituted – or, better to say, superimposed over – those existing before 1948 and the migratory waves of the 1950s and 1960s. They created new feelings of belonging that did not merely coalesce around previous urban/regional/national labels (e.g., Moroccan Jews, Jews of Alexandria), but also around the new, post-colonial national frameworks and ideologies that the migration imposed on Jews.

Of particular significance are, in this regard, recent works that describe the migration of North African Jews to postcolonial France and their relations with the French Republic. Such works have showed the deep significance that both French colonialism and the migration to the Héxagone had on Jews from countries such as Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia.7 Then, one should also look at the case of Israel and at the Zionist conceptions of shlílat ha-golah (“the denial of the
exile”) and mizug galuyiot (“ingathering of exiles”). Shlilat ha-golah relates to the idea that the first Zionist ideologues had of the Diaspora as a space and time that through Zionism and the advent of a Jewish nation-state was to be put aside and rejected. In a Jewish nation-state, Jews from all over the world would forge a new, unified Jewish society: a mizug galuyiot – a term that might be rendered in English as melting pot – that would eliminate the cleavages among the various Jewish communities. While acknowledging the differences that exist among a Moroccan Jew who settled in France, an Egyptian who moved to Israel and a Syrian who instead migrated to Argentina, Contemporary Sephardic and Mizrahi Literature argues that the gradual disappearance of a Jewish presence from the Arab Muslim world – and the conception of Israel as mizug galuyiot – did not lead to the end of these communities but to their rebirth in new and interconnected forms.

At a methodological level, the volume wishes to bring into dialogue scholars working on the Jews of the Middle East and North Africa from different fields and academic traditions. This can help construct an alternative framework for studying Sephardic and Mizrahi literature as a global corpus of texts, whose boundaries go beyond those of national languages and literary canons. The question of language indeed is crucial, as we are confronted with texts written in many different idioms, which in some cases circulate beyond their place of publication either in translation or because they are written in global languages intelligible to many of these writers’ prospective readers – for example, French and English.

It is true that when one looks back at the history of Western literatures, he is confronted with the emergence, in the nineteenth century, of literary spaces that largely mirrored the national/political framework of the European states. Even though this did not prevent transnational literary exchanges and influences, the national model has very much been the prevalent one in the West and, under the influence of colonialism and colonial culture, also in many non-Western countries. Clearly, it would be naïve to claim that nowadays the nation has disappeared from the (literary) scene. Nonetheless it seems timely to look also through other scales of analysis at the literature produced in an increasingly diasporic world. This means focusing not solely on the nation and its literary traditions but on possible transnational connections and transfers, highlighting shared memories and feelings among people that live in faraway places. In the case of Jews, the national and diasporic dimensions have long been deeply intertwined. Furthermore, Jewish literature – as Dan Miron noted – has in itself the double identity of both a literature written in Hebrew and one that is, more generally and regardless of the language, written by Jews and that deals with explicitly Jewish topics. So as to come to terms with such a complex category, Miron understood Jewish literature as a set of contiguous texts that relate to one another and that configure a different kind of literary canon that goes beyond, yet does not ignore, the nation-state.

Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews are often said to have played a marginal role in the development of Jewish and Hebrew literatures. Even though several studies have demonstrated that this is not true – as more than a few Jewish authors did contribute, for example, to the modern Middle Eastern and North African literary
scene publishing in languages such as Arabic, French and Hebrew — what is true is that we are faced with people whose literary culture and memory still tend to be overlooked in comparison to that of the Jews of Europe. Both in the West and in Israel, the contemporary Jewish discourse has been dominated by the history of Zionism, of European Jews and then by the memory of an event like the Shoah — which, despite its current global significance, originally impacted almost only on the Jews of Europe. Despite the growing number of in-depth studies on the history of the Jews of the Arab world, the general view that many continue to have of Jewish history and memory is still very often connected to the European Jewish paradigm. It is perhaps also for this reason and in order to counter what might be called the *hégémonisation du fait juif*, that at least since the last three decades a great number of Middle Eastern and North African Jews ended in taking history, with a small ‘h’, in their own hands and started writing novels, poems, autobiographies, memoirs.

So as to take all this into account, *Contemporary Sephardic and Mizrahi Literature* opens with a chapter by Ewa Tartakowsky, dedicated to Judeo-Maghrebi authors in postcolonial France — the country that nowadays hosts one of the largest North African Jewish diasporas. Drawing upon a corpus of Francophone writers published in the last thirty years, Tartakowsky explains the roles that Judeo-Maghrebi literature has and analyses it through the tools of sociology of literature. In her view, French Judeo-Maghrebi authors act as guardians of group memory. More importantly, they provide new visions of contemporary France in its capacity as host society for Jewish immigrants coming from the former French colonial empire. Tartakowsky’s chapter introduces heterogeneity as an essential characteristic of the Sephardic and Mizrahi texts that the volume focuses on: for example, whereas some authors are professional writers, others are amateurs who only published one autobiography or a family memoir, still others are playwrights or visual artists who happen to write texts on their life-stories. In other words, we are confronted with a variety of genres that calls for an open definition of Sephardic literature, which — similarly to what happens for postcolonial literature — goes beyond the primacy often ascribed in Western canons to novels and includes a larger range of writings and authorial experiences that, however, also relate to one another as regards themes and memorial trends.

Expanding upon a specific author of the Francophone Jewish world, the second chapter, by Dario Miccoli, illustrates how the Diaspora and the Land of Israel can interconnect. By focusing on two novels published between the 1980s and the mid-1990s by the Tunisian-French writer Chochana Boukhobza, it becomes clearer how the contemporary construction of a Sephardic and Mizrahi literary identity neither replicates the pre-Israeli and pre-migratory diasporic model nor is a wholly new entity that escapes pre-existing Jewish classifications. Rather, it is an interconnected process related, in the case under consideration, to different national and ethnic feelings of belonging at the crossroads of Jewishness, Frenchness and Israeliness.

Issues of displacement and exile and the discussion of how the national context in which one lives influences the process of memorialisation of the past are
at the centre of much Sephardic and Mizrahi writing. In addition to the French case, one needs to mention other scenarios, such as Italy, Britain, Latin America. Three Argentinian writers and artists of Arab Jewish descent born between the late 1930s and the late 1940s and having grown up during the Argentinian dictatorship are analysed by Silvina Schammah Gesser and Susana Brauner. Schammah Gesser and Brauner discuss how Argentinian Jewish intellectuals of Middle Eastern origin contributed to the political opposition to the dictatorship, as well as to the country’s literary and artistic avant-garde: from theatre to poetry and painting. By contextualising their works within the Argentinian cultural history and that of the Latin American Sephardic migrants, the authors offer an original picture of the complexity of Arab Jewish identity, as well as its inherently hybrid and unfinished character. The chapter offers the possibility to look at the political dimension that Sephardic literary and artistic production entails, understanding the role of Jewish migrants, or in this case of their sons, as a minority that – due to its long history of interethnic and interreligious cohabitation – can also engage in radical political movements or more generally in the social sphere.16

To further illustrate this, the chapter by Piera Rossetto discusses Libyan Jewish authors in Italy and Israel, comparing their writings and how the migration to these two countries impacted on the process of memorialisation and diasporisation. Rossetto tries to detect whether and how the post-Qaddafi Libya of today is perceived, showing to what extent writings by Libyan Jews rest on the past but, at the same time, are strongly connected to the present. This is of particular significance when one considers the contemporary Mediterranean scenario, with its interethnic and interreligious tensions, and on the other hand the possibilities of dialogue between Jews and Muslims that a more nuanced vision of the past could open. Similarly to Rossetto but basing her chapter upon a corpus of texts by Moroccan Jews belonging to the “1.5 generation” – that is, writers who left Morocco as children or adolescents and write in French, English and Hebrew – Emanuela Trevisan Semi looks at locations and objects of identity, from the mel- lah (the Jewish quarter) to Moroccan Jewish traditional food. Trevisan Semi finds out that writers who are based in Israel are more nostalgic towards their place of birth, Morocco, compared with those based in France or the US. So, as opposed to what the Zionist concept of shilat ha-golah posits, there seems to be an unexpected correlation between the return to the homeland from the Diaspora and a retaining of the feeling of belonging for the abandoned native land, remembered as a country of exile.

All these chapters are interesting also insofar as they present authors who – as said – can be professionals or amateurs, published by major publishing houses or independently. On the whole, it seems that the Sephardic and Mizrahi literary arena is an inextricable mixture of genres and authors that blurs the boundaries between high and popular culture and between languages and that highlights to what extent the identity of these Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews is largely constructed upon their being witnesses, or heirs, of a world otherwise destined to oblivion. But what does this mean for the Israeli case?
In fact, even though the opposition between Israel and the Diaspora is not as strict as one may think, this does not mean that the national context in which one writes has lost its relevance. So, the second half of the book deals more explicitly with Mizrahi Israeli literature questioning the assumption whether it might or not be considered an independent literary arena. Yochai Oppenheimer sets the tone by contextualising Mizrahi Israeli fiction vis-à-vis postcolonial studies and interprets it as a “minor literature” – in the sense that Deleuze and Guattari gave to the term as a literature that utilises a major language, in this case Hebrew, in a de-territorialised and political manner. In doing so, Oppenheimer not only explains the main characteristics of Mizrahi writing, but also proposes a new and original analytical framework that can be applied beyond the Hebrew literary canon in a larger transnational context. His chapter can be read in parallel to Tartakowsky’s, as the Sephardic and Mizrahi texts that they discuss, despite their differences, share many themes: again exile, displacement, rupture and the confrontation with the Other – be he the Ashkenazi Israeli or the (non-Jewish) French: all are issues which take a cue from the authors’ status as cross-cultural migrants.

Clearly, fiction and autobiographies are not the only means of literary expression utilised by Jewish authors of Middle Eastern and North African origin. Especially in the Israeli case, poetry is a very important genre that relates to a centuries-old tradition of Sephardic piyut (“liturgical poetry”) and to music and that has acquired more visibility in the last years thanks to young poets like Almog Behar, the literary collective ‘Ars Po’etiqah and the consecration that authors from previous generations have obtained. The chapter by Omri Ben-Yehuda is dedicated to one of the most renowned Mizrahi poets, Erez Biton. Born in Algeria from a family of Moroccan origin, Biton – who in 2015 was awarded the renowned Israel Prize for Literature – is interpreted as a founding father of Israeli literature at large. Through a close textual reading of some of Biton’s most renowned poems and a transposal to poetry of Oppenheimer’s interpretation of Mizrahi fiction as minor literature, Ben-Yehuda concentrates on the relations among poetry, gesture, trauma and music as signifiers of identity. He explains that Biton does not negate Hebrew literary hegemonic views but undermines them from within through a recollection of the identity and bodily traumas that the Mizrahim experienced upon arrival in Israel and during the following decades.

The final chapter, by Ktzia Alon, proposes an in-depth study of Shva Salhoov’s poems against the background of Emmanuel Levinas’ philosophy. Born in Israel into a family of Libyan Jews, Salhoov reflects upon the Mizrahi experience and some of its most important elements – from the usage of the Arabic language to the reappropriation of biblical motifs and images – in order to unravel the stakes that Israel is facing. According to Alon, Salhoov’s poetry paints a utopian, liturgical and ethical horizon for a kind of Mizrahi poetry that is firmly planted in the Israeli present, but also evokes a coveted future rooted in the Arab Middle East and its traditions. Alon’s study allows us to get a glimpse of what nowadays is left of Jewish liturgical poetry, adding another dimension – closer to the religious sphere and to mysticism – to the already rich Sephardic and Mizrahi literary panorama. All in all, the Israeli writers seem subject both to the specificities of
the Hebrew literary canon and the Hebrew language as well as to transnational cultural and identity dynamics that relate to the Middle Eastern and North African Jewish worlds and their post-migratory vicissitudes. When looked at from this perspective, Israel becomes the site of another (albeit peculiar) Jewish diaspora that – despite its centrality – is no longer perceived as the main or exclusive point of reference.19

As David Damrosch wrote, much work still needs to be done in order to “link our countercanonical and hypercanonical writers beyond the boundaries of national or imperial spaces”.20 This is true also for this volume, which – despite the fact that it focuses on more prominent authors like Erez Biton and on others who are less known such as Gil Ben Aych and Susana Romano Sued – cannot claim to be exhaustive. For example, for reasons of space and due to the research interests of the contributors, some Middle Eastern and North African diasporas remain out of the picture. Secondly, even though references to Anglophone authors of Middle Eastern and North African origin like the Egyptian André Aciman and the Moroccan Ruth Knafo Setton are present in the book, none of the chapters deals specifically with this subject. The same applies to the case of those Jewish writers, mainly of Iraqi descent, who retained the usage of the Arabic language after the migration and whose intellectual itineraries surely deserve further analysis.21 On the other hand, some of the chapters introduce to an English-speaking audience authors in languages, like Italian and Spanish, who rarely feature in the literary history of contemporary Middle Eastern and North African Jewries.

It is to be noted that the authors here discussed belong to different generations of migrants and of writers: some were born in the Arab world and moved to Europe or Israel as children, others are the sons or even grandsons of the first migrants. Therefore, they can be either direct or indirect witnesses of a past memory, or postmemory,22 which is then mediated by their national and social milieu and by a set of by now global Jewish political and memorial frameworks that include, for example, the Arab-Israeli conflict and feelings of belonging or proximity to Israel or the Shoah. In the end, these novelists and poets construct a kind of historical memory, which is based on both individual and communal experiences. They form a heterogeneous yet visible (literary) diaspora that looks back to a centuries-old past of Jewish-Arab coexistence, and forward to a still uncertain future, whose contours are difficult to decipher but that surely will bear the weight of a twentieth-century history of migration, identity ruptures and spatial as well as cultural/linguistic displacements.

That the historical narration of the past experience of the Jews of the Middle East and North Africa has been often left to fiction or autobiographies leads to the question of how scholars – and particularly historians – should handle this kind of archive. What is the face value of these texts and what history comes out of them? What are the sociological and political questions relating to the writings of these minority groups? What is their contribution to constructing an alternative narrative to that of official historiography? The hope is that Contemporary Sephardic and Mizrahi Literature will provide answers to these and many other questions, paving the way to further comparative analysis of the literature that Sephardic and
Mizrahi Jews produce in a myriad of languages, as part of a global diaspora at the crossroads between a resilient past and an equally tangible present.

Notes


Introduction

9 Here, it is useful to consider what is already argued by Yael Wise-Halevy, *Sephardism. Spanish Jewish History and the Modern Literary Imagination* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2012).


16 Consider the contribution that Jews of Iraqi, Egyptian and Moroccan origin gave to the emergence of the Communist and Socialist movements in the Arab world (see for example: Rami Ginat, *A History of Egyptian Communism: Jews and Their Compatriots in Quest of Revolution* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2011); Bashkin, *New Babylonians*, 141–182 and Robert Watson, “Between Liberation(s) and Occupation(s): Reconsidering the Emergence of Maghrebi Jewish Communism, 1942–1945”, *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies*, 13/3 (2014): 381–398) and partly also in Israel: think of the writer Sami Michael, that in the 1950s contributed to Israeli Arab Communist newspapers.


