ANTON SHAMMAS: THE FAULT LINES OF ISRAELI CULTURAL IDENTITY

In his pioneering work of Hebrew fiction *Arabesques* (1986a; in English, 1988a) and in numerous writings on social and cultural criticism, Shammas has significantly problematized the dominant Jewish Israeli representations of history, nationhood, and culture. In the process, he has represented the destructive effects of hegemonic Israeli social and cultural practices on the Palestinian Arabs. In fiction and nonfiction, Shammas repeatedly reveals the complexities and contradictions of Israeli society and culture as seen by the internal Palestinian Other.

At the same time, Shammas persuasively represents the oppressive, silencing, marginalizing, exclusionary effects of zionist discourse and practice as they are inscribed in the apparatus of the state. In so doing, he has effectively represented to a Hebrew readership the cultural violence that zionism has perpetrated on the Palestinian Other. He has also effectively demonstrated the various ways in which the process of shaping a distinctly "Israeli" culture and cultural identity, like the process of shaping any national culture, is embedded in power relations and infused with power-laden discourse and practices.

In Israeli liberal discourse, one finds many critiques of the effects of Jewish Israeli political hegemony on the political and civil rights of the Palestinians. Shammas, however, has been particularly forceful in raising cultural and identity problems. By showing the destructive effects of Israeli cultural hegemony on the practices through which Palestinians represent and make sense of the reality around them, Shammas reveals to his readers, Israeli and non-Israeli alike, the consequences of cultural discourse and practices taken by the Jewish majority to be natural and positive. At the same time, Shammas' powerful voice contributes to the construction of a Palestinian counternarrative.

Regarding Cultural Hegemony

Focusing his narrative on the everyday life of Palestinian villagers, Shammas, in *Arabesques,* engages in what literary scholars Gary Morson and Carol Emerson (1990), in their study of the Russian literary theorist Mikhael Bakhtin, refer to as "prosaics," "a form of thinking that presumes the importance of the everyday, the ordinary" (p. 15). Shammas' fiction represents an alternative reality to the everyday reality of the Israeli Jew.

According to the Israeli literary scholar Hannan Hever, the publication of Shammas' Hebrew novel *Arabesques* (1986a) had the effect of subverting the dominant notion of a Jewish-Hebrew literary canon and significantly problematizing the zionist view of Hebrew as the Jewish national

language. Demonstrating a mastery of a rich and complex Hebrew style, Shammas, as interpreted by Hever (1990), transforms the language of the majority into a weapon of the colonialized minority in its struggle against hegemonic culture. By problematizing the classical zionist view of Hebrew literature as Jewish national literature, *Arabesques,* in Hever's words, "forces a fundamental revision in some of the political assumptions underlying Israeli public discourse" (p. 290).

Building on Hever's suggestive interpretation, I would like to expand the discussion to include what I see as Shammas' problematizing of Israeli culture and the prevailing conception of Israeli identity. I read Shammas against the background of recent writings in the field of cultural studies, which treat culture as a power-ridden, conflicted site of signifying practices that produce and disseminate meaning.[7] Shammas repeatedly draws our attention to the power and the paradoxes inherent in the processes whereby meaning is constructed and disseminated in Israeli society.

Through numerous examples, Shammas educates his readers to the fact that "culture," far from being a benign, humanizing realm, is a power-ridden process in which one continually struggles for hegemony. Positioning his readers to read Israeli culture from the perspective of the excluded "Other," he makes it difficult for his Jewish Israeli readers to ignore the power effects and the violence that Israeli culture entails for the Palestinian minority.

In particular, Shammas' writings provide powerful examples that supports French philosopher Jacques Derrida's (1984) claim that violence is inherent in the processes of collective identity formation:

> The rapport of self-identity is itself always a rapport of violence with the other; so that the notions of property, appropriation and self-presence, so central to logocentric metaphysics, are essentially dependent on an oppositional relation with otherness. In this sense, identity presupposes alterity. (p. 117)

Shammas makes us aware that alongside the physical destruction of Arab villages and the confiscation of land, another form of violence has been unleashed at the Palestinians, the violence engendered by zionist/Jewish cultural practices. Describing the cultural struggle between Israeli Jews and Palestinians as a "cruel bullfight between two cultures," Shammas (1983a) sees the Palestinians cast into the role of the "ill-fated bull" (p. 35), but in this bullfight,

> no one knows which role he is supposed to play. The roles change, and the rules of the game are lost. This war between the two cultures, the Jewish and the Arabic, is becoming increasingly like a "corrida" [bullfight], and many voices, on either side, are hoarse from yelling "Ole! Ole!" (pp. 35–36)

One site of this struggle is the Israeli educational system, which seeks to impose on the minority the perspective of the majority:

> The policy of Mapai [Israeli Labor Party] and later the Alignment [a left of center coalition that included Mapai] was devised, at least in the field of education, to attenuate the Arab personality, and then to demand that it [the attenuated Arab personality] integrate into the system of the state. The integration is carried out in the well-established tradition of Arab taste. (p. 36)

Shammas (1988b) provides us with numerous descriptions of the destructive effects of statehood on the indigenous Arab population:

> Since 1948, they [Palestinian Arabs living within Israel's borders] had been exposed to the state, which had defined itself, from the very beginning, as a Jewish state. This sudden exposure after 1948 knocked the ground—in the literal sense of the word—from under their cultural confidence. Those were the days of the military administration and land appropriations. (p. 48)

Whereas, to Jews, the establishment of the state was the culmination of their dream of national liberation, to Palestinian Arabs, Shammas reminds us, it was a disaster that deprived them of their independence and freedom of movement. Similarly, the Israeli Declaration of Independence, the official document proclaiming the new state, like Independence Day, the day established to commemorate the establishment of the state, and the flag, which is the material representation of the state, have entirely different, negative meanings for the Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel. Recounting a ceremony celebrating Independence Day in his school, Shammas (1991) writes:

> Little did we know that the state whose flags these were was not ours. Come to think of it, nobody knew, not even the young teacher who had taught us the Arabic translation of the Israeli Declaration of Independence from a brand new Reader, which also had a relatively detailed biography of Herzl. We were told, through some outlandish reasoning, to learn those texts by heart, and to this day some sentences of the Declaration will occasionally pop up out of the blue inside my head. (p. 220)

On another occasion he observes (1983a), in passing: "It was on May 2, 1979, Independence Day—not an occasion of celebration for me, I regret to say—I was on my way to Tel Aviv" (p. 34).

As Shammas (1991) repeatedly demonstrates, the documents and artifacts, the discourse and practices that, to Israeli Jews, represent liberation and freedom are, for the Arab citizens, constant reminders of their subordinate, disenfranchised condition:

> Even according to the Arabic translation of the Declaration, the state was defined as a Jewish state, but nobody seemed to pay any attention to that fact.

> You see, we had the flags in our hands, so declarations did not matter, nor did the fact which we discovered later—that there was an utter rift between the signified and the signifier; those flags did not signify a single thing. (p. 220)

Shammas (1987b) represents the Palestinians as aliens living in exile in their own homeland. In a passage that rings familiar to students of European Jewish history, he writes:

> Transit permits were necessary for Arabs of the 50's if they wished to travel from place to place in their homeland which had now become "the homeland of the Jewish people." Transit permits were not given to Arabs (in Israel) to move around in the cultural spaces in which he had grown up. His separation from the existence from which he had been cut off, which had found its way to the refugee camps, was complete. This was also the case in regard to his separation from his spatial cultural surroundings. Until finally, he finds himself in an ongoing cultural quarantine. (p. 24)

Insofar as it defined itself as the state of the Jewish people, the

> state of Israel...did not even define itself by territory or space, but rather by time...the last link of sorts in the Jewish chain of time, the chain [that] will lead, as the Zionist movement believed, to a secular Geulah, salvation on earth. (Shammas 1988b, 9)

To further represent the disempowering effects of Israeli cultural hegemony, Shammas (1987b) uses the metaphor of playing the piano, which he compares with the arabesques of the Alhambra. In both instances, secondary designs emerge from the primary one, in variations on a theme, and in the end, they all come together in one arabesque:

> "How" he asks, "can the Arabs learn to play the piano with the right hand, while the left hand of the Jewish majority provides the dominant chords from which the transitions emerge and to which they return, whether or not they want to." (p. 26)

Referring to the Hebrew writer A. B. Yehoshua, Shammas (1987b) adds, "What he [Yehoshua] does not know is that his left hand is already a part of my Israeli experience, just as at least one finger on his right hand is one of my own fingers" (p. 26).

Linguistic Hegemony

Shammas, like many thinkers in this generation, sees the sphere of language as a site of ongoing cultural struggle. In the Ahad Haamian form of zionist discourse, the establishment of a Jewish state is depicted as the culmination

of a quest for a natural habitat, a natural space in which Jewish national culture could grow and flourish. Similarly, the establishment of Hebrew as the national language of Israel represents the renewal of the Jewish national spirit and the normalization of Jewish national cultural life.

To Israel's Palestinian Arabs, however, Hebrew symbolizes the cultural hegemony imposed by a conquering majority on the conquered minority: Portraying his father's first encounter with Hebrew as the official language of the new state, Shammas (1991) describes its marginalizing and exclusionary effects:

> My father, those days, was continuously and pensively struggling with the new [Hebrew] language that had invaded his small world and ours, imposing upon him confusion and a new type of illiteracy. He needed a special permit, like all the fathers of his generation, to move around in the scenes of his homeland which had turned overnight into "the homeland of the Jewish people"; but no such permits were available for moving around in the cultural scenes. (p. 217)

Lacking the linguistic means by which to navigate their way through the new Israeli culture, Palestinians like his father, whose families had dwelled in the land for generations, were suddenly transformed into outsiders, strangers, the Other.

However, it was not only people like his father who found themselves in an alien linguistic setting. Palestinian writers also experienced a sense of internal exile:

> Nowadays, to write in Arabic in Israel is a very lonely undertaking and a courageous one. It is lonely because the infrastructure is missing. The outline plan is blurred and the writers cannot come home again. The traditional house has given way to the modern villa, wherein everything is counterfeit. The walls are no longer built of stone—they are, at best, surfaced with it. The village society which remained in the country after the establishment of the State has not yet lost the sense of isolation. (Shammas 1991, 43)

Shammas (1989a) describes the success of zionism in establishing Hebrew as the Israeli national language as "the only triumph of Zionism":

> It is the only homeland that Zionism could ever offer to the Jewish people.... Hebrew is the only Israeli thing that Zionism managed to accomplish. The rest, albeit spectacular at times, is a moot, sometimes a very lethal one, grounded on plastic and kitsch. (p. 10)

Shammas, however, challenges the notion that Hebrew, the national language of Israel, is the exclusive possession of the Jewish people. Thus, in a dialogue between Israeli and American writers in Los Angeles in November 1988, Shammas (1989a) made the following highly provocative statement:

> What I'm trying to do—mulishly, it seems—is to un-Jew the Hebrew language (to use a Philip Roth verb), to make it more Israeli and less Jewish, thus bringing it back to its Semitic origins, to its Place. This is a parallel to what I think the state should be. As English is the language of those who speak it, so is Hebrew; and so the state should be the state of those who live in it, not of those who play with its destiny with a remote control in hand. (p. 10)[8]

While the 1967 War presented Palestinians in Israel with unforeseen opportunities for renewed contact with the wider Arab world, the resulting contact only served to intensify their experience of cultural emptiness:

> For twenty years the Arabs of Israel breathed with one lung, and the sudden exposure to contemporary Arab culture, which took place following the 1967 War, only intensified the feeling of suffocation. Under the circumstances, Arabic literature in Israel appears miraculous, impossible. The system of Arab education in Israel, at least in my time, produced tongueless people, more at home with 7th century Arab poetry than with that of the 20th century. These are people without a cultural past and without a future. There is only a makeshift present and an attenuated personality. The tongue has been cut out, like that of the old Arab in A. B. Yehoshua's "Facing the Forests." (Shammas 1983a, 43)

Kitsch

Shammas utilizes the concept of kitsch, which he borrows from the contemporary writer Milan Kundera, to represent the destructive effects of Israeli culture on the Palestinians. Kitsch, according to Shammas (1987b), "transforms the stupidity of accepted opinions to the language of beauty and feeling" (p. 24). In his eyes, "the hegemonic Israeli politics towards the Arabs, in all of its institutionalized forms, is based first and foremost on kitsch." According to Shammas (1983a) kitsch has "spread into the local councils of the Arab villages, and even sits in the Knesset" (p. 36).

The contemporary Arab house in Israel is "one of the many monuments [*Andratah*] that perpetuates the cultural oppression [*remisah*] of the third world by European kitsch" (Shammas 1987b, 24). This is reflected in the changing character of the walls of the Arab home. The classical (prezionist) Arab house was, to Shammas, an outstanding example of integration of function/aesthetic form. However, over three generations, under the impact of Western/zionist culture, the house became a monument to kitsch.

In "Kitsch 22," Shammas (1987b) describes the way in which the state imposed a new, alien culture on the Palestinian generation of 1948:

> One can say by way of metaphor, that the Jewish-zionist reality, encasing things in a wrapping of government [*shilton*], not only wrested the walls of the stone from his [the Arabs] possession, with the help of his neighbors, but also forced him to hang on the walls items that he never would have hung there on his own

> (a poster of Ben Gurion hung in my father's shoe repair shop) just as it forced him to carry a transit permit from place to place. (p. 24)

Similarly, "in the reality of cultural and political threat, in the atmosphere of military government," with the ground pulled out from under him, the son lost the sense of cultural security that his father had and was made to "stand naked and barren before all new challenges" (Shammas 1987b, 24). Thus, couples were led to decorate the walls of their house with all of the gifts they received for wedding presents, whether they liked them or not. This changed the character of the wall/house to one of kitsch:

> The grandchild, the third generation Palestinian, the child of the '67 war, is forbidden to build a "house in Israel." His only recourse is to take his grandfather's house and renovate it. The kitsch that this produces is a consequence of the fact that the "Arab is asked to come to terms with the new complex reality of the Jewish state, with the complex reality of living bi-lingually." (Shammas 1987b, 26)

The Critique of Israeli Political-Legal Discourse

To Shammas, the paradox of Israeli cultural discourse is imbricated in political and legal discourse. This paradox is manifest in two basic documents of Israeli political life, the Declaration of Independence and the Law of Return. On the one hand, the Declaration proclaims Israel to be "the Jewish state in Palestine." At the same time, the Declaration pledges that the state will

> promote the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants [and] will uphold the full social and political equality of all its citizens without distinction of race, creed or sex; will guarantee full freedom of conscience, worship, education and culture. (Mendes-Flohr and Reinharz 1995, 630)

To the Palestinian population, Shammas (1985b) insists, the Declaration, with its inherent paradox, is analogous to AIDS:

> The Declaration of Independence, which still has a good name as a liberal document (in the absence of a constitution), is, in my eyes, the AIDS of "a Jewish state in the land of Israel, the State of Israel." (p. 17)

Just as AIDS breaks down the immune system, so "the mononational state of Israel conceals, in its very definition, the seeds of catastrophe: the breakdown of the immunizing system of every state, that is, every democratic state" (Shammas 1985b, 17).

According to Shammas, the exclusionary discourse of the Declaration is further disseminated and institutionalized in the 1950 Israeli Law of Return, which legislates that

> any Jew who comes to Israel and after his arrival expresses his desire to settle there, is entitled to obtain an immigrant certificate. (Mendes-Flohr and Reinharz 1995, 633)

Commenting on this law in a debate in the Knesset on July 3, 1950, then–prime minister David Ben Gurion stated:

> The State of Israel is not a Jewish state merely because the majority of its inhabitants are Jews. It is a state for all the Jews wherever they may be and for every Jew who so desires. (Mendes-Flohr and Reinharz 1995, 631)

In Shammas' (1988c) view, the Law of Return is nothing short of racist:

> If we exclude its application to those Jews in the diaspora who are still persecuted because of who they are—an application that should not be excluded—the Israeli Law of Return is, in effect, a racist law. (p. 48)

The Law of Return entitles the American Jew to automatically claim citizenship, even though this Jew lacks the bond to the land that the Palestinian Arab living in Israel has. Accordingly, Shammas (1989a) characterizes the Law of Return as

> the Israeli-made pacemaker, installed in the chests of perfectly healthy Diaspora Jews. Just in case, the state of Israel being the ever hovering battery over an uncharted territory, undefined land. (p. 10)

Meanwhile, Palestinian Arabs who had lived in Israel prior to the establishment of the state but had fled or been driven off in the 1948 War were and are denied the right to return.[9]

To Shammas, an amendment to section 7A of Israel's Basic Laws passed by the Knesset in 1985 that disqualified parties espousing racism from participating in Israeli elections reproduced the racist discourse of the Law of Return by continuing to define Israel as "the State of the Jewish people." Thus, the inherent paradox of the Declaration continues to be disseminated throughout Israeli legal discourse.

As long as Israel remains a Jewish state and a state without a constitution, the situation of the Palestinian citizens is an impossible one. Lacking the protection of a constitution, they live at the mercy of the majority and are subject to the changing favors, whims, and moods of the majority: "The only protection that I can receive is the protection of a constitution, law, and justice" (Shammas 1983b, 34).

According to Shammas (1988b), Palestinians living in Israel are caught in a catch-22:

> The state of Israel demands that its Arab citizens take their citizenship seriously; but when they try to do so it promptly informs them that their participation in the state is merely social, and that for the political fulfillment of their identity, they must look somewhere else (i.e., to the Palestinian nation). When they do look elsewhere for their national identity, the state at once charges them with subversion; and needless to say—as subversives they cannot be accepted as Israelis. Back to square one. (p. 9)

Rather than advocate the immediate repeal of the law, Shammas has suggested that in 1998, on Israel's fiftieth birthday, a ten-year moratorium be instituted whereby "all Jews can immigrate to Israel under its protection." This would allow any Jew who is the victim of persecution because of that Jewishness to apply for refuge. In 2008, the law would be repealed and Israel will finally become a democratic state of all of its citizens.

One hears echoes of Shammas' critique in a recent lecture delivered by the Israeli Jewish political scientist Yaron Ezrahi (1993):

> The very insistence on the notion that Israel is a "Jewish state" despite its inherent ambiguities, rationalizes the role of the state as the promoter of a national Jewish culture. This role is clearly incompatible with notions of the relative neutrality of the state and the basic norms of democratic civil culture and their expressions in the educational system. In such a context, cultural forms not sanctioned within the established Jewish religious-national traditions in Israel are bound to appear "foreign" and to be at least partly rejected as inimical both to the values promoted by the Israeli educational system and to the policies of state sponsored cultural institutions. (p. 262)

Reconfiguring Israeli Identity

Shammas also targets the legal apparatus, the practices by means of which the dominant conception of Israeli identity is reproduced and disseminated. It is ironic, he argues, that on identity cards that are carried by all citizens there is no place that defines one's nationality as Israeli. Instead, the term Israeli comes under the category "citizenship," while under "nationality" is listed one's ethnic or religious community. The fact that there is no place for the category of Israeli national identity is yet another indication of the paradox that lies at the heart of the official definition of the state:

> My nationality according to the Israeli Ministry of the Interior is "Arab"; and my Israeli passport doesn't specify my nationality at all. Instead, it states on the front page that I'm an Israeli citizen. (Shammas 1995a, 25)

Accordingly, when filling out a disembarkation card prior to landing in France, Shammas (1995a), like all Palestinian Arabs with Israeli citizenship, is confronted with the problem of having to write "Arab" under "Nationality":

> If I wrote Arab under Nationalité, in the French form, I would be telling the truth according to the state that had issued my identity card and my passport, but then it may complicate things with the French authorities. On the other hand, writing "Israeli" under Nationalité is worse still, because in that case I would be telling a lie; my passport doesn't say that at all, and neither does my I.D. (p. 25)

To Shammas (1995b), the confusion in Israeli official discourse between nationality and citizenship is at the root of what is referred to in that discourse as "the Arab problem." This confusion is indicative of the ongoing problematic of a group identity that is based upon unclear distinctions between citizenship, nationality, and people:

> I do not know many people in the Middle East who can differentiate between "citizenship," "nation" [*leom*], "nationalism" [*leumiut*], "nationalism" [*leumanut*], "people" [*Am*], and "nation" [*umah*]. In Arabic, as in Hebrew, there is no equivalent for the English word nationality. (p. 30)

According to Shammas, the solution is to establish an "Israeli" identity that is determined by citizenship in the state rather than a historical link to a particular ethnic, religious, or national group.

SHAMMAS AND HIS JEWISH CRITICS: A. B. YEHOSHUA AND SAMI MIKHAEL

Not surprisingly, Shammas' arguments have elicited strong responses from Israeli critics. Among the most articulate and forceful of these critics is author and social critic A. B. Yehoshua, a leading voice of the Israeli left. In a widely cited statement in the left wing journal *Politika*, Yehoshua (1985) leveled the following challenge to Shammas:

> If you want your full identity, if you want to live in a state with a Palestinian character [*Ishiut*], an original Palestinian culture, arise, take your belongings [*metaltelekhah*], and move one hundred meters east, to the independent Palestinian state that will exist alongside Israel. (p. 11)

Acknowledging that he and Shammas are in conflict over the nature of Israeli identity, Yehoshua argues that Israel is a Jewish state in the same way that Spain is a Spanish state. Seen in this light, Israeliness is not only citi-

zenship but an essence that can be quantified or measured. What Yehoshua has said to Shammas, he would also say to Jewish settlers living in territories that have been or will be returned to Palestinian authority:

> Anton Shammas wants to place upon me his dual identity [Palestinian and Israeli] (which for him is a source of richness). And I refuse. There are enough Jews in the world with dual identity, and I do not want to be of dual identity [Jewish and Israeli] here. (Yehoshua 1986, 23)

Yehoshua criticizes Shammas for not speaking out against Arab/Palestinian acts of terror. For the Israeli left not to lose its moral force in its debate with the right, it must continuously demand of the Arabs, particularly the Palestinians, "Where are your Arie Eliav's? Your Shalom Akshav (Peace Now)?" (Yehoshua 1986, 22).

In response, Shammas argued that just as he rejects the notion of a Jewish state, he likewise rejects the notion of a Palestinian state. What he advocates is a state called Palestine, whose citizens will be Palestinians, alongside a state called Israel, whose citizens are Israelis. Taking issue with Yehoshua's argument that just as Spain is a Spanish state, Israel is a Jewish state, Shammas (1986b) argues, "Israel is an Israeli state in the same way that Spain is a Spanish state" (p. 44):

> In spite of everything I have said, if time passes and Yehoshua still insists that it is better that I seek my full identity elsewhere, I shall leave my land and my birthplace. For if Yehoshua prefers to establish a state together with his brethren from the Jewish terrorist organization, may he and they be healthy. (p. 45)

The debate between Yehoshua and Shammas over the limits of Israeli identity was resumed six years later in 1992, when Shammas, who had since moved to the United States, returned to Israel for a visit, and he and liberal Israeli writer David Grossman met with Yehoshua at the latter's home on Mt. Carmel. The confrontation, described at length in Grossman's book *Sleeping on a Wire* (1993), brings to the surface in a particularly lucid way the ongoing points of difference that separate Yehoshua and Shammas:

> "My problem and debate with Anton are not about equality, but about identity. Because as a national minority in an Israeli state..."
>
> "What's an Israeli state?" Shammas interrupted him. "There's no such thing!"
>
> "What do you mean there's no such thing?... For me, 'Israeli' is the authentic, complete, and consummate word for the concept 'Jewish.' Israeliness is the total, perfect, and original Judaism, one that should provide answers in all areas of life." (pp. 253–254)

To which Shammas responded: "How can you want to make me a partner in an Israeli identity, if Israel is the totality of Judaism?" (p. 272).

Yehoshua compared Shammas to a Pakistani who comes to England with a British passport and insists on being a partner in the creation of the British nationality, seeking to introduce Pakistani, Muslim symbols and languages. In response, Shammas argued:

> "Buli, the minute a man like you does not understand the basic difference between the Pakistani who comes to England and the Galilean who has been in Fasuta for untold generations, then what do you want us to talk about?"(p. 254)

When Yeshoshua argues that to separate Israeli and Jewish is like trying to separate France from Frenchness, Shammas replies:

> "France and Frenchness come from the same root, but Judaism and Israeliness is a different matter. That's why I advocate the de-Judaization and de-Zionization of Israel...I'm asking you for a new definition of the word 'Israeli,' so that it will include me as well, a definition in territorial terms that you distort, because you're looking at it from the Jewish point of view." (p. 255)

Shammas accepts the notion that as a state in which the majority is Jewish, Israel has the right to impose an educational system that reflects the composition of the population:

> "These are legitimate political power struggles as part of the game of democracy. But the minute you tell me that not only is the country's ambience Jewish, but also its very character as a national state; the minute the law faculty at Tel Aviv university drafts a constitution for Israel that opens with the sentence 'Israel is the eternal state of the Jewish people'; the minute the Knesset inserts a racist definition into its amendment of the Knesset basic law, as it did in 1985, then I've got a problem with you, because you exclude me from that definition." (p. 261)

One can read the debate between Shammas and Yehoshua as one of conflicting interpretations of culture and cultural identity.[10] On the one hand, in contrast to Yehoshua's apparently essentialistic definition of Israeli identity, Shammas' antiessentialistic position resembles the recent nonessentialistic, strongly contested conceptions of identity that have been espoused by writers such as postcolonial critics Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, cultural critic Stuart Hall, and feminist critic Judith Butler. In their writings, and in the writings of others in the field of cultural studies, cultural identity is viewed as a dynamic process that can best be understood in relation to

the cultural Others over and against which a group defines itself.[11] As articulated by Jacques Derrida (1984):

> No culture is closed in on itself, especially in our own times when the impact of European civilization is so all-pervasive. Similarly, what we call the deconstruction of our own Western culture is aided and abetted by the fact that Europe has always registered the impact of heterogeneous, non-European influences. Because it has always been thus exposed to, and shadowed by, its other, it has been compelled to question itself. Every culture is haunted by its other. (p. 116)[12]

This position blurs the sharp boundaries between insiders and outsiders, natives and foreigners, we and they. Instead, emphasizing the mutual impact of colonizing and colonized, dominant and subordinate, hegemonic and minority cultures on one another, they have urged us to be simultaneously attuned both to voices "within" and voices "without."

At the same time, Shammas (1995a) reads identity in terms of power: "Ultimately we are dealing with the question of identity; the identity which is given to us by those who have the power to do so" (p. 24). Shammas thus represents Israeli culture and identity as a contested, power-ridden set of discourses and practices through which meaning is produced, disseminated, and legitimated.

Shammas effectively depicts the cultural violence with which the dominant Israeli culture treats Palestinians who are Israeli citizens. He thus poses a unique challenge to those on the Jewish Israeli left like Yehoshua, who frame the problems of Palestinians in Israel solely in the discourse of legal rights and political equality. While the problems of political and economic inequality are complex and challenging, to the liberal Israeli they can be largely resolved through legal and political reforms. However, if, as Shammas argues, the basic conflicts are embedded in the dominant Israeli discourse and practices, then political and social reforms are not adequate. To achieve the desired goal as understood by Shammas, it would be necessary to change the "character" of the society by revising the prevailing cultural discourse and the practices related to it. As Shammas repeatedly argues, this entails a far-reaching revision of the dominant notion of Israel as a Jewish state and Israeli culture as basically Jewish culture, a revision that, like Yehoshua, most Jewish Israelis would oppose.

Sami Mikhael, an Israeli Jew originally from Iraq, has taken up Shammas' challenge. Mikhael, a novelist, has been a leading critic of Israel's marginalization or exclusion of Jews of Middle Eastern origin, the so-called Mizrahi Jews. However, pointing to the case of Lebanon as an example of a failed attempt at democracy in the Middle East, Mikhael (1986) states his opposition to making Israel a democratic, as opposed to a Jewish, state:

> I am willing to fight shoulder to shoulder with him [Shammas] against every injustice against the Arab minority. But, no more than that. I am willing to gamble my personal fate, but not my national fate. (p. 17)

While empathizing with Shammas' suffering, Mikhael (1986), like Yehoshua, refuses to contemplate a situation that would result in Israeli Jews becoming a minority:

> Many Jews from every camp understand his pain and identify with his suffering as a member of a minority. Many are ready to pay a price in order to make it easer for him but not to the point where they make themselves into a minority. (p. 17)

In a bristling reply to Mikhael, Shammas (1986d) again summarizes his position: (1) After the establishment of the state of Palestine, Israel, the state of the Jewish people, should be declared the state of Israel, "medinat Yisrael." (2) In the box reserved for "nationality" [*leom*] on both Shammas' and Mikhael's Israeli identity card, the word "Israeli" should be written:

> What, essentially, is Israeli identity? In my view, Israeli identity is the identity of a citizen of Israel who asks of the Ministry of the Interior that the word "Israeli" be written in the box marked "nationality" on his identification certificate. (Shammas 1987c, 27)

Shammas (1987c) then states the following additional propositions:

> 1) Zionism, as a national movement, ended its function with the establishment of the state; 2) Everyone living within the green line who is a citizen of the state of Israel should be defined as an "Israeli." 3) The Law of Return...is the strictest kind of racist law [*lemehadrin*]. One generation is sufficient time for a mature man to decide if he will immigrate to Israel or not. And a situation in which an individual, always a Jew, decides whether or not to adopt the state as his home is absurd. The time has come to transform the law of return into a regular immigration law, as in the Western states (secular and democratic!). The state will have the authority to decide who may be called Israeli, but Israeliness should no longer be automatic or self-understood [*muvan meelov*]; 4) All Israelis should be equal with regard to rights and responsibilities; 5) Currently, the state of Israel is not democratic, even for Jews (as it was prior to 1967); occupation and democracy can only exist in tandem in a fountain by Agam; 6) All of the above can come about only when the state of Israel returns to its legitimate boundaries. Terribly simple! (p. 27)

He then concludes,

> If we have fumbled the chance for "we, the members of the Israeli nation," should we then wait, with Levantine patience, for the first Jew to proclaim at the head of the camp, in hope that the entire camp will follow after him: "Zionism is dead, long live the Israeli nation."(p. 27)

With the establishment of a Palestinian state, the Palestinian citizens of Israel who choose to remain in Israel will be confronted with the following dilemma:

> If this is the national homeland of the Jewish people, what are you—Palestinian Arabs whom we forgot to drive out in 1948—doing here? Are you *benei bayit*? Renters on a monthly basis? Protected renters [*dayarim muganim*]? Renters with key money? Do you have a document of ownership? [*yesh lakhem tabu*]? Allah knows! (Shammas 1989b, 25)

Shammas has thus problematized the prevailing zionist conception of Israel as a Jewish state, a state belonging to the Jewish people worldwide. Calling into question the hegemonic notions of Israeli identity and culture, he has effectively revealed the contradiction between the claim of the state to be democratic and the claim of the state to be Jewish, a motif that, as mentioned earlier, recurs in the ongoing debate over postzionism and in the writings of particular groups of Israeli social scientists. Shammas' name rarely if ever is introduced into the debates over postzionism. Nonetheless, as I have argued, his writings problematize zionist discourse in general and the zionist definition of the state of Israel far more effectively that those of Jewish critics.

As Homi Bhabha reminds us, there is an inherent tension between the official representations of the nation and the everyday life of the people. Distinguishing between official, pedagogical discourse and practices and the ways in which national life is enacted in daily practice, Bhabha helps us understand the ways in which the presence of Palestinian Arabs, like other minority populations, subverts efforts to represent the state and its culture as homogeneous. Differentiating between "the people" as represented in official nationalist or state discourse and "the people" as enacted in the course of everyday practice, Bhabha problematizes the concept of "the people," conventionally taken to be the foundation, core, or essence of the nation.

Far from being a natural entity, a people is the product of complex cultural and social processes. In Bhabha's (1994) terms, the people, like the nation, must be written:

> The scraps, patches, and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a national culture, while the very act of the narrative performance

> interpellates a growing circle of national subjects. In the production of the nation as narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative. It is through this process of splitting that the conceptual ambivalence of modern society becomes the site of writing the nation. (pp. 145–46)

Bhabha (1994) also stresses the liminality of the nation. On the one hand, a nation is the object/subject of a national narrative grounded in historical past. At the same time, it is the product of the everyday performance by those belonging to the nation that constantly rubs against the grain of that narrative. Thus, in all nations, the people are the site of ongoing conflict:

> The people are neither the beginning nor the end of national narrative; they represent the cutting edge between the totalizing powers of the "social" as homogeneous, consensual community, and the forces that signify the more specific address to contentious, unequal interests and identities within the population. (p. 146)

As Shammas has shown us, the existence of a large population of Palestinians renders problematic the zionist premise that Israeli identity, Israeli culture, and the Israeli people are exclusively Jewish.

EMILE HABIBY: UNMASKING THE ZIONIST APPARATUS

In contrast to Shammas, Emile Habiby (1922–1996) was actively engaged in Israeli political life for most of his career. A major figure in the Israeli Communist Party since the early 1940s, he served as its representative in the Knesset for nineteen years (1953–1972). Hoping to improve conditions of Palestinians in Israel through political means, he subordinated his artistic career to his political activities. In the end, however, Habiby acknowledged that his political activities failed to yield the sought-after results. Realizing the futility of trying to juggle a political career and writing, he abandoned politics.

In his last novel, *Sarayah* (1993), Habiby describes his inner conflict:

> The true identity of Sarayah was not revealed to me until the final pages. I was amazed [*nidhamti*], as was a poet friend who read the manuscript, by the truth that was revealed to me. But I have not allowed myself to hide it, although it contradicts the path I have chosen [based on] my faith that it is both possible and beneficial "to carry two watermelons with one hand, actively engaging in politics and in literature." (p. 9)[13]