

Moving From East to East: Coding Arabic Place Names in Iraqi Jewish Hebrew Fiction

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Abstract

In the late 1950s, as part of a general mass immigration from Arab countries, many Iraqi Jews left or had to leave Iraq for Israel. In their encounter with a new society where Hebrew is the national language, most Iraqi Jewish authors found it impossible to continue writing in Arabic and had to face the literary challenge of switching to another tongue in order to be read.

Clashes between origins and new cultures are likely to occur when geographical contexts change. In this regard, and unlike the typical emigration context when people move from east to west, moving from east to east exemplifies the experience of two Jewish authors, Shimon Ballas (b. Baghdad, 1930) and Eli Amir (b. Baghdad, 1937) alike. It is this complex situation that provides the backdrop to this study.

Shimon Ballas and Eli Amir employ Arabic place names associated with Baghdad and/or Iraq in different ways in their Hebrew texts. This paper investigates the style of using Arabic place names in four Hebrew novels written by the two authors. The study argues that the place names brought by immigrant authors from their country of origin are not just names, but rather serve as codes and tools to transfer history, culture and traditions through a very minimal use of the mother tongue within literary texts, creating a sort of ‘bilingual’ final product.

Keywords: Migrant literature; Place names; Code-switching; Iraqi Jewish authors; Arabic; Hebrew

1 Introduction

‘I did not go so far from the world in which I grew up. I only moved from one country to another within the same region that speaks Arabic. Because of this, I am also not like other immigrant writers coming from Europe and America to Israel. I did not cross the sea to get here. Arabic is the language of the region and it is the second official language in Israel as well.’ (Ballas, 2009: 65)

This quotation intertwines representations of Ballas’ inner conflict about the act of changing his location at the beginning of his literary career in Israel. It also sheds light on Ballas’ sociolinguistic background, which is demonstrated by his internal struggles between his mother tongue, i.e. Arabic, and the adopted language of his new land, i.e. Hebrew.

Eli Amir also touches on the same issue concerning the geographical location of Israel between east and west, as the following conversation in Amir’s novel confirms. In a clever way, Amir throws light on the debate between Nuri (a newly immigrated Iraqi adult in Israel), Zavik, (one of the Ashkenazi¹ members of the kibbutz²) and Bozoglu (a fresh immigrant Jew from Morocco) about the definition of backward people and geographical boundaries:

Zavik to Nuri: ‘You still have a lot to learn, primitive.’

‘What does primitive mean, sir member of the kibbutz?’ asked Bozoglu.

Zavik: ‘Exactly what you are: Asiatic.’

‘And I thought that Israel was [located in] Asia.’ Bozoglu celebrates his first win.

(Amir, 1983: 45–46)

Zavik, the Ashkenazi, describes Nuri as a primitive person simply because he comes from Asia. Yet Bozoglu, a Moroccan adult and one of Nuri’s friends in the kibbutz, reminds

Zavik that Israel is also located in Asia. Thus, the conversation between the three men is an attempt to illustrate how Israel belongs to Asia, geographically speaking, and to the Middle East. In addition, it reflects the paradox between geographical location and cultural segmentation in eastern and western cultures.

Shimon Ballas (b. Baghdad, 1930) and Eli Amir (b. Baghdad, 1937) emigrated from Iraq to Israel during the mass immigration of Jews from the Middle East and North Africa in the 1950s. Having lived in Iraq during their childhood and youth, Ballas and Amir's mother tongue is Arabic. When they arrived in Israel, where Hebrew was in the process of becoming the dominant language, they had to learn Hebrew. Although, they had studied the language in Jewish schools in Iraq, they were not able to communicate with veteran Jews; the modern revived spoken Hebrew in Israel at the time was different from what Iraqi Jews had been taught in Jewish schools before immigrating to Israel. Therefore, the two authors had to acquire Hebrew as a second language in Israel. They both found it difficult to write in Arabic and they both published many novels in Hebrew. Yet Arabic still appears in their literary works.

This paper explores the experience of writing in the non-mother tongue and the way in which place names from the country of origin influence and stylize the literary works of Iraqi Jewish authors as bilingual immigrants. The paper deals principally with the two authors and some of their Hebrew novels regarding the use of place names from their motherland in literary works written in the non-mother tongue. The novels were chosen because they feature Israel and Iraq in the events they describe. Two of the novels are set in Iraq (Amir, 1992; Ballas, 1991), while two other novels depict events in Israel (Amir, 1983;

Ballas, 1964). This paper only analyses the use of place names that have contextual meanings and denotations in the texts. It investigates how each author employs them and how the style of using Arabic place names differs between the two authors. All Arabic place names in the novels are written in Hebrew script.

2 The Novels between Iraq and Israel

When immigrants leave for a new country, they must adhere to certain policies if they are to be integrated in the new society. The clash between the original and the new culture is more likely to occur when the geographical territories are detached. Unlike the typical emigrational context when people move from east to west, it is the experience of moving from east to east that signifies the episodes for both Shimon Ballas and Eli Amir.

Although the surrounding environment in the aftermath of the establishment of Israel was familiar to the new Iraqi-born emigrants in terms of climate and geography, the cultural conflict between the newcomers and the ‘veterans’, between east and ‘west’ still appears in the themes in their early Hebrew manuscripts. The impact of this action on their writing merits attention. The following section focuses on the two authors and the role of place in general in the context of their early Hebrew texts.

The clash between the newcomers and the new land appears in diverse ways in the first Hebrew works by the Iraqi Jewish authors. Accordingly, the way in which they introduce their protagonists to modern Hebrew literature –as a wave of rebellion against the place and its new language and culture– is not surprising. Shimon Ballas’ novel, entitled *Hama’bara*³ (The Transit Camp, 1964) follows the story of some Iraqi Jews who encounter hardships

and difficulties in the Oriya transit camp with regard to work, food, medical care and more. The main character in the novel is Yusuf Shabi, an intellectual Iraqi Jewish adult who takes responsibility for the household, which contains his mother and his brother Said, instead of his absent father. Most of the events portrayed by Ballas occur within the sphere of the transit camp. Within this space, major components shape the *Ma'bara* and add distinction to it. One example, the Al-Nasr Café, whose Arabic name means 'the victory' and is the main location where the characters meet, will be discussed below because of its connection with the context of language and place.

Ballas (1991) chose Baghdad as the site for the events in his novel *ve-hu aher* (The Other One), which is based on the autobiography of Ahmed Nasim Sosa (1900-1982),⁴ an Iraqi Jew who converted to Islam. Aharon Sawsan, the main character in the novel, is an Iraqi Jew born in 1902, the junior among his three sisters and one brother. His father, Moshe Sawsan, sent him to Talmud Torah to receive religious education at the age of four.

The place, however, is more extensive in Eli Amir's novel *Tarnegol kapparot* (Scapegoat, 1983). Unlike Ballas, Amir has another image of the place: It is not only the transit camp that provides the setting for Amir's novel; the places in the work also include the kibbutz, a very important institution in Israel associated with the socialist and Zionist identity of the state. Nuri, the protagonist of the novel, narrates his experience in the ideal organization, *Kiryat Oranim*, his search for self-identity in the new land and the inner conflict between the world of the kibbutz with its all cultural features –including secularism, socialism and Zionism– in contrast to the world of the *Ma'bara* with its religion, family connections and cultural heritage all associated with Baghdad.

The *Ma'bara* in Amir's work serves as a place that links Nuri to his past in Iraq. His religious parents live in the *Ma'bara* and not in the kibbutz and the Jewish sacraments are still preserved in the family tradition. In a very important scene in the novel, Nuri lies to his parents and brings them a chicken from the kibbutz that has not been slaughtered in conformance with kosher regulations for Yom Kippur. His parents are upset and they ascribe the change in Nuri's behaviour to the influence of the kibbutz. This scene featuring Nuri emphasizes the conflict between life on the kibbutz and life in the *Ma'bara*.

Amir (1992) builds his novel *Mafriah ha-yonim* (Farewell Baghdad) on the story of the pre-immigration life of Iraqi Jews. Kabi, the novel's narrator, experiences the events as an observer and also as a hero in Baghdad, from the perspective of time and biography. The young Kabi tells his family's story in Iraq just before the immigration to Israel and describes his family's feelings of fear because of the conflict between the Arabs and Jews during and after 1948-1951. The narrator not only tells his family's story, but the stories of many other Iraqi Jews as well. The novel begins with the arrest of Hezkel, Kabi's uncle – who was accused by hiding weapons and supporting the Zionist movement in Iraq – by the Iraqi police. The narrator follows the story of the efforts made by the Jewish family to obtain Hezkel's release from prison. The novel ends in Israel and describes the first encounter between Kabi and his family and the new land.

3 Coding Arabic Places in Iraqi Jewish Fiction

3.1 *Place names and bilingualism in literature*

It can be argued that it is more appropriate to describe a country or territory by means of its native language, which is why the names of streets, historical buildings and squares etc. are more likely to be understood when they are written in the language of the origin: 'Place names in a native language are reservoirs of local folklore that can be read by a local community' (Nic Craith, 2012: 51). This claim applies not only to the writing process, but also to the way in which these names are perceived by the reader.

Writing memories in a language other than the mother tongue may challenge the author in terms of translating some cultural idioms into the target language: 'Writing about one's earliest memories against the mother tongue or against the tongue in which they occurred involves a process of reassessment and rewriting' (Miletić, 2008: 32). Yet, reassessment or rewriting is not that easy when it comes to place names, character names and the like, where more than one semiotic level shapes the historical and cultural dimensions they hold. Names also are connected to social relations from the homeland and have their own influence. As Haugen (1953: 192) explains, 'Names are often fraught with emotional overtones which influence men's lives, perhaps unduly. In any case they are keys to such important social institutions as the family and the neighbourhood'. Therefore, they are not that easy to understand for a reader who does not share the same cultural background as the bilingual author. They enable him to understand the value and local flavour of such place names concerning their connection to the text.

This, perhaps, is the case with Sami Michael, a well-known Iraqi Jewish author who writes in Hebrew, when he begrudges such authors writing only in their mother tongue: ‘I envy those writers who experience their infancy, kindergarten years, first love and its disappointments, writing their first literary lines and summing up magnum opus in the same country, in the same language, in the same culture’ (Michael, 1984: 23). Ballas (2009: 75) speaks of his feelings about using Arabic in his writing: ‘At the time, I was already impervious to applying Arabic syntax to Hebrew, and if there is any interference here and there in the syntactic structure, it is mostly intended’. With regard to the way Hebrew and Arabic merge in his novel *Mafriah ha-yonim* (Farewell Baghdad, 1992), Amir says: ‘When writing this Hebrew novel, I imagined myself listening to my father telling it to me in Arabic’ (Snir, 2005: 338).

These three statements from Michael, Ballas and Amir confirm the longing to use Arabic while reflecting on the intention and the consciousness of playing with Arabic as a literary device within the Hebrew texts. However, they contravene the statements in the above-mentioned process of rewriting and reassessment, which leads Alcalay (1993: 244) to interpret the works of Iraqi Jewish authors thus:

Their work is often hard to place in the Israeli context since it seems much more intimately related – in terms of narrative structure, subject matter, and intentional trajectory – to modern Arabic, North African francophone, African-American, or contemporary ‘Third World’ novels than the last vestiges of ‘neomodern’ trends still prevalent among many of their own Israeli contemporaries.

3.2 Place names in the Hebrew novels

In his study of Ballas's *ve-hu-aħer* (The Other One) (1991) and Michael's *Hofen shel 'Arfal* (A Handful of Fog) (1979), Zeidel (2009) raises the question of whether these two novels, both published in Israel and written in Hebrew, are Iraqi or Israeli. He uses the content of the novels as well as the themes and the language to argue that these texts should be further clarified by the two authors if they are to be understood by non-Iraqi readers. It is true that the authors did not use techniques like footnotes to explain their cultural idioms. Neither did they write about other themes other than 'Iraqiness' or use the other methods that Zeidel (2009: 231) mentions in his study. However, even if the authors did try to make their text more accessible for a non-Iraqi readership in Israel, it might not solve the complications in some spots in the texts that deal with the deep historical and cultural dimensions these place names hold. These cultural patterns, which are difficult to translate, most likely use code-switching (often used by bilingual authors creating or rewriting works in a second language). The use of Arabic place names by the two authors introduces the reader to Iraqi literary images that are probably not completely understood without knowledge of the local flavour or the cultural background. This is why Ballas includes some comments on some of the characters' names in his novel *Ha-Ma'bara* (1964: 23,84,85,122).

Conversely, the picture and the actual denotation of the names that are not translated or explained by the author still seem to be indistinct due to the use of code-switching. This is the case with the term *Karakhanat Baghdad* in Eli Amir's novel. The use of Baghdadi places with local and/or historical connotations makes the reader who is outside the

Baghdadi dialectical context ask: What is Karakhana and what is the link to Baghdad and Iraq and any Jews in Iraq? The question: ‘what is this here, *Karakhana* of Baghdad?’ (Amir, 1983: 58) is a disapproving question asked by Florelantin’s mother. The conservative Iraqi mother is angry about the way Nira is dressed and she expresses her annoyance by describing the kibbutz as ‘*Karakhant Baghdad*’⁵, which means Brothel of Baghdad. These examples, among others, introduce the reader to typical Iraqi narratives. Although they are merely names in an utterance, they create linkages between the author and a special group of readers, those who share the same cultural, linguistic and geographical background. The use of this kind of Arabic in the four novels is considerable and can present a challenge for the Israeli reader who does not share the same linguistic and cultural background, or the ‘outsider reader’. The ‘insider reader’ (here an Iraqi Jew who has access to both Iraqi and Israeli linguistic and cultural backgrounds), on the other hand, can easily access not only the places, but also the historical, metaphoric and literary effects associated with such places.

Not only are places associated with Iraq or ‘thereness’; a simulation of the place may be transferred to Israel. In his novel *Ha-Ma’bara*, Ballas uses the café with the Arabic name *Al-Nasr*⁶ as the point where most of the Iraqi immigrants in the transit camp spend their time, take their decisions, listen to Iraqi and Arab music on the radio, drink Iraqi tea and, of course, speak Arabic. Moreover, the story begins and ends in *Al-Nasr*. This place, which echoes a similar place in Baghdad, *Bab-el-aja* and also has the same name (Ballas, 1964: 8), binds the Iraqis in the novel to special place. *Al-Nasr* is not just a place; it is a point where two places exist, Iraq and Israel. Geographically, the story follows the life of an Iraqi

Jewish immigrant group in an Israeli transit camps during the 1950s. On the other hand, the protagonists, the characters, the language of most of the conversations and the narrative generally connect with Iraqis. The *Ma'bara* is described by one of the characters as 'the second Babylon' (Ballas, 1964: 51). Similarly, the *Al-Nasr* café serves as a third place, belonging neither to here nor there. It is much closer to Berg's depiction of the transit camp in Michael's novel *Shavim ve-shavim yoter*: 'The camp is a place of transition, a liminal space in which the newcomers are neither here nor there (2005: 180).'

The same holds true for Nuri, the protagonist in the *Tarnegol Kapparat* (Scapegoat) (Amir, 1983). The *Ma'bara* acts as an in-between place between Israel (kibbutz Oranim) and Baghdad. The inner conflict between east and west reaches its peak with Nuri, who is lost between two places, two cultures and two types of music. On the one hand, he wants to adapt to western music and mimic the Ashkenazim, while on the other, he cannot stop listening to the oriental musical instrument, the 'Oud, played by his Iraqi friend Masul in the kibbutz. This emotional confession leads him to think about leaving the kibbutz for the *Ma'bara* and then for Baghdad (Amir, 1983: 121).

The coding of place names in Amir's novel (1992) is notable. The author many times tries to bring the outsider reader closer to the denotation of Arabic place names employed in his text. He does this by using glossing and contextual clarification of the historical and cultural aspects associated with the Iraqi places used in his text, e.g.: 'He went to *Bab-Alsheikh*, to the damned Muslim neighbourhood.' (1992: 67) The author sees that the Arab code that refers to *Bab-Alsheikh* needs to be clarified and illustrated for the outsider reader and this is why some of place names are encoded in the Hebrew texts. Other examples of

this technique include: ‘the *Karakhana* passage, the passage of brothels’. (1992: 62, 235), ‘In *Share’ Al-Rashed*, the main street’ (1992: 47), ‘*Suk henuni*, the Jewish market’ (1992: 18) and ‘*Suk Al-Shorja*, the Muslim market close to our neighbourhood’ (1992: 301).

Translation and glossing are not the only strategies that Amir uses in his texts with Arabic place names, he also applies code-switching, e.g. ‘within half an hour he will cross *Shat Al-’Arab*’ (1992: 8). Here the author does not explain *Shat-Al-’arab*, (the word-for-word translation means the Arab shore, referring to the Persian Gulf). Eli Amir neither translates it into Hebrew in the text nor glosses its meaning in the footnote. In this respect, the Arabic name here serves as a code for the outsider reader.

Arabic place names are also used as a metaphor when the lack of cultural background about the place and its historical connotation would make an outsider reader unable to appreciate the metaphoric image that the author wants to present in his text, as in the following example:

‘Haron,’ he said while shaking me, ‘if you go up to the tower of *Sug Al-ghazl* (the *Al-ghazl* market) and shout for days and nights, saying that you have converted to Islam just because of your love for Mohamed’s nation, this does not also help you’.
(Ballas, 1991: 94)

In this conversation, Kazim, an Iraqi Jew in Baghdad, is not convinced that Haron, the narrator of Ballas novel (1991) has converted to Islam motivated by love for the religion and its people. In order to convey this opinion, Kazim uses an Iraqi metaphor. The metaphor refers to a famous place in Baghdad at the time, *Sug Al-ghazl*.⁷ This code

constitutes the main part of the metaphor, yet its historical and cultural values are hard to translate into Hebrew for the outsider reader.

4 Conclusion

Bilingual authors bring to their texts –especially texts dealing with memories of the place of origin– place names and characters names. Yet they are not just names; in some cases they serve as tools to transfer history, culture and traditions through the minimal use of the mother tongue in a literary text written in a second language. This applies to the Iraqi Jewish authors Shimon Ballas and Eli Amir. The connection to Arabic places associated with the homeland in Iraq not only stylizes their Hebrew works, but also at times serves as a code that requires a certain type of reader who shares the same linguistic, landscape and cultural patterns with the authors. In this regard, the study divides the readers of such works into insiders and outsiders according to the reader’s cultural and linguistic background.

5 Notes

1. Hebrew lexical item to refer to the Jews of European origin. Jews from oriental or eastern origin, on the other hand, are called *Mizrahim*.
2. ‘Kibbutz’ (Hebrew: קיבוץ) is a Hebrew word for Jewish settlements established in Palestine before 1948 and after the establishment of Israel. These settlements are based on communal principles. The main activity in the kibbutz is agriculture.
3. The *Ma’bara* (Hebrew: מעברה) was a transit camp for new Jewish refugees in Israel during the 1950s. The *Ma’abarot* (plural) were used as absorption camps where newcomers, mainly those arriving in Israel during the mass immigration of the Jews

from Arab lands, were accommodated. Many Jews who inhabited these transit camps complained about the hardships and bad conditions they encountered during their absorption process after immigrating to Israel.

4. A historian and engineer, born in Iraq in 1900 who graduated from Colorado College in civil engineering in 1924. He obtained his PhD degree from the USA in 1930. After finishing his studies there, he returned to Iraq to do civil work. His publications include more than 100 books and papers.
5. *Karakhane* is a Turkish term used during the Ottoman empire to refer to a brothel. Many Arabs borrowed it and it is still used in some Arabic dialects.
6. An Arabic name written on a café in the Oriya transit camp in the *Ma'barah* novel.
7. An ancient and very famous market in Baghdad held every Friday, famous for selling birds.

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