

## Identity and Gender in the Poetry of Amira Hess

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### I. "As if the umbilical cord of your soul had been severed"

Amira Hess was born in 1943 in Baghdad, and emigrated with her family in 1951 from Iraq to the Yokneam transit camp in Israel. Next, her family moved to Mazmil/Kiryat Yovel, in Jerusalem. She completed her studies at the Seligsberg Vocational School, and worked as a secretary in the Government Press Office of the Foreign Ministry's and for a brief period as a Hebrew teacher in East Jerusalem. Hess began publishing poetry relatively late in life; her first book was published when she was forty-one years old. She currently resides in Jerusalem, in Beit Hakerem. One of the formative experiences of Hess's poetry is immigration, the moment she testifies to in her poem that begins "Now darkness":

**"I was stolen, baby in a soft *abaya*, into the jaws of some kind of time"**

(*Veyareah*, 14).<sup>1</sup> The move is described in these lines as a theft that takes the poet from the situation of tenderness, in which as a baby she is swathed in Arab garb, to a different time, which is depicted through the frightening image of jaws, a time when "**darkness/digs darkness**" and "**the gardens and houses are locked**" (ibid.).

Amira Hess has published six volumes of poetry so far: *Veyareah Notef Shigaon* (And the Moon is Dripping Madness) (1984, Am Oved), *Shnei Susim Al Kav Haor* (Two Horses by the Light Line) (1987, Am Oved); *Bole'a Hainformatzia* (The Information Eater) (1993, Helicon), *Yovel* (Jubilee) (1998, Carmel), *Ayn Isha Mamash Beyisrael* (There is no Real Woman in Israel) (2003, Keter), and *Habulemia Shel haneshama* (The Bulimia of the Soul) (2007, Helicon). Despite the fact that she produced prolific and fascinating writing for almost thirty years, won various awards, and published her books with major publishing houses, no comprehensive academic study has addressed the fundamental issues in the poetry Amira Hess, and she has been mentioned only in references in broad-based studies about others, press interviews, and reviews in the daily press and journals, which appeared mainly with the publication of her books.

Amira Hess was part of the flowering of Israeli women's poetry, which took place in the nineteen eighties and tended toward the ambiguity and enigma prevalent in women's poetry since Yona Wallach. When Hess embarked on her poetic path, Yona Wallach was a central figure in the world of poetry. The circle of Jerusalem women's poets of which Amira Hess was a part in the early nineteen eighties related to Wallach as their primary poetic model. Like Yona Wallach,

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<sup>1</sup> Hereinafter, all quotations from Amira Hess's poems will be accompanied by the first word in the title of the book from which they are taken and the page number. Line breaks will be indicated by a single slash, while a double slash will indicate an empty line.

Amira Hess breaks sentence structure and involves different levels of language in her poetry, but it seems that many more layers of the Hebrew language are accessible to her than had been to Wallach, in addition to a mixture of high and low language, the insertion of foreign vocabulary, mainly concepts from psychology and mysticism, and the use of slang and "Englishisms." Hess's language is also open to the language of the sages, which does not surrender to the laws of modern syntax, to Aramaic (one of the poems in her second book is written almost entirely in Aramaic), and to Arabic, German, English, and Yiddish words. Psychology and mysticism serve her as reserves of myth, and goddesses such as Astarte, the subconscious as an entity unto itself, Maria (the Virgin and Magdalene) and Jesus, figures of Kabalistic angels, modern cartoon characters, and even the editor of her poetry book can all appear in her poems.

Amira Hess, like Yona Wallach, is greatly concerned with sexuality, positioning it not as polar, but rather as a range, opening the door to androgyny, movement, and combinations of different degrees of femininity and masculinity, to the extent of dismantling conventional wisdom on femininity and masculinity. This concern is particularly evident in her book *Bole'a Hainformatzia* (The Information Eater), where an abundance of the erotic is integrated with images of violence, but it is also expressed in her other books. Androgynous concepts are also articulated through various mystical concepts, as well as at the linguistic level, where there is a mixture between masculine and feminine forms. In addition, Amira Hess's poetry, like that of Wallach, exhibits a tension between sanity and insanity, with insanity often the preferred pole of the poetry (as we can see in the title of her first book, *Veyareah Notef Shigaon* (And the Moon is Dripping Madness). Embracing madness could, of course, be connected to Romantic

notions of poetry as stemming from insanity, and from the widespread attribution of madness both in the past and in modern psychiatry to femininity, an attribution that Amira Hess tends to embrace and empower rather than reject, as part of the adoption of a range of stereotypes that were considered negative.

The nineteen eighties, in which Amira Hess began to publish her poetry, were the years that followed the emergence of the foundational poetic voice of Erez Bitton, in which the debate on the category of "*Mizrahi* poetry" developed. At the same time, alongside veteran Mizrahi poets who continued to publish, including Ratzon Halevi, Aharon Almog, Moshe Sartal, Yoav Hayek, and Shlomo Avayou, Ronny Someck and Maya Bejerano were becoming established as major poets. At the beginning of the nineteen eighties, Amnon Shamosh, a veteran story teller, published a book of poetry called *Diwan Sefaradi* (Spanish Diwan), which use the classic Sephardic forms of Hebrew poetry. The collection *Echad Bishvil Shelosha Veshelosha Beshvil Echad* (One for Three and Three for One), which included works by Peretz-Dror Banai, Eli Bachar, and Ronny Someck, was also published at the beginning of the decade. Throughout the nineteen eighties, the voices of many new Mizrahi poets were heard alongside Amira Hess, and among them was a large proportion of women and Jerusalemites: Bracha Serri, Shelly Elkayam, Yossi Alfi, Yosef Ozer, Miri Ben-Simhon, Benjamin Shvili, Shimon Shloush, Sami Shalom Chetrit, and Moise (Moshe) Ben-Harosh. In 1983, the Mizrahi literary journal *Apyrion* was established by poet Erez Bitton. Amira Hess published many of her poems in it over the years. Her poems were also published in later journals associated with Mizrahi poetry, including *Dimui*, founded by Hava Pinhas Cohen in Jerusalem in the late eighties (and identified with religious poetry in particular), and *Hakivun Mizrah*, established in 1998 by Itzchak Gormezano-

Goren. In addition, her poems were published in two of the most important anthologies of Mizrahi poetry, *Keys to the Garden* by Ammiel Alcalay, published in 1996 in English (including an interview with her),<sup>2</sup> and in *Mea Shanim, Mea Yotzrim* (One Hundred Years, One Hundred Writers), published in Hebrew by Sami Shalom Chetrit 1999.<sup>3</sup> One of her stories was published in the anthology *Mizrah Maarav* (East West), edited by Amnon Shamosh in honor of the occasion of Israel's Jubilee.<sup>4</sup> Several of Hess's poems appeared in the bilingual English and Hebrew anthology of Hebrew feminist poetry, *The Defiant Muse*, edited by Shirley Kaufman, Galit Hasan-Rokem, and Tamar S. Hess.<sup>5</sup>

Her immigration from Iraq to Israel comprised, according to Hess, a fall in status from affluence to poverty, and apparently also involved a transition from a stable family situation to family and generational crisis, manifested in various ways in her attitude toward her parents. Immigration also meant switching between languages. Amira Hess speaks fluent Baghdadi Judeo-Arabic, but did not have time to be significantly educated in Iraq in literary Arabic. She has written all of her poetry in Hebrew, with the exception of one poem in Aramaic and one she wrote in recent years, but has not yet been published, in Baghdadi Judeo-Arabic. Amira Hess talks about Hebrew and her entry into the language in terms of assimilation, devotion, and complete immersion in the language by choice: "When a person immigrates from one culture to another, as I did when I left Iraq in

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<sup>2</sup> Ammiel Alcalay (Ed.), *Keys to the Garden: New Israeli Writings*. (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1996)

<sup>3</sup> Sami Shalom Chetrit (Ed.), *Mea Shanim, Mea Yotzrim*. (One Hundred Years, One Hundred Writers: A Collection of Hebrew Works in the East in the Twentieth Century) Vol. 3: Poetry (Tel Aviv: Bimat Kedem Lesifrut, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Amnon Shamosh (Ed.), *Mizrah Maarav: Chamishim Sofrim Bochrim Sipur*. (East West: Fifty Authors Chose a Story) (Tel Aviv: Aviv, 1998), 4.

<sup>5</sup> Shirley Kaufman, Galit Hasan-Rokem, and Tamar S. Hess (Eds.), *The Defiant Muse - Hebrew Feminist Poems from Antiquity to the Present: a Bilingual Anthology* (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1999).

1951, it's as if the umbilical cord of his soul has been severed," she says, but despite this soul-wrenching experience, she chose total assimilation into Hebrew, and explains: "When I came here, I started to speak and write Hebrew happily, I wanted to assimilate ... maybe writing in Hebrew was my way of truly entering into a new culture."<sup>6</sup> Arabic remained in Hess's life as a family place, a language she often speaks with her siblings, a musical place, and she taught Hebrew for a time in an Arab school in Jerusalem.

Hess's position on the Hebrew language is unique: older writers of Iraqi origin, such as Sami Michael and Shimon Ballas, who were from the beginning educated as writers in literary Arabic, continued to write in their own language in Israel and only in the sixties (Balass<sup>7</sup>) and seventies (Michael<sup>8</sup>), in light of the changes in reading habits of Iraqis in Israel and due to the increasing gap between their focus of interest and that of the Palestinians, they moved between the languages in an instrumental manner, and it can still be said, at least in part, that they write "Arabic in Hebrew." Other writers, like Yitzchak Bar-Moshe, Samir Naqqash and Ibrahim Ovidia, wrote in Arabic in Israel until their dying days. Writers younger than Hess, such as Ronny Someck, did not make a choice, because their early education took place in Israel and in Hebrew. Amira Hess's statement regarding her introduction to Hebrew is unique, as is the fact that she has written two poems in languages other than Hebrew: Aramaic and Baghdadi Judeo-Arabic. In the extensive use of Arabic within Hebrew she was preceded by Erez Bitton and Avot Yeshurun.

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<sup>6</sup> Reuven Snir, *Arviut, Yahadut, Tzionut*. Arabness, Jewishness, Zionism: A Struggle of Identities in the Literature of Iraqi Jews (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 2005), 406-7.

<sup>7</sup> His first Hebrew book, *Hamaabara* (The Transit Camp), was published by Am Oved in 1964.

<sup>8</sup> His first Hebrew book, *Shavim Veshavim Yoter* (All Men are Equal but Some are More), was published in 1974 by Bustan.

Hess's total dedication to Hebrew, on the other hand, and, on the other, the difficult feelings of the severing of the "umbilical cord of the soul," coexist in Hess's poetry and in their way prevent her from perceiving herself as a person with a whole identity, both culturally (and as part of a community), and personally—in terms of character. Yet, from the ruins of culture, community, family, and the individual, Hess's poetry engages in a kind of renewed alternative construction, by virtue of her success in writing poetry from the crisis point itself, and as such it is extraordinarily powerful. Although this duality can be explained by the biography of the artist and the history of the immigration of Iraqi Jews to Israel, a duality at once existential/mystical and psychological is also apparent, and this is how Hess often sees herself: "I am a person who is full of absurdities and paradoxes, full of contrasts. Within me are a terrible existential pain and joy and thanksgiving to the universe together."<sup>9</sup>

Amira Hess, who has often objected to being defined as a "feminist poet" or a "Mizrahi poet" has done so, it seems, for two reasons. The first was a reaction to conservative criticism, which over the years had sought to label Mizrahi artists and women in these frameworks in order to reduce them and the options for reading them, and her demand not to be labeled in this way. Thus, for example, in an interview after the release of her second book, when asked about the reception of her first book, she said: "I was afraid then, too, of the label 'Mizrahi poet.' Today I don't carry this label— I'm a poet, period."<sup>10</sup> The fear of the label, and the sense of having escaped—"Today I don't carry this label" is repeated along the path of the publication of Hess's books, since critics often

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<sup>9</sup> Nurit Manna, from an interview with Amira Hess on January 30, 1987 in *Hithadshut*, a Journal of Kurdistan Jews in Israel. Vol. 6, 148.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

return to the same Mizrahiness that she thought she had escaped. The second, much more radical reason that Hess rejects these definitions has to do with her rejection of any definition of philosophical-mystical reasons that object to splits within reality, such as separation between men/women, East/West, even of the non-recognition of the ability of words to define reality, and the perception that perfection consists of assembling the very things that seem separate. Thus, for example, she stated regarding her definition of herself as a woman that "when you are only male or only female you do not feel whole."<sup>11</sup> This androgenic approach is in line with Amira Hess's refusal to accept many other definitions, such as the unequivocal definition of herself as a Jew, and sometimes with her vision of the definition of herself as lacking. Regarding her definition as Mizrahi, Hess has provided a temporary reason for her transformation since her arrival in Israel, stating in an interview: "I can not describe myself today as only a native of Baghdad alone, or as only Mizrahi. I can not see myself in that way and perhaps I would not want to."<sup>12</sup>

In this context, it is important to notice that the terms "feminine literature/ women/feminist" and "Mizrahi literature" are used in two opposite directions. On one hand, they exist within the critical discourse that intends to point out their uniqueness and their years-long exclusion, to see in them an independent productive space, to examine them from within the internal dynasties that they contain, and to draw attention to the challenge they pose to hegemonic literature. In this context, these definitions are perceived as empowering, as they sometimes are established as sustainable over time and sometimes judged to be

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<sup>11</sup> Ahuva Muallem and Lital Levy, "*Eich Ata Shlemut?*" (How are you Perfection?) A Conversation with the Poet Amira Hess. *Azut Metzah*. Jerusalem, 1998, 69.

<sup>12</sup> Edna Evron, "*Megeirot Halev*" (Drawers of the Heart) (An Interview with Amira Hess)" (Hebrew). *Proza* 99 (1987), 82-3.

temporary, as subversive temporary positions against the hegemony that excludes Mizrahi and feminine literature. On the other hand, these definitions are used precisely to exclude and control Mizrahi and feminine literature by pointing to their significant difference, which requires further examination, another language of criticism (which is usually more sociological than literary), and makes them marginal compared to the central "department" of literature, which is just literature, with no secondary definitions. The second use of these concepts is the one that has been more common in recent times, and perhaps is also so at present, and it has created a situation in which Mizrahi artists, both men and women, wish to be excluded from these definitions, which confine them to a kind of marginal ghetto within Israeli Hebrew literature. This creates a situation in which, paradoxically, those who want to "return" the Mizrahi artists to the label of "Mizrahi Literature" imposed on them in the past by conservative criticism are critical writers, who seek to resist this conservative criticism.

## **II. "I am Amira, daughter of Salima, daughter of Haim Yitzchak Yehuda": East and West: Death of the Father and Death of the Mother**

On the back cover of her first book, Amira Hess chose to describe herself as descended from a male and female Jewish literary dynasty: "Amira Hess (Bar-Haim Ainzi-Barazani) is a member of a family of kabbalists and scribes, including poet and scholar Haroun Barazani and the female Hebrew poet Osnat of the seventeenth century."<sup>13</sup> Inside the book, too, she announces that she was

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<sup>13</sup> Bar-Haim is the Hebraized name of Hess's parents. Ainzi is her father's original name, and her mother's family name is Barazani (connecting her to the sage Haroun and the poetess Osnat). "Taking back" all of those names and positioning them alongside her married name, the man's name, in the Israeli context of changing names and deleting them, is a powerful act of ethnic and gender protest. The poet Osnat headed a yeshiva in Kurdistan. In an interview, Hess spoke about the connection with the sage Barazani and Osnat: "My mother's grandfather's grandfather, the sage Aharon Barazani, was a great and well known kabbalist. There are stories about him that say there was simply a halo of light around his head, so holy was he when

born **"in the womb of holy scribes from Barazan"** (Veyareah, 39), an image that creates a gender reversal and gives scribes, usually men, a womb, from which the poet was born. With these words she creates for herself an esteemed literary spiritual lineage and male and female ancestral merit.

This dynasty, whose inclusion here is a statement of cultural strength and continuity,<sup>14</sup> continues inside the book, which is dedicated to "My father of blessed memory and my family, may they be blessed with long life." The father, who is present throughout the book and throughout Hess's poetry, appears at the beginning of the first poem, which opens with a family tree: **"I am Amira/ daughter of Salima/ daughter of Haim Yitzchak Yehuda/ son of Yehezkel, peace be upon him"** (7). This opening reads like a dedication or a sanctification of prophecy, but is unique in its gender reversal in that it sanctifies a woman; prophetesses in the Bible are actually not attributed to their parents: Deborah the Prophetess is called by her husband's name: **"Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth, she judged Israel"** (Judges 4:4), and Miriam the prophetess is presented through her brother: **"Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron"** (Exodus 15:20). In her dedication, Amira Hess is named first of all as her mother's daughter, as is common in a religious context, for example when praying for good health. Names are central in Judaism from the Bible to Jewish philosophy and Kabbalah, as well as in traditional everyday life.<sup>15</sup> In this succession of names,

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immersed in Zohar and Kabbalah, and there are stories about him that say he made it rain in a drought year, and there are wonderful stories about Osnat, called 'Osnat the teacher' and 'Osnat the prophetess' (see Edna Evron, *Megeirot Halev*, 81-85).

<sup>14</sup> This includes the continuity of the use of the Hebrew language. The main language of the Jews of Iraq was Arabic, and of Kurdish Jews Kurdish and Aramaic.

<sup>15</sup> G-d is called "the Name," his nation is named for him, and when requesting help from G-d people ask, **"G-d, do it for the sake of your name,"** and plead that their name not be erased from the Book of Life, and that it remain after their deaths. Likewise, people mention the names of their ancestors before G-d in times of distress, and ask Him to rely on "the merits of ancestors." They say **"remember, G-d, the love of our ancestors - Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants,"** and often mention the mothers (especially in times of illness), prophets and kings, and the merits of rabbinic authorities, Talmudic sages, and holy

Hess creates the sense of a kind of desperate attempt to keep alive those who are not alive, or at least to keep their names alive, and through their names to keep alive the first name mentioned, "Amira." In contrast to the importance of the name here, in a later poem Hess declares: "**I changed my name within my consciousness**" (*Bole'a* 14), but even here, the name is extremely important, because changing it can apparently make a decisive difference in person.

After constructing the family dynasty of names in the opening poem, Hess goes on to mix family figures and fantastic, frightening dream figures:

**What if I grow Samsons' hair / in my sleep Judah? / And I  
arise because my father roared / and shook thresholds and  
dances / the vitality of the virgins / and me Maria / the way a  
group of Jesuits would go? // what if I arise / retarded child  
/ his face different / and he spreads the rot of his soul /  
treading gangrene to his head?// perhaps I will arise as a  
mermaid, / daughter of coral, biting water like nails /  
capering on the streams / to their end? ... and I, Astarte,  
rule... see, see I'm Gub-Gub the pig / daughter of Coco the  
pig, I have not gone so far as to go crazy yet ... and no one  
hears a modest voice calling *gevalt* / a pig is calling,  
Balaam's donkey is me / Perhaps a Midianite daughter/  
Perhaps a dancing parrot / classic hopscotch** (*Veyareah*, 7-9).

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men of all generations. Names are inherited, and before people were called by family names, they were called by the names of their fathers. The Bible is full of dynasties, mainly male, and despite its inability to name the dynasties from Adam to the present, the Scriptures try to provide a complete lineage from Adam and his sons to David and his descendants, the kings of Judah.

This carnival of figures, which contains a combination of humor and horror, weakness and strength (particularly prominent in Samson and his hair and Maria mother of Jesus, both of which are images that combine strength and vulnerability), blurs the image of Amira Hess herself, and the image of her parents, and combines them with images of animals and divine figures until they become mythological figures, "**my mother's owlish visage / weeping over the ruins / my father's face like a cherub – the Lord—grace him not**" (*Veyareah*, 9, trans. Ammiel Alcalay).

Amira Hess turns to her father and speaks to him, makes a request of him, and swears to him:

**How I feared your grave, my father, / blocks of Great  
Supplication/ Give me the vitality // Not to be afraid / all that  
is truth / written and signed under oath. / / I bow down  
before you Isaac,<sup>16</sup> who will laugh / to tell in your name of  
blessed memory / to whisper unsaid secrets... I will not  
violate my mission / to you – in the saintly heights** (*ibid.*, 8,  
trans. Ammiel Alcalay).

Poetry is a mission "to tell in your name," an oath to express in words the hidden truth. It is bowing itself down before the Father, the fear and request not to be afraid, it is at once vitality and the request for vitality and its originary site is the grave of the poet's father, a father who becomes divine, "sitting on the hillside of the holy."

But very soon it becomes clear that turning to the father is not satisfactory, because poetry can not always fulfill the promises she makes to

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<sup>16</sup> The name Isaac (Yitzchak) in Hebrew means "He will laugh."

herself, and Hess apologizes to her readers, "**and I beg the forgiveness of the reader / If my face wore a different portrait / than the sights / I was sent to tell about**" (*Veyareah*, 8). Poetry is a mission, but there can be a gap in it between the sights the poet is sent to tell about and the multiple portraits her face wears in her poetry. More importantly, despite the vow she makes to her father to tell in his name, the poet is aware that readers expect other sights, and feel that she is on a mission on their behalf, and so she moves between betraying them and betraying her father, between loyalty to her father and her readers. Her apology is thus simultaneously ironic, appearing in the framework of prophetic sanctification and self-aggrandizement (although she is also a "retarded child") (*Veyareah*, 7), and mocks the reader, who expects self-deprecation and apology, while it expresses the poet's basic position of fear of betrayal.

Multiple faces become the basic identity position of Amira Hess, and are woven into the poems in her later books: "**And I have 12 faces and more / and no face has been found for me**" (*Bole'a*, 23), "**to paint my face ten times and more**"? (*Yovel*, 25). Hess's request, "and I beg the forgiveness of the reader," is charged in gender terms as a woman's request of a man, in which a woman is apologizing, somewhat ironically, to a man for changing. In masculine poetry, woman has been depicted as constantly changing, always in a basic mode of deceit against man, for example by Yehuda Amichai: "It is morning now and behold, you are Leah. Last night you were Rachel. / It was not Laban who deceived me in the dark of night. / It will always be so. This is the way of the world: / Now you are Leah, and last night you were Rachel."<sup>17</sup> In Hess's poem, while she apologizes to the man, she does so from a position of strength, with a

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<sup>17</sup> Yehuda Amichai, *Esrin Merubaim Chadashim, Meruba T"U* (Twenty New Quatrains, Quatrain Fifteen) in *Poems 1948-1962*. (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1969), 264.

mission to tell, as one who is sanctifying herself for the mission.

Alongside attachment to and identification with the family genealogy, the opening of Hess's first poem and the vow to tell in her father's name also emphasizes her painful disengagement from the family: "**No. but my father lost his tongue / only his eye, only his eye was spinning in a painful path** (*Veyareah*, 8)... **There was a time when I would have said: / I won't defile myself with this contemptible East / I'll relegate my ancestral home to oblivion**" (*Veyareah*. 8-9 trans. Ammiel Alcalay). The loss of the father's language, Arabic, becomes, in the poem that begins by his grave, a metonym of his death, the East, the parents home, which has become contemptible, the memory of their house, are positioned together as things that must be given up, perhaps due to the failure of the parents, expressed in the father's muteness.

Opposite the East immediately stands the West, as though they are a couple one part of which cannot be discussed without the other, and Amira Hess declares: "**And I said / the West, for example, has no caress to its spirit/ well-done within, singed to the shrouds. / East and West I'll set out in a strong beat**" (*ibid.*, 9 trans. Ammiel Alcalay). While the West is not contemptible, and has not failed, it is positioned here as negative, since it has no "caress to its spirit," perhaps reflecting the stereotype of the West as cold as opposed to the East as warm. But this characterization can also be understood as stemming from the fact that the East is the poet's family home, a place of caressing spirit, while the West is to blame for her parents' failure. From her vow to disconnect from the East and her home, the poet moves to a dance that takes place under her direction in which the East remains a partner to the West (again, it can not stand alone).

From statements that Amira Hess made in the journal *Hakivun Mizrah* several years ago, we can perhaps understand the uprooting, even if partial, of Amira Hess from her parents and the East. In speaking of the "Baghdadi Girl" that she was, she says: "Girl from the East. Her internal image is darkness and loss and fear and depression and a trail of darkness ... I live as though I have no homeland, although I have no other place."<sup>18</sup> In her first book of poetry *Yareah Notef Shigaon (And the Moon is Dripping Madness)*, Hess explains: "**I am a alone/ without a country / A swallow without a prince**" (10), but this feeling of detachment is resolved by a man walking beside her, and it turns out he is a Jew, "**and he digs toward me at the entrance to an ancient city / in the alleyways of a dark world / plowing and insisting / my Trafalgar / Soho Square Central**" (ibid., 11). The detachment in the ancient city, which is a dark world of alleyways, and could be Baghdad or Jerusalem, but is now London, is resolved in the sexual relationship, which may have been alluded to already through the digging, and the dimness, and by means of the sexual act the poet's face becomes her mother's face: "**And we make love there into the night ... And I glow – my mother's face- suddenly- whores/ another passion**" (ibid.). Eventually, the tie to the family cannot be loosened, but it creates geographical inversions: "**and I said with the power of love, / the power of the quest for love / A baby calls for a bosom. I am a daughter of Baghdad/ / willing to swear / I was born in London**" (ibid.).

Despite the poet's resemblance to her mother, whose face glows from within her own, there is also a fear of her mother, of the similarity between them, of the knowledge that she will be like her in the future: "**afraid of your face,**

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<sup>18</sup> Amira Hess, "*Ei Mi Hidlik Or Tamid Bechalomi*" (Who Turned on an Eternal Light in My Dream) *Hakivun Mizrah* 9 (2004), 30-31.

**mother / you outflanked me hip and thigh / and breasts"** (p. 11). Here Hess takes the biblical phrase from the story of Samson, avenger of the Philistines: **"and he struck them hip and thigh with a great blow"** (Judges 15:8), which became a common expression, and revives it by connecting it with breasts and putting it in modern military language, speaking of "outflanking." The reader who goes back to the Bible discovers that the poet has become a Philistine, who suffers from the anger of her mother—Samson. Later in the book, in a poem that opens "I redeemed myself in shekels," the poet says: **"This is the fractured time, / When my eye sees the world pursuit by pursuit - / mother is not shouting now, / because her face is wrinkled / and a woman at the time of wrinkles is frightening"** (Yareah, 17). Here the mother is "not shouting now;" she is immersed in her old age, and now her face frightens the poet with the old age reflected in it. In another poem, the mother seems confused to the daughter who asks her and tries to guide her in opening the poem: **"Oh my mother where to and a garden of people / is not the shadow of a palm"** (ibid., p. 26). Palm trees symbolize Iraq, their homeland, and the daughter corrects the mother, who anticipates finding here "shadows of palm," while the only thing before her is a "garden of people." The poem ends with an image of severe and sexual violence, directed at the mother, **"that when the time comes for the poles to open / beat, beat the drum / the time of the poles will come / the whole height of Ararat will dig into my mother's cunt"** (ibid., p. 27). In her book *Ayn Isha Mamash Beisrael* (There is no Real Woman in Israel), a supposed reconciliation with her mother takes place, which also contains a reconciliation with the East, and the book, published after the death of the poet's mother, is dedicated to her memory.

On its cover appears a painting of her mother by Hess, and in one of the poems, which bears the name of the mother, "Salima," Amira Hess writes:

**Now I will not whisper the name Salima quietly with hesitation, / as though she were the far East. / Now there is communion between us / a whispering internal identity / My heart that protected Israel / will now protect mother / our faces will not be erased from our existence / which is not the dust of passing thoughts / rising for the duration / and even then when the roads ran / aground / even then you were my empress** (No Real Woman, 10).

The daughter is mourning over years of whispering, of quiet hesitation, years in which she was asked to favor the national, "Israel," over the personal, home and the mother, years of distancing herself from the East, the cradle of her origin, until it became the "far East." The promise that the face will not be deleted appears precisely after the death of her mother, precisely in the now that follows her death the communion and inner identity between mother and daughter exist. The daughter feels that the death of the mother is ending ninety years of exile, and hears a foreign woman who says to her "**righteous, righteous, / She sang solo at her death / and at night when her soul found light / she sang softly to the angels**" (p. 13).

Although it is possible to try to see here a seemingly continual process between the first book and the fifth, in terms of a change in the way she relates to her parents and to the East, we can not talk about this process as a linear one. Amira Hess's poetry is essentially "anti-linear." She does not surrender to the "order" that the poem should contain one move, one message, and succeeds

from the outset in including all the contradictions within it, all those **other** **"portrait[s] than the sights I was sent to tell about,"** for which she apologized to her readers and of which she is also proud. The denial of the East and its vitality, a rejection of her parents and a deep connection with them, ideas of merging and feminine power are all found in a kind of inner vortex. According to Amira Hess, the source of the flow of her work is: "a character that isn't made to adapt to this reality. And from this difficulty stems what is sometimes not even clear to my knowledge. I am a person who does not know, trying to be precise about the accuracy or inaccuracy of understanding, within the complexity that sometimes seems horrifyingly very simple." In her poetry and in what she says about it, there is tension between not-knowing and knowing, between a lack of definition and an attempt to define, and these coexist simultaneously, repeatedly giving rise to one another all the time.

The first poem in the first book, which begins "I am Amira, daughter of Salima," ends with a return in a dream both to the father and to Baghdad, the city of birth previously replaced by another: **"there in the dream / If you return walking in the paths of the forbidden garden ... in the garden, in all the yards, / a distant journey to the rooftops in Baghdad. / I also made a trip to the park / where the molten horse stands / its rider galloped to the graves"** (Yareah, 13). The journey of return is distant now, perhaps only possible in a dream, and can never succeed in being a full return to the Baghdad before the baby was stolen **"into the jaws of some kind of time"** (p. 14), Baghdad before the sense of **"darkness/digs darkness"** and **"the gardens and houses are locked"** (ibid.).

### III. Afterword

Gershon Shaked, at the end of his book *Wave after Wave in Hebrew Narrative Fiction* (1985), in which he discussed the political implications of Hebrew literature in the nineteen seventies and eighties, stated that most of the works of this period suffered from the disease of nostalgia, which was motivated by a yearning for the "good and beautiful Land of Israel" and the desire to return to Zionist pioneering values. He recognized as standing outside the nostalgic atmosphere the new writing of the "absorption model" in which, according to him, a change had taken place in "writers on both ends of the ethnic spectrum"<sup>19</sup>: "This model is generally perceived as a positive model, until the last few years came along and changed our way of looking at it ... in the past, the experience did not reach consciousness, because those being absorbed did not yet have a 'consciousness;' they were mute and lacked language, and could not give expression to their experiences."<sup>20</sup> There is something very infuriating in Shaked's Hegelian presentation, despite the fact that some of what he said has been said by Mizrahi writers. What is the muteness to which he refers if not Amira Hess's "My father lost his tongue" (Yareah, 8)? What is the lack of expression of immigrant experiences if not the words of Ronit Matalon: "the condition of the immigrant is the suspension of the tongue, a twilight zone between the two languages - old and new. He has a mother tongue, but it is suspended because of the situation of immigration. Someone who has no language cannot tell. He will always need someone, the owner of the language, to tell him for him."<sup>21</sup>

What is infuriating about the way in which Shaked phrases his statement is the

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<sup>19</sup> Gershon Shaked 1985, *Wave after Wave in Hebrew Narrative Fiction* (Hebrew). Jerusalem: Keter. p.177.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. The two models that Shaked uses to illustrate the new way of relating to the "absorption model" are Sami Michael's *Shavim Veshavim Yoter* (All Men are Equal but Some are More) and Aharon Appelfeld's *Mikvat Haor* (The Scorch of Light).

<sup>21</sup> Ronit Matalon, *Kro Uchtov* (Read and Write) (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2001), 47.

absolute connection he makes between what he sees and what exists, and thus also the connection between what he does not see and what is not there. If Shimon Ballas and Sammy Michael wrote in Arabic in the nineteen fifties, this does not constitute an expression of existing consciousness, because Arabic is unable to penetrate the consciousness of the Ashkenazi Jewish literary critic of the time. If a "marginal" poet who never approached the canon wrote in Hebrew on Mizrahi experience in the nineteen fifties or sixties, this is not an expression of consciousness because he is not worth reading.<sup>22</sup> The absorption model "was generally viewed positively as a model" by those who did not experience that absorption,<sup>23</sup> and so his way of seeing is what changed.<sup>24</sup> What changed for those who did experience absorption was the ability to bring their words to the hegemonic center, the legitimacy to speak of it in a different way.

I have not checked the influence of this belated legitimacy on writing about Mizrahiness, on the fact that only after it did Amira Hess begin to publish poetry. Did her economic situation and daily troubles not allow it before then? Did she not have a room of her own? Did her father's death have an impact on her turning to poetry as a major factor in her life? Was there no one before this who expressed interest in her poems and asked to publish them? According to Hess, she began

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<sup>22</sup> See, for example the lament of Rabbi Shalom Rada'ai, "Fire will burn within me when my heart remembers being in Yemen," based on the ninth of Av lament (attributed by various sources to Avraham Ibn Ezra and Judah Halevi), "Fire will burn within me when my heart remembers leaving Egypt," which was written close to the time of his immigration to Israel, and lamented the state of Yemenite immigrants in transit camps in Israel: "**Every day and night at Torah times when I was in Yemen / only the Torah of the body that is upon me will float coming to Zion**" (Rada'ai, 36), and: "**Schools for teachers of the faith of Moses will teach when I am in Yemen / the children rejoiced that there was no school when I came to Zion**" (37).

<sup>23</sup> Gershon Shaked himself was born Gerhard Mandel. He immigrated to Israel at age ten without his parents, when Austria was annexed by Nazi Germany in 1939, in the framework of the Youth Aliyah, and was educated at the boarding school in Pardess Hannah. His experiences and those of his generation and of his parents as immigrants who were torn from their places and suffered through absorption were expressed in his later book *Mehagrim* (Immigrants) (Hebrew). Was he writing the things he says here regarding the consciousness of those being absorbed as immigrants about himself and his parents and the time it would take him to tell his story? (These words were written before his novel *Immigrants*).

<sup>24</sup> Perhaps it is possible to say that precisely for him, the process through which "experience (finally) reaches consciousness" took place after he had no consciousness.

to write as a young child, but she links the first publication of her poetry to a creative writing workshop in which she participated: "I wrote for the sake of writing. A book seemed like a fantasy to me, not one of the things I aimed for, not in my wildest dreams. I went to poetry workshops. Asher Reich greatly admired my style and layers of language. I thank God that I met him."<sup>25</sup> According to Hess, after the workshop, Reich encouraged her to submit her poems for publication.

It is also possible to read the late publication of Amira Hess's poetry through the difficulty of writing Mizrahi poetry in the central Hebrew poetic language in recent generations. Haviva Pedaya, in her essay, "The Time Has Come to Say a Different 'I' in Hebrew Poetry," she explores events that took place in the field of poetry in Israel since the breakthrough of Natan Zach, both in his poetry and in his poetic manifestos, and offers a new poetic manifesto. According to her, a Western, but supposedly universal "I," stands at the center of Zach's poetic approach, which became the hegemonic approach in Hebrew poetry. This "I" is "temporary, passing, trapping itself with fragments of thoughts, associations, and impressions,"<sup>26</sup> an "I" that made the detailed and narrative

presentation of the 'I' unnecessary for anyone who writes within what is taken for granted in writing in the legitimate code. Such a person writes without any special conflicts of social identity and politics. Naturally, a person who does not experience immigration and foreignness or acute suppression is also not

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<sup>25</sup> Naomi Gal, *Hakol Kara Levad: Hameshoreret Amira Hess* (Everything Happened By Itself: The Poet Amira Hess). *Hitchadshut: A Journal of Kurdistan Jews in Israel*. Vol. 6 (1990), 147.

<sup>26</sup> Haviva Pedaya, *Higiya Hazman Lomar "Ani" Acheret Bashira Haivrit* (The Time Has Come to Say a Different 'I' in Hebrew Poetry) Part One (Hebrew). *Haaretz Literary Supplement*. May 2 2006,14.

obsessively troubled with the stuttering involved in presenting himself.<sup>27</sup>

The dominant poetic position that followed Zach thus rejected, in the name of liberation from the collective and recruited Altermanian voice that preceded it, all the "poetics engaged deeply and intensively with immigration and identity, poetics occupied with religious and symbolic content, and poetics occupied with the deep structures of its culture,"<sup>28</sup> and labeled them "ethnic", "religious," or "peripheral." This cultural situation made possible the acceptance of Mizrahi poets into the center of Hebrew poetry only when they adopted the "legitimate 'I' of Hebrew poetry" as a tormented existential "I" or an ironic, broken down "I," from within which they attested to the fragments of the East inside them. Even Erez Bitton, who marks the fault line of Mizrahi poetry,<sup>29</sup> testified that he initially wanted to write "existential, universal poems by a very enthusiastic young Israeli,"<sup>30</sup> and only later, close to the time he was working on the end of his first book, did he begin to "write poems that touch the conflict, the roots, the experience, the duality ... precisely in the advanced stages of the book, the miracle of writing about Moroccan poems was created."<sup>31</sup>

This situation could possibly explain Amira Hess's marginality in Hebrew poetry to date. Since her poetry is not written according to the style of Zach (although an "I" is present in it, but it is a different "I"), she was not received

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> While this is true, his poetry did not, at least immediately, have a clear line of successors that recognized him as a founding father. His successors were Sami Shalom Chetrit, Shelley Elkaim at certain stages, Moise Ben Haroush, Vikki Shiran, Mati Shemoelof, Mizrahi poets who began writing with him or after him took different paths, for example, Ronny Someck, Maya Bejarano, Bracha Serri, and also Amira Hess. But perhaps we can speak of him as someone who enabled certain voices, even if they did not see in him a founding father.

<sup>30</sup> Haviva Pedaya, *Higiya Hazman Lomar "Ani" Acheret Bashira Haivrit*, 212.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

into the mainstream of poetry (although the Zachian style has become less dominant since then), and because her poetry did not shape itself as Mizrahi protest poetry, and was ambivalent toward Mizrahiness, it was not positioned centrally in Mizrahi poetry (and the same thing may be said about the place of her poetry in relation to feminine poetry and religious poetry). But marginality has an advantage, because it allows for writing that does not succumb to hegemonic structures, and attempts to create alternative structures that defeat the dominant dichotomous gazes. Amira Hess does this on the one hand by excavating the infrastructural mythological models of the culture, and on the other by adopting the existing stereotypes of Israeli culture while changing them. Thanks to Amira Hess's courage in including in her poetry everything, good and bad, from self-love to self-hatred, from the beautiful to the ugly, her poetry is unique in dealing with the heavy baggage of self-hatred, both in the Mizrahi context and in the context of gender and in the way it facilitates the renewed observation of new identities, simultaneously constructing them and them breaking down.

Amira Hess's poetry has been read until now in a way that reduced it to individual properties. For example, Avi Lipsker stated that "this is poetry whose main concern is mystical content".<sup>32</sup> Gabriella Moscati-Steindler related to Hess's poetry as personal and biographical.<sup>33</sup> Edna Evron argued that Hess's poetry was "religious and wild, sexual, and liberated."<sup>34</sup> This kind of reduction is related to the ways in which feminine Mizrahi poetry is read, as personal and minor (and autobiographical) on the one hand, and mystical and path-breaking (and

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<sup>32</sup> Nurit Manna, from an interview with Amira Hess on January 30, 1987 in *Hithadshut*, a Journal of Kurdistan Jews in Israel. Vol. 6, p.148.

<sup>33</sup> See Gabriella Moscati-Steindler, "Amira Hess: Hashira Keautobiografia" (Amira Hess: Poetry as Autobiography) *Studies in Hebrew Language and Literature*, Strasbourg Congress. Jerusalem: Brit Ivrit Olamit, 1998), 129-133.

<sup>34</sup> See Edna Evron, *Lehiyot Meshoreret Ze Siyuti* (Being a Poetess is Nightmarish) *Yediot Achronot*, April 2, 1993.

irrational), on the other, as particular and ethnic, and as full of sexuality and madness. Amira Hess was read through the accepted dichotomies between West and East, between tradition and modernity, and thus the following was written about her first book: "Amira Hess is a discovery—a unique discovery in poetry that attempts to form a bridge between the primal world of yesterday, a world of family tradition, and the new world, modern and demanding."<sup>35</sup>

When criticism attempted to pinpoint the quality of Hess's writing, it was mainly in an effort to present it as a universal quality (i.e., Western and male) and a particular one (i.e., Mizrahi or feminine). From this attempt, it became apparent that most reviews were unable not to reiterate time and again its Mizrahiness, with the addition of the explanation that the poetry was constantly moving away from ethnic subjects, and thus the first book "indeed" was Mizrahi, but the second was "already" not Mizrahi in comparison with the first, and so on regarding the third, fourth, and fifth.<sup>36</sup> Thus, Miriam Eitan praises Amira Hess's second book for having: "No more self-pity and feelings of discrimination ... No more hopeless primal rage ... No more moon dripping madness."<sup>37</sup>

When the critics intended to indicate a lack of poetic quality in Hess's poetry, they stressed its Mizrahi side. According to Netta Naaman, Amira Hess's writing is "black writing," realized in "angry poetry ... sometimes the anger is ethnic ... the ethnic threat appears as a popular decoration and not impartial."<sup>38</sup> Amnon

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<sup>35</sup> Moshe Ben-Shaul, "*Lagaat Baksamim*" (Touching the Magic), *Maariv*. January 11, 1985.

<sup>36</sup> It appears that this kind of attitude is similar to the attitude toward other Mizrahi writers and other women writers whom critics praise for having left "feminine" subjects in favor of "broader" ones.

<sup>37</sup> Miriam Eitan, "*Sus Hanefesh*" (Soul Horse) (review of Amira Hess's second book). *Iton* 77, 88-89. (1987), 14.

<sup>38</sup> Netta Naaman, *Shira Hamevakeshet Lehiyot Eruma Upshuta* (Poetry that Wants to be Naked and Simple) (review of Amira Hess's first book) (Hebrew). *Iton* 77 64-65 (1985), 11.

Navot compares Hess to "our professional Mizrahi writers,"<sup>39</sup> unlike whom she has "authentic Mizrahiness"<sup>40</sup> that is not sterile and meaningless, claiming "[o]nly time will tell if become Amira Hess will become another grotesque character who turns the delicacies of the East and material on the edge of the ethnic gap into an axe to grind."<sup>41</sup> What Navot points out as Amira Hess's virtue is related to her "authenticity," to her comparison to Mizrahi poets who are below her. The East is for him immediately connected with food, the "delicacies of the East," and strange expressions such as "the material on the edge of the ethnic gap," and, of course, an "axe to grind," not a real present, not a memory of the past, not the desire for a different future.

Amira Hess learned from the Orientalists about the Orient where she was born and raised, and this is part of the reason for her self-hatred, for her view of herself as a "black hole," but she also took control of the images for herself, and reconstructed her own identity and place in the world, after she passed on what she learned through a thousand and one sights. She is a Mizrahi who sees herself through the eyes of the West, but these are eyes that have been dismantled and reassembled, and she will look at the West through the eyes of the East, the East as a Western stereotype and the East of her life. See the words of Orhan Pamuk, the Turkish writer: "Whenever I sense a lack of Western eyes, I become my own Westerner."<sup>42</sup>

The writing of Amira Hess does not surrender to the rationalistic prohibition of ambivalence, and manages to tell things and their opposites, both in

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<sup>39</sup> Amir Navot, *Amira Bat Salima Utikvat Hashir* (Amira Daughter of Salima and the Hope of the Poem) (review of Amira Hess's first book). *Achshav* 50. (1985), 349.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Orhan Pamuk, *Istanbul: Memories and the City*. Trans. Maureen Freely (New York: Knopf, 2005), 288.

good faith, and thus she joins together the worst things about the East, which have really been internalized by the Mizrahi, and the excitement of the moment of explicating the discovery of the oud and the kamanga music of the Baghdadis. This writing does not succumb to liberal politics (which conceal the stereotypes that still exist), is not satisfied with merely protesting (which limits the possibilities of the Mizrahi) or with a mere intellectual glance, even if it is critical and deconstructing (like that of Edward Said), but finds itself engaged in a non-stop excavation of the individual and the collective, the conscious and the mythological, and is eventually able to be liberating. Amira Hess's poetry, in my opinion, allows the reader to advance in the process of "unlearning" that Edward Said mentions at the end of his introduction to *Orientalism*.<sup>43</sup> This is a process of "reversed learning" in which the reader learns to forget the same hegemonic dichotomies embedded in culture, since "real forgetting," like a computer that has been completely deleted, is not possible (even in the world of computers), and ideas, even if forgotten, spawn other ideas, and these spawn still other ideas and connections that cannot be unraveled or found. Thus, the only real option is to confuse, to keep the same words (and not to cause them to be forgotten, to float them on the surface so they cannot be blurred), but to give them new meanings, sometimes inverted, sometimes combined, as Amira Hess does with the concepts of masculinity and femininity and East and West. This is the real process of reversed learning.

Studying Amira Hess's poetry will reveal the possibilities it establishes for women's writing and Mizrahi writing, Mizrahi and feminine voices, which are not frequently heard in the cultural field. It is important that Amira Hess's poetic

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<sup>43</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*. (New York: Vintage, 1979), 28.

voice serve as a tree of life and sow new fruits in the realm of poetry, which will comprise a poetic mode in which to express oneself, with which to wrangle, to grow with, to make a parody of, to move toward its opposite, to cast out, to complete. It is also important that her voice and the reversed learning reflected in her poetry be expressed in the critical field of literature and culture, written in theory, placed in historical and sociological contexts, and read into the history of Hebrew literature.