

NEW HORIZONS IN CONTEMPORARY WRITING

**THE POLITICS OF JEWISHNESS IN
CONTEMPORARY WORLD LITERATURE**

THE HOLOCAUST, ZIONISM AND COLONIALISM

ISABELLE HESSE



B L O O M S B U R Y

The Politics of Jewishness in Contemporary World Literature

The Holocaust, Zionism and Colonialism

Isabelle Hesse

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Note on translation/transliteration

This book uses primary texts originally written in English, German, French, Arabic and Modern Hebrew alongside their translations into English, French and German. All translations from texts that are not in English are my own, unless otherwise indicated. Arabic transliterations in this book follow the IJMES system while Modern Hebrew has been transliterated using the Library of Congress' transliteration chart. Names of authors as well as well-known place names and proper names follow the spelling commonly used in English-language publications.

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From the Enlightenment to the Gaza Freedom Flotilla: Ideas of Jewishness in the Modern and Contemporary Period

The symbolic character of Jewishness, and the role of the name 'Jew' in the history of Western semiotics, makes Jews good to think about human nature with.

Jonathan Boyarin, *Jewishness and the Human Dimension*, 9

The Jew is not simply the West's other (...) The Jew is a subject. And, like all human societies, Jewish society too has relied on the image of the other in constructing and defining itself.

Esther Benbassa, *The Jew and the Other*, ix

Since the emergence of the 'Jewish Question' in the Enlightenment, cultural representations of Jewishness have been deeply ambivalent, defined in complex ways in relation to notions of majority and minority, inclusion and exclusion. Taking this ambivalence as its point of departure, this book considers the relationship between images of Jewish selfhood and Jewish otherness in the contemporary period in light of the two defining moments for the idea of Jewishness in twentieth-century Jewish history: the Holocaust and the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine. It links the establishment of Israel to an important shift in cultural perceptions of Jewishness, which have been extended beyond ideas of diaspora, marginality and victimization to include emerging intersections with Israeliness and its relationship with Zionism, settler-colonialism and nation-building. Thus, it is not only Jewish minority that lends itself to thinking through human nature with, as Jonathan

Boyarin suggests in the epigraph, but equally Jewish majority and hegemony in Israel/Palestine.¹ Throughout this book I focus on how contemporary world literature engages with the transformation of the Jews from being a discriminated and persecuted minority in Europe into achieving territorial control, political independence and military power in Israel. I also pay attention to how authors use ideas of Jewish minority and majority to create a comparative framework for discussing concerns pertinent to contemporary identity more widely.

Israel itself plays a crucial role in cementing ideas of Jewish ambivalence. The circulation of Jewish victimhood in the international media is partly fuelled by Israel's own rhetoric of presenting itself as victim, using the discourse of minorities to justify the occupation of the Palestinian territories for 'security' reasons. As Jacqueline Rose observes, there is a persistent paradox in Israel's use of the minority rhetoric while having achieved military and territorial control: 'although it is one of the most powerful military nations in the world today, Israel still chooses to present itself as eternally on the defensive, as though weakness were a weapon and vulnerability its greatest strength' (xiii). Of course, the conflation between Jewishness – and by extension Israeliness – with victimhood is also due to the lingering shadow of the Holocaust, which casts the Jews as the quintessential victims of the Nazi genocide. Diane Enns rightly argues that 'it is the Holocaust victim of Nazi Germany, particularly the camp survivor, who symbolizes absolute victimhood – pure innocence – for us today' (2012: 50), and in many ways Israel makes use of the equation between victimhood and innocence to deflect criticism for the occupation of the Palestinian territories, the siege of Gaza and the violation of international human rights laws. A potent example of how Israel deploys this rhetoric of vulnerability today can be discerned in relation to the 2010 attack on the Mavi Marmara, one of several ships that tried to reach Gaza with humanitarian aid since the blockade started in 2007. Israel justified this attack, which resulted in the deaths of nine civilians, by linking the activists on the ship to Al-Qaeda, thus aligning the perceived threat to their security with the global 'war on terror'.² In the aftermath of the attack, Israel continued this line, stating that the 'vast majority of those injured and killed (...) belonged to extremist Islamist organizations' (Fox News 2010). Many critics have observed that

this incident, together with the 2008/2009 Operation Cast Lead, also known as the Gaza War, 'finally broke the blockade on the world's understanding of the Gaza crisis' and has resulted in many people 'consider[ing] what Zionism has built in the Middle East' (Horowitz and Weiss 2010: 104). Most importantly, both of these attacks have contributed to a change in international perceptions of Israel as 'the scrappy underdog beating the odds' (Horowitz and Weiss 2010: 104) circulated since the 1967 war.

Israel's political wars, then, are fought as much in the international media as they are at home. Recognizing this fact is central to any attempt to understand literary and cultural portrayals of Jewishness in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, for the politics of Jewishness not only permeates the media but also plays an essential role in less obviously politicized fields of cultural production, such as literature. In this book, I demonstrate how the adoption and adaptation of ideas of Jewishness in contemporary world literature constitute not only narrative tropes but political statements, reflecting the author's position in relation to the Holocaust and Israel. By examining ideas of Jewish minority and majority in texts published between 1971 and 2008³ by writers from a range of different backgrounds, including from Germany, South Asia, the United Kingdom, Israel and Palestine, I demonstrate that ideas of Jewishness are not only important for defining Jewish identity but that ideas of Jewish minority and majority are used metaphorically to define and delineate contemporary identity more widely. Following David Damrosch, I group the works in this book under the umbrella of 'world literature', which he defines as 'literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language' (2003: 4). Over half of the texts included here were not originally written in English and I read and reread them in Arabic, German and Hebrew alongside their translations into English, French and German. As a student of Arabic and Hebrew and a scholar with fluency in several European languages, I am aware of the limitations that reading in another language imposes on my interpretation and analysis in terms of local reception and linguistic nuances. However, I am also convinced of the rewards of reading literature in translation, allowing texts to move beyond their linguistic point of origin and in this I echo the incisive and compelling arguments in relation to reading texts from

Palestine and Israel in translation put forward by scholars such as Anna Ball (2012: 12–14) and Anna Bernard (2013: 5).

Although the texts under discussion in this book only constitute a small selection of literature, in their critical engagement with ideas of Jewish minority and Jewishness as Israeli selfhood, they offer a valuable series of snapshots into the key themes and issues that have emerged in relation to Jewishness in works published after the Holocaust. Reading these texts raises bigger questions about contemporary Jewish identity, as they challenge received representations of Jewish victimhood and powerlessness originating from the Holocaust and contest the uses of these concepts in Israel's self-perception as eternal victim among 'hostile' Arab states. In the European and Northern American imaginary, Jewish victimhood is often conflated with the Holocaust as a paradigmatic instance of suffering. Bryan Cheyette cautions against the dangers of universalizing and overwriting Jewish history by 'construct[ing] Jews as "world-historical victims" or the quintessential insider/outsider' (2013: 30). In these imaginaries Jewishness is also linked to cosmopolitanism, an association originating from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century conceptions of Jewish marginalization and wandering. Anna Guttman draws attention to the limitations of using Jewish cosmopolitanism in South Asian literature: 'The Jewish subject may be exemplary cosmopolitan – and thus the basis for further globalized imaginings, both in theory and in literature – but only if that Jewishness is at least partially suppressed and carefully delimited' (2013: 90). The texts under consideration in this book expose some of the limits of using the history of Jewish suffering and its conflation with victimhood as well as the idea of the Jew as an easily adaptable cosmopolitan subject and so in this sense can be seen as presenting 'carefully delimited' instances of Jewishness. And yet, I argue, this careful delimitation arises from an awareness of Jewishness as a concept that changes according to the context in which it is used and serves as a means to avoid emptying Jewish history of its historical and political significance and to open up a comparative framework to engage with identity formation in the contemporary period more widely.

In discussing the creation of anti-Semitic constructions of Jewishness, Jean-Paul Sartre contends that society, rather than history, creates the idea of the Jew but significantly, he also suggests that Jewishness as a social construct

determines history: 'It is therefore the *idea* of the Jew that one forms for himself which would seem to determine history, not the "historical fact" that produces the idea' (1948: 16). Sartre not only addresses society's role in shaping history but also the fact that Jewishness is defined by the context in which it is used, disavowing the concept of an 'eternal' Jewishness that remains fixed and unchanged throughout history. His argument adds an important angle to received ideas of Jewishness as determined by hegemonic societies and their perceptions and positioning of Jews as part of their community: the possibility of Jewishness as reflecting on society from a minority point of view and influencing the creation of the majority's 'history'. Moreover, Jewish identity is not only created in relation to ideas of European selfhood but as Esther Benbassa notes in the epigraph to this introduction, Jewish identity equally relies on ideas of otherness to define itself. The authors discussed in this book do not challenge hegemony through an exclusive focus on concepts associated with Jewish minority identity nor by envisioning Jewishness only as an ambivalent identity but by stressing ideas of Jewishness linked to an identity that has moved from minority to majority.

Following Sartre, I focus on *ideas* of Jewishness, as the concept of 'idea' implies that although there is a correspondence with 'real' life, there is more importantly an element of appropriation and adaptation on the part of the authors who creatively engage with tropes associated with Jewishness, such as minority identity, diaspora and otherness. I use 'otherness' and 'other' here as denominators of perceived difference, positioning the other as an oppositional category created by hegemonic powers to describe and delineate outside groups. Arif Dirlik, in his criticism of postcolonial epistemology, asserts the centrality of 'difference' to postcolonial studies: 'Difference is important not just as a description of a situation, but more importantly because it shapes language, and therefore the meaning of identity (...). Difference and the negotiation of difference becomes crucial to the construction of identity and, by extension, of culture' (5). I agree with Dirlik that an overemphasis on difference, and the concepts associated with it, such as hybridity, can obscure the concerns of the formerly colonized people by favouring abstract solutions based on the reconciliation between their identity and the colonizer's identity, which distracts from the actual economic

and social problems of the postcolonial state. And yet, I contend, there is a striking absence of discussions of *Jewish* difference in postcolonial studies. Instead, the field tends to consider Jewishness in one of two ways: either as a conflation with a monolithic Europe or as symptomatic of quintessential otherness and victimhood. Jonathan Boyarin confirms this trend by pointing out that 'the situation of the Jews after the Second World War bears similarities to the postcolonial situation, but (...) these similarities have been occluded by an unthinking association of Jews with a monolithic "Europe"' (1994: 425). I suggest that an investigation of the situation of Jewish difference in postcolonial theory needs to be mindful of Jewishness as between 'Europe' and its 'others', a delimitation that postcolonial literature has already successfully engaged with as the novels of writers such as Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth and Zadie Smith attest.

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, 'Jewishness' still plays a major role in the identity construction of subjugated groups; however, I argue that this construction has taken a 'colonial' turn. One expression of this colonial turn manifests itself in postcolonial fiction, where the figure of the Jew is becoming a recurrent trope. The impulse to include Jewish characters can be explained through the parallels between the Jewish experience of discrimination and suffering and the domination of colonized people by European imperial powers. Another manifestation of the 'colonial' turn can be identified in representations of Jewishness in Israeli and Palestinian literature, not only by portraying the shift from colonized Jewish other in Nazi Europe⁴ to settler-colonial self in Israel but also through conscious authorial choices to use ideas linked to Jewish minority identity to critically engage with Zionism and the occupation of Palestine and the concomitant image of the Israeli Jew as a colonizer and oppressor. Although some critics have exposed the limitations of applying postcolonial theory to the situation of the Jews,⁵ aligning Jewishness with the colonial and postcolonial experience is important for identifying the ways in which twentieth- and twenty-first-century identity is imagined through literary representations of Jewishness as both minority and majority and as both of Europe and the Middle East.

Central to this book, then, is the shift from Jewish identity in Europe before the first Jewish settlers arrived in Palestine – as a minority identity in the diaspora, facing discrimination and persecution in Europe, which

culminated in the Holocaust – to Jewishness as Israeliness, defined in relation to the state of Israel, Zionism and settler-colonialism. Jewish identity is posited as a means of questioning received ideas about powerlessness and power by juxtaposing notions of Jewishness associated with positions of minority with those derived from positions of majority or dominance. According to Aamir Mufti, Jewish minority identity can be understood as a historical model for modern ideas about minority identity: ‘In the question of the Jews’ status in modern culture and society, (...) what emerges is a set of paradigmatic narratives (...) concerned with the very question of minority existence, which are then disseminated globally in the emergence, under colonial and semicolonial conditions, of the forms of modern social, political, and cultural life’ (2007: 2). Mufti links the crisis of contemporary Muslim identity in India to problems of secularization and minority identity in the Enlightenment period and suggests that this crisis needs to be understood in terms of the discourse surrounding the ‘Jewish Question’, which emerged during that time. Consequently, Mufti seeks to apply ideas linked to Jewish minority existence – his list includes assimilation, emancipation, minority rights, exile and homelessness (2007: 2–3) – to the Indian Muslim context in order to locate these concerns as relevant to, and reflected in, their situation as a religious and cultural minority in contemporary India. My book builds on Mufti’s work in that it creates a comparative framework between Jewish identity and other minority identities. But instead of ‘rethinking European selfhood (...) from positions marked by dilemmas, vulnerabilities, and ethical and critical possibilities of Jewishness-minority’ (Mufti 2007: 7), I examine Jewish selfhood and Jewish otherness not only through a European Jewish minority lens, comparing discourses of victimhood and powerlessness in relation to Jewish particularism during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but I also trace concepts of Jewish selfhood and otherness in relation to the creation of Israel, Zionism and settler-colonialism, from contemporary world literary perspectives inside and outside of Israel.

Literature is, of course, intimately linked to the political and social context in which it is produced. In discussing postcolonial literatures, Abdul JanMohamed draws attention to the ‘lived’ relationships that inform any act of writing, and specifically the depiction of both self and other: ‘The writer, by unconsciously attempting to valorize the position of self and his group in

the face of an antagonistic alterity, is most often unable to proceed beyond the limited (and limiting) *real* economic and socio-political interests of his class or group' (266). The relationship between the aesthetic and the political has been central to postcolonial studies since the rise of the field in the 1980s, and as JanMohamed observes, literature is often pressed into the service of a political agenda to the detriment of its aesthetic merits. Emily Apter extends, and inverts, JanMohamed's criticism and cautions against the dangers of world literature as being 'an encapsulating model of literary comparatism that, in promoting an ethic of liberal inclusiveness or the formal structures of cultural similitudes, often has the collateral effect of blunting political critique' (2013: 41). The texts under discussion here, however, resist this all-encompassing mode and have been chosen, among other reasons, for their criticism of dominant ideologies. In this context, as Deepika Bahri has noted, the aesthetic can constitute a 'powerful mode for engaging with otherness' (2003: 9) and 'the intermeshing of sociopolitics with artistic and intellectual expression is seen as a distinctive and defining attribute of what we recognise as "postcolonial"' (2003: 11). One of the key questions that *The Politics of Jewishness* addresses is whether in the texts under consideration Jewishness functions only as a means to a (political or narrative) end, especially in the case of non-Jewish writers, or if these texts can be read 'postcolonially' in that their engagement with Jewishness represents an 'intermeshing' of the social, political, artistic and intellectual. As I suggested above, and as Bryan Cheyette confirms, even though writers rely on stereotypes about Jewishness to represent Jews, they 'actively construct them in relation to their own literary and political concerns' (1993: 268). I analyse this act of 'active' construction in contemporary world literature in light of Israeli politics and I argue that, even if not exclusively motivated by political reasons, each inclusion and adaptation of Jewishness in the literary texts in this book reflects the author's own position in relation to ideas of Jewish minority and majority circulated in the European and North American imaginary.

In keeping with Barbara Harlow, who points out that in the case of resistance literature 'narrative, unlike poetry perhaps, provides a more developed historical analysis of the circumstances of the economic, political and cultural domination and repression' (1987: 78), my focus is on narrative fiction,

including novellas and travelogues. The models of Jewishness I engage with need to be firmly situated and developed from within a historical, political and social context, and thus the authors discussed in this book comply with Ian Watt's observation that 'the novelist's primary task is to convey the impression of fidelity to human experience' (1987: 13). More recently, Franco Moretti has described the benefits of reading narrative fiction in the following way: 'the novel is for us a great anthropological force, which has turned reading into a pleasure and redefined the sense of reality, the meaning of individual existence, the perception of time and language' (2007: ix). I am particularly concerned with narrative as 'redefining a sense of reality' by examining works that present a challenge to established ideas of Jewishness and attempt to advance alternative models of Jewishness that encompass concepts of Jewish victimhood as well as notions of Jewish selfhood, including for example the German Jew who attempts to reclaim a sense of selfhood in Germany – the nation of the 'perpetrators' – and the idea of the Jew in Israel as a 'colonizer' of the Palestinian people.

From Jewish other to Jewish self: The creation of Israel

As many thinkers have noted, most famously Hannah Arendt and Karl Marx, the emergence of the modern 'Jewish Question' dates back to the Enlightenment. Karl Marx, in his influential and controversial essay 'On the Jewish Question' (1844), asserts that the problem of the Jews' emancipation⁶ originated from their adherence to religion: 'Emancipation from religion is laid down as a condition, both to the Jew who wants to be emancipated politically and to the state which is to effect emancipation and is itself to be emancipated' (1997: 30). Marx identifies a universal conflict between the political state and civil society, a conflict which expresses itself through the state's demand that individual emancipation should be achieved through renouncing religion. He is very suspicious of the desire for, and indeed the possibility of, Jewish emancipation, and he dismisses political emancipation 'because you can be emancipated politically without renouncing Judaism completely and incontrovertibly, political emancipation itself is not *human* emancipation' (1997: 40). Through the example of the Jews in Germany, where