

**EWA TARTAKOWSKY, *LES JUIFS ET LE MAGHREB. FONCTIONS SOCIALES D'UNE LITTÉRATURE D'EXILE*, COLLECTION « MIGRATIONS », TOURS, PRESSES UNIVERSITAIRES FRANÇOIS-RABELAIS 2016, 330 PP. ISBN 978-2-86906-408-9**

If I tried to sum up the key ideas and to sketch a concise picture of Ewa Tartakowsky's work, I would say that it deals with two crucial issues and notions concerning Jewish identity in exile – memory (both individual and collective) and its adaptation to a new reality. In this context, one may say that the book is about the situation of a passage – between two territories and between sensibilities. I regard Tartakowsky's book also as an important contribution to our understanding of the exilic state of mind. This study presents an extremely interesting insight into the experience of Jewish Francophone authors from the Maghreb and exiled in France.

As to the methodological perspective adopted by the author, it stems from Bakhtin's theory that literature may be regarded as a social fact that emerges in a historical context (18).<sup>1</sup> Tartakowsky also refers to Pierre Bourdieu's opinion that literature tends to objectivize the world in the dialectics of the double movement: revealing vs. hiding.<sup>2</sup> In that way it tends to capture the whole complexity of history. Consequently, the author asserts that all strategies of the discourse, all esthetical means, like style, metaphors, and lexicon, may be analyzed as expressions of the social attitudes they incorporate (22).

What is crucial for precise understanding of Tartakowsky's arguments is the notion of "exile." She insists on a proper distinction between two concepts – diaspora and exile:

L'exile, par son caractère bipolarisé, relie deux territoires, l'ancien et le nouveau, dans une dynamique de multiappartenance, il le fait sans projet d'entretenir des liens avec le lieu d'origine et dans une potentielle dynamique d'intégration dans la communauté nationale. La *diaspora*, quant à elle, est un groupe qui n'a pas nécessairement expérimenté un déplacement [...] et ne se définit plus en termes de centralité par rapport à un ou autre territoire, mais les deux dans une dynamique d'interaction. (29)

Therefore, exile must be viewed from the perspective of two territories. The writer in exile is perfectly aware of his origins, and cultivates strong ties with the abandoned land. He is as if between two lands, two landscapes. Therefore, exile implies more internal dynamism, the awareness of being between, being both not there any more and not here yet, the state of "passing-by."

Before I try to trace the main lines of Tartakowsky's discussion, I would like to provide the reader with a concise outline of the socio-linguistic situation of the Jewish society in North Africa at the end of the nineteenth century (using the example of Tunisia),

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<sup>1</sup> The numbers in the parentheses refer to the page of the book under discussion.

<sup>2</sup> Here the reference is to Pierre Bourdieu, *Les règles de l'art. Genès et structure de champ littéraire*, Paris, Le Seuil, coll. « Points », 1998 [1992], 68 (18, footnotes 3 and 5).

according to Yosef and Tsivia Tobi's excellent and unique history of Judeo-Arabic literature in Tunisia in the colonial era:

[T]he trend of exposure to and openness toward foreign cultures, which was reinforced at the end of the nineteenth century, is reflected in the internalizing of new cultural values along three different vectors: (1) a growing awareness of the Hebrew language, both because of its connection with Haskalah in Europe and all its associated books and journals and because of its connection with the Zionist movement; (2) a move to draw closer to the cultural habitudes of France, French language, and French literature; and (3) expansionism and diverse literary activism in the Judeo-Arabic language.<sup>3</sup>

In the colonial era the Jewish community in the Maghreb countries started to define themselves as being on the crossroads of those three tendencies. In effect, or as a by-effect, the phenomenon of French literature created by Jewish authors of Maghreb origin has emerged.

What may be interesting for the reader especially in Poland, not well-versed in modern French literature, is the introductory information about the emergence of Jewish francophone authors from the Maghreb countries in France (77-132). At the dawn of the postcolonial era in France appeared Tunisian and Algerian Jewish immigrants, striving to establish their new home there. Algerian Jews obtained French citizenship even earlier. On the one hand, this caused severe regulations during the Second World War, as they fell under the jurisdiction of the Vichy government. On the other hand, however, when the French government stepped down and withdrew French administration from Algeria and Tunisia and the two countries proclaimed independence, France became an obvious goal of Jewish immigration. This, again, brought about a process of acculturation of Maghreb Jews. In this respect Morocco stayed apart, as it held its semi-independent status as a kingdom. When the new State of Israel emerged, Moroccan Jews also chose this destination in their quest for a new life. Tartakowsky provides us with very interesting figures that testify to the creative potential of Jewish immigrants of Maghreb origin. There were 0.03% writers among the most numerous Jewish immigrants from Algeria (of a total number of 110,000-120,000 immigrants in the years 1958-1962). The respective percentage among immigrants from Tunisia (from a total of ca. 60,000) is 0.07%. As far as Moroccan immigration is concerned, there were 0.05% writers among them (85-86).

Among the authors discussed, one outstanding personality emerged: that of the well-known writer Albert Memmi (born in Tunis in 1920), whose first, mostly autobiographic novel was published with a preface by Albert Camus. The most prominent authors of Maghreb origin discussed in the book are: Georges Cohen (born in Tunis in 1932), Claude Amsallem (born in Saïda, Algeria in 1941), Jean-Luc Allouche (born in Constantine, Algeria, in 1949), Katia Rubinsten (born in Tunis in 1944), Gil Ben Aych (born in Tlemcen, Algeria in 1948), Rolland Doukhan (born in Constantine in 1928), Gisèle Halimi (born in La Goulette, Tunisia in 1927), Roger Hanin (born in Algeria in 1925), Hélène Cixous (born in Oran, Algeria in 1937), Hubert Haddad (born in Tunis in 1947), Nine Moati (born in Tunis in 1938), and Marcel Bénabou (born in Meknés, Morocco in 1939). Almost all these figures are introduced under the heading *Exemples de profils*,

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<sup>3</sup> Yosef Tobi, Tsivia Tobi, *Judeo-Arabic Literature in Tunisia 1850-1950*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit 2014, 6.

distinguished graphically in the content of the chapter. Side by side with them in the book the reader can find the no less important writers of the younger generation, such as Marco Koskas (born in Tunis in 1951) and Colette Fellous (born in Tunis in 1950).

Tartakowsky analyses some specific features of the literature created by the generation of Maghreb-origin Jewish writers based in France from the perspective of the transformation of social experience into literature. She traces and analyses the main settings of the literature stemming from social experience: the folklore entourage of family life (134-145) and history as a source of inspiration, including precolonial Maghreb, with the figure of Kahina, the Berber princess, who resisted the invasion of Egyptian Muslim troops in the 7th century. The Arab historiographer, Ibn Khaldun, claimed that she was of Jewish origin or came from a Judaized Berber tribe.

In this respect, the especially interesting chapter is the one devoted to the phenomenon of the language. The language of literature seems to be a peculiar one, sometimes characterized as a “hybrid” language, i.e. the French used by the children of Arabic or Judeo-Arabic native speakers. When grandparents spoke only Judeo-Arabic, their grandchildren rejected this totally in favor of French. Colette Fellous, in her book *Avenue de France*, quoted in this context by Tartakowsky (195), presents two portraits – of her grandfather and her brother. Through these pictures we may trace the way from the totally Arabized world of the Maghreb Jews to that solely dominated by French. What seems very interesting is the suggestion that some language phenomena encountered in the literature of authors of Maghreb origin could be compared to those present in creole languages (197). Linguistically, if the children really spoke a creole form of French, the language of their fathers would be defined as pidgin language. In any case, we are dealing with some features of language contact as elements that are used as a means of literary stylization.

Among the social processes testified to by Jewish writers of Maghreb origin is the emancipation of women and the change within the patriarchal society. The colonial society represented two kinds of oppression – political and masculine (216). In fact, exile opens up the possibility of the passage from the traditional model of the family to a modern one. But in the context of the melancholic picture of the past, the tone of social criticism is rather less voiced (215).<sup>4</sup>

In the most theoretical chapter of the work, Tartakowsky analyses first the sociological functions of literature. Accordingly, we are dealing with three social functions of literature: memorization, the historiographic function and the adaptive one (217-270).

Memory creates an impression of rooting into the surrounding reality. Moreover, it determines our perception of the present in very different ways. Marcel Bénabou states:

La tyrannie que cette mémoire, encombrée d'un passé marocain qui se refusait à passer, exerçait sur mon rapport à la réalité. [...] Je découvrais qui se ainsi que mes années marocaines [...] avaient déposé en moi, en strates serrées, une gigantesque masse de souvenirs qui,

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<sup>4</sup> This remark is relevant for Sami Michael, an Israeli author of Iraqi origin. In his novel *Victoria*, the life-story of Jewish girls from Baghdad is narrated with melancholy towards the past, not deprived, however, a social criticism.

constamment prêts à surgir avec une dimension et un relief que je ne leur connaissais pas, donnaient à tout ce que je vivais à Paris une figure, une coloration très particulière.<sup>5</sup>

Bénabou states that his Moroccan past determines his perception of current reality: a new reality, that of the exile. In fact the past constitutes one's self and one's sensibility. You cannot totally reject your past and open a new chapter in your life. On the contrary, one's past transforms one's recognition of the world and makes it individual, really unique, one's own. This in turn influences the mechanism of adaptation:

À partir du moment où le migrant pose les pieds la société française, se met en place inévitablement un processus de mutations culturelles, une modification des rapports à soi, à la famille, à la quotidienneté et aux projections. Le modèle intériorisé et hérité est, en effet, inadéquat au nouveau contexte. La tension sera portée vers le passé ou vers l'avenir en fonction du contenu du présent. (231)

Current life proves that our self, our habits and views are inadequate to face new reality. This, again, creates an internal tension that must be released. "Let your memory be your home," according to the wording of Edmond Jabès. "All homes that I discovered and honored add something to myself." When a person launches his or her quest for a new life, they need an anchor in order to find their way in a new land. This is as if a constant reciprocal movement: back to the roots and forward – to what is beyond the horizon. But memory should be firmly fixed to play its role – a stabilizer that helps to build a new home as well as a new identity. As the present draws its life-giving juices from the individual, family and collective past, memory may make the adaptive process effective and successful.

As mentioned at the beginning of this review, the end of the 19th century in the history of North African Jews is marked by three tendencies in the intellectual history of the Maghreb Jews, Haskalah among them. Within the movement of the Jewish Enlightenment, Jewish historiography began to develop, i.e. A scientific attitude to the Jewish past. The need for a historic anchor, then, met the general tendency to investigate Jewish history as a scientific field. At the beginning of the movement, the history of the Ashkenazy Jewry was in focus. In the case of the Jews of the Maghreb, "literature precedes history," as Claude Nataf claims.<sup>6</sup> There are some specific features in those Jews' memory. There is hardly any experience of genocide in their collective memory. However, a strong tendency to save the memory of the forefathers and a deep need to revive the lost world are present. This was alluded to as a form of rivalry with the Ashkenazy brethren by Jean-Luc Allouche:

Pour nous, les « nord d'af » il y avait le sentiment que nous aussi il fallait qu'on récupère quelque chose de ce qui était mort. Sans doute il y avait une émulation souterraine inconsciente avec nos camarades ashkénazes.<sup>7</sup>

Anyway, Jewish writers of Maghreb origin were striving to build proximity and intimacy with their past generations. As a result, Jewish Maghreb authors engaged in some

<sup>5</sup> M. Bénabou, *Jacob, Ménaïhem et Maimoun. Une épopée familiale*, Paris 1995, 21-23, following: Ewa Tartakowsky, *Les Juifs*, 230.

<sup>6</sup> Interviewed by Ewa Tartakowsky, *Les Juifs*, 246.

<sup>7</sup> Jean-Luc Allouche interviewed by Ewa Tartakowsky, *Les Juifs*, 247.

scientific activities to fulfil the “need for memory.”<sup>8</sup> Nine Moati, when preparing her novel *Les belles de Tunis* about three generations of Jewish women under the French protectorate, launched archival research. She investigated the archives – also those of Alliance Israélite Universelle – searching for historical knowledge about Tunisian Jewish women (249-250). Finally, the minority group gains its historical past, which, in return, contributes to its group and national identity.

Adaptation, as mirrored in literature, may be defined as a process. Tartakowsky quotes Hélène Cixous, who perceived herself as a “passer-by” between two lands, two countries, two cultures, without being able to live in either one or the other.

Longtemps j’ai pensé que c’était mon accident algérienne qui avait fait de moi une passante. [...] mes diverses chances généalogiques et historiques se sont arrangées pour que je passante ; de façon pour moi originelle je suis toujours passante, en passante. (265)

Being in exile means, therefore, being in a life-long journey, being between two banks, of which one is not yet totally abandoned, while the other is not as yet reached. This state brings about a special type of sensibility – as if a double perspective in perceiving the outer world. Ewa Tartakowsky states:

C’est donc avec une sensibilité particulière, développée grâce à la double perspective, autant extérieure qu’intérieure, que les écrivains d’exil non seulement développent des formes narratives nouvelles ainsi que des innovations linguistiques, mais qu’ils permettent de donner à lire et à voir d’autres schèmes de compréhension du monde. (266)

Sometimes, one may contribute to a new comprehension of the world of one’s fellow man thanks to his/her origin, roots or cultural background. As in the case of the journey of a grandson and his grandmother born in Tlemcen, Algeria in Gil Ben Aych’s novel *Le Voyage de Mémé*. The grandson explains to his grandmother the rules of life and behavior in Paris, while she is still immersed in the reality of her place. But reciprocally, the young man enriches his identity, his self. Tartakowsky concludes:

L’apprentissage de l’adaptation est donc mutuel. C’est un va-et-vient réciproque entre passé et présent, jeune et ancienne génération, la grammaire référentielle d’ici et de là-bas. (268)

One may say that exile is a state of permanent passing-by, or a state of openness to the new. Awakening this consciousness constitutes the adaptive role of literature. Not surprisingly, literature becomes a means that helps to transfer the values of the world of origin and plant them in new soil – of a new society with its own views and values. Therefore, literary creation opens new perspectives in the perception of the surrounding world. Through its meditative capacity, literature supports the process of adaptation, as Tartakowsky writes, summing up the considerations of the last but one chapter.

At the end, Tartakowsky states that the literature of Jewish authors of Maghreb origin offers a new perspective on the history of the Maghreb that differs from the “official” French version. This phenomenon may be compared, as Tartakowsky observes, to the diaspora English literature of Hindu authors (279-280). But we may also say that literature offers a means for society or community capabilities for social adaptation.

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<sup>8</sup> The wording of Claude Nataf, *ibid.* 246.

Ewa Tartakowsky's work seems to me to be very thorough and innovative. She searches for some general, sociological dimensions in literature and its importance for human social existence. On the other hand, the example she chose to analyze may be especially interesting for the Polish reader, as knowledge about Jewish francophone writers of Maghreb origin is rather poor in our country. Moreover, Tartakowsky's work provokes further reflections. We may pose a question: might these conclusions be applied to the Jewish literature of the 20th century in general or not? Does Jewish European literature have a similar adaptive dimension?

The reality of exile has been an increasingly common experience in Europe. It is especially inscribed in Jewish fate. It is hard to resist the impression that European Jewish literature in the 19th and 20th centuries is almost exclusively that of exile – it is dominated by the experience of exile.

This is true even during the renaissance of Hebrew literature at the dawn of the 20th century (or maybe particularly in that epoch). Then, Jewish literature was striving to reach out to its roots in the past, in the common memory, and to build self-identification in the present time. The characters created by Shmuel Josef Agnon, especially in *Ore'ah Nata Lalun*, but also in *Tmol Shilshom*, may serve here as examples. The hero is longing for Zion as a religiously determined goal of his life. On the other hand, when he is already there – like the main character of the novel *Ore'ah Nata Lalun* – he is looking back melancholically towards his lost homeland, i.e. Europe, Ukraine. But during his reminiscent journey to his birthplace he feels alienation from there. Neither in his new homeland nor in the old country does he feel at home. His past is always present in him, and defines his identity. In this context one could ask: is, then, the Land of Israel the soil of exile? The feature that is predominant in the experience of exile is the sense of being uprooted that overshadows the present life. Consequently, literature is looking for a reconciliation with a new reality – that of exile – and tends to reduce the tension between memory and the necessity to adapt to the new reality.

In the case of the francophone literature of the Jews of Arab countries, the background, the experience of strangeness or inadequacy is to some extent less dramatic. The more or less forced emigration to France may be regarded as a movement from the periphery to the center.

As my last remark regarding Ewa Tartakowsky's thoughtful study, I would like to mention a very peculiar – in the post-Holocaust world – part of Jewish literature: the German one. The mother tongue of the Czernowitz-born poet Paul Celan was German (neither Ukrainian nor Russian). This feature may be compared to the linguistic situation of the francophones in the Maghreb. Celan, when deprived of his territory, his parents and his relatives, remained rooted only in the language. But even the language was that of persecutors, oppressors and murderers. This fact made the reconciliation of the memory and the current life impossible. Therefore, the passage was not from one reality to the other but from one reality to the void.

Ein Nichts  
waren wir, sind wir, werden  
wir bleiben, blühend:  
die Nichts-, die  
Niemandrose.<sup>9</sup>

The human is sometimes driven to the edge of the capability to express his or her experience. Language does not provide proper literary tools that match memory and real life. Then, Nothingness is the only choice.

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<sup>9</sup> Paul Celan, "Psalm," in: P. Celan, *Psalm i inne wiersze*, Wydawnictwo a5, Kraków, 2013, 172.