

STUDIES IN ARABIC LANGUAGE
AND LITERATURE

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Sasson Somekh and Alexander Borg

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Mahmud Ghanayim

**THE QUEST FOR A LOST
IDENTITY**

Palestinian Fiction in Israel

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To my wife

Sihām

my children

Ṭayyib, Nahāwand, and Sukayna

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Preface

The beginnings of Arabic fiction written by Palestinian *littérateurs* in Israel can be said to hark back to the establishment of the state in 1948, an event that has affected not only the land that had been Palestine, but the entire region. In that year, the character of the land underwent drastic sociopolitical changes that were to radically affect the course subsequently taken by Palestinian literature, whose origins, in fact, antedated the foundation of the state. Thus the event undoubtedly marks a new start in the literary history of the Palestinians.

The most crucial sociopolitical change was demographic: large portions of the Arab population were displaced and left the land under compulsion or of their own will, with the result that, in the new political entity that emerged with the establishment of the State of Israel as the home of the Jewish people, the Arabs who remained constituted a minority now governed by those who had been its former enemy in a bitter war.

In order to monitor the Arab population, which had resisted the establishment of the new state, military rule was introduced curtailing various civic liberties: freedom of speech, of movement, and of association until the mid 1960s. It should, furthermore, be noted that the Arab population was then mostly concentrated in rural areas and was, consequently, unable to transmit its literary heritage to the younger generation. In effect, the changed circumstances and the new political realities induced this minority to forge for itself a medium of literary expression adapted to the new situation.

It is this unique turn of political and cultural events in the region that prompted me to examine Palestinian literature—more specifically—fiction produced after the establishment of the State, since the observer is here confronted with several literary phenomena not encountered elsewhere in contemporary Arabic literature.

In the present work, I have undertaken the task of highlighting these distinctive traits as reflected in the evolution of various trends afoot in Arabic narrative fiction written in Israel over the half-century intervening between 1948 and the events of October 2000 which prompted the outbreak of the *Intifada* of al-ʿAqṣā.

After the establishment of the State of Israel, members of the Arab minority within its borders were, in theory, considered full-fledged citizens enjoying, in principle, all attendant rights and duties. The state was thus obliged to treat members of this minority as it would any other citizen, something which proved extremely difficult in practice, since Israel was still at war with the Arabs, a nation to which the local minority also belonged.

The centrality of political issues in this state of affairs inevitably rendered political themes a very important constituent of Palestinian fiction written in Israel. The present book will examine the dynamics of this fiction, keeping in mind that the authors' ultimate aim throughout the period under study was to produce literature rather than political commentary. As will be seen, however, the distinction between these two genres became, in some cases, decidedly blurred.

Acknowledgments

Some chapters of the present study are partly based on materials in Arabic that have already appeared in my book, *al-Madār al-Ṣa'b* (*al-Karmil* Series), in several papers I published in *Arabic and Middle Eastern Literatures* (<http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals>), and in Meir Litvak's book, *On Palestinian Memory and Nationalism*. I thank the editors of these publications for permitting me to use this material here.

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