

CONFLUENCE
Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies

ISSN: 3085-5411
Journal Homepage: https://journals.imist.ma/index.php/confluence/index

Against the "Ingathering": Mizrahi Renaissance and the Politics of Deterritorialization in Ronit Matalon's *The Sound of Our Steps*

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https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-vol2iss1.6109

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Received: 10-09-2025 Accepted: 25-12-2025 Published: 19-01-2026

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ABSTRACT

Ronit Matalon's *The Sound of Our Steps* exposes the marginalization and displacement of Mizrahi Jews in Israel by challenging the Zionist narrative of the "ingathering of exiles." In a Eurocentric society that favors the Ashkenazim, the novel explores the struggles of an Egyptian Jewish family with social exclusion, economic hardship and cultural silencing. Matalon constructs a counter-narrative to prevailing nationalist discourses via her disjointed storytelling, linguistic hybridity and opposition to Zionist mythmaking. Using postcolonial theory and Mizrahi feminist critique as a framework, this article reads Matalon's *The Sound of Our Steps* in relation to Ella Shohat's discussion on Mizrahi identity, Zionist exclusion and the erasure of Arab Jewish heritage. This article examines Matalon's portrayal of deterritorialization and Mizrahi agency, challenging traditional power structures and cultural narratives. In order to unsettle the Zionist deracination and fabrication of the Arab Jewish exile, this article situates Ronit Matalon's fiction within the Mizrahi Renaissance movement and argues that her work reclaims and rewrite the Mizrahi/Sephardic experience.

KEYWORDS

Mizrahi Renaissance
Egyptian Jews
Mizrahim
Sephardim
Deterritorialization

Introduction

Ronit Matalon is a prominent literary figure, having won several prestigious prizes in a predominantly Ashkenazi, Eurocentric literary field. Her fiction often employs a stream-of-consciousness style, combining juxtaposed events and non-linear timelines without a clear structure or plot. Her narrative is composed of fragmentary moments drawn from her own memories, her family's shared recollections and the larger experiences of displaced Mizrahi communities. She also writes in a memorial style, where characters and storylines feel displaced and disjointed. This literary strategy enables Matalon to subvert prevailing narrative paradigms within Israeli literature. Her distinctive approach positions her novel, *The Sound of Our Steps*, within a register of literary, cultural and political revolt. Embedded in her novel are her Egyptian Jewish roots and the perspectives of Mizrahi Jews, who are often excluded from the cultural and literary mainstream despite their significant presence in Israeli society. Her narratives

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articulate the sense of uprootedness and hostility experienced by Mizrahim in Israel, a society in which Ashkenazi history and culture are institutionally prioritized.

Matalon's distinctive writing style is further characterized by her use of linguistic and cultural hybridity. She repudiates linguistic homogenization, blending Hebrew and French with Egyptian and Palestinian Arabic dialects in *The Sound of Our Steps*. This linguistic choice unsettles the hegemony of Hebrew within Israeli literature while affirming cultural plurality. Matalon's work offers a more inclusive definition of Jewishness, elevating the marginalized languages of the Palestinian and Mizrahi/Sephardic communities. This subverts the homogenizing trends that are explicitly present in the Israeli national narrative, instead reframing Jewish identity beyond national homogeneity.

Ella Shohat's theoretical framework on Mizrahi identity and her criticism of Zionist discourse's relabeling and marginalization of Arab Jews within Israel are closely aligned with Matalon's approach to the Mizrahim and their political fight for recognition. Matalon's novel engages with Shohat's intervention and unveils the occlusions that structure the social positioning of Palestinian and Mizrahi Jews. This article places Matalon within the larger tradition of the Mizrahi literary renaissance by means of a close textual analysis of the novel's narrative techniques, examining how its fragmented storytelling, multilingual elements and treatment of themes of homeland and exile confront dominant Israeli literary conventions. This article further examines how Matalon creates a counter-narrative that questions rigid representations of Jewish identity in Israel, highlighting her portrayals of familial disintegration, economic precarity, and the psychological effects of displacement.

Literature Review

Existing scholarship on *The Sound of Our Steps* mainly interprets Ronit Matalon's novel with attention to Levantine identity and post-Zionist critique. For example, Lital Levy situates Matalon's fiction, particularly *The Sound of Our Steps*, within a second-generation Mizrahi literary corpus aimed at creating "a different and unfamiliar kind of Hebrew literature" (212). Levy primarily examines Matalon's role in the "linguistic turn" in Israeli Mizrahi writing (213). A key aspect of *The Sound of Our Steps* is its incorporation of "Levantine" languages and cultures, using "the speech of her characters" to challenge "language as representation altogether" (Levy 220). Levy further explains that the text constitutes a "meta-linguistic discourse," where Matalon intertwines "immigrant Hebrew, 'ivrit tiknit,' Egyptian colloquial Arabic, spoken and written French, and the idioms of political pamphlets and garden manuals—all thrown into a kind of internecine struggle" (221).

In addition to sociolinguistic readings, literary critics, particularly Hannan Hever, position Matalon's work against the backdrop of Mizrahi marginality and the politics of canon formation in Israeli literature. Hever contends that Matalon's narrative strategies resist hegemonic Ashkenazi norms and destabilize dominant Zionist historiography. Yochai Oppenheimer similarly identifies a formally disruptive quality in Matalon's prose, arguing that its fragmentation mirrors the fractured status of Mizrahi subjectivity within the national literature. Meanwhile, Rachel S. Harris argues that Matalon disrupts "Levantine aristocratic positioning" and subverts the concepts of home and homeland (116). She asserts that Matalon's "characters experience a constant movement. This unsettled migration disturbs the expectations of rootedness, but movement too becomes a kind of paralysis and not a redemption" (116).

Naama Tsal foregrounds the home's centrality within the novel's thematic structure. She states that its "constitution, and the ongoing anxiety of its collapse form the central axis along which that last novel progresses and from which the narrative is spun" (306). For Tsal, this

portrayal of domestic space is integral to Matalon's "post-Zionist criticism" (306), since the novel's focus on the unstable home challenges Zionist constructions of identity. Likewise, Tamar S. Harris states that Matalon's novels are media for intellectual exchange with other critics and theorists, thereby framing her fiction within a network of relational dialogue. She notes that "Matalon's writing displays a deep awareness of post-structuralist and neo-Marxist thought, and her stories … maintain an intimate exchange with Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes, among others" (293). In their article entitled "An Autobiography of Her Own," Tammy Frade Galon and Adia Mendelson-Maoz argue that *The Sound of Our Steps* constitutes a feminist autobiographical text in which Matalon illustrates the "marginal place of women" in Israel (227). They add that "Matalon combines her dialogue with autobiographical material to express her social and gender criticism" (227).

What remains largely unexplored is Matalon's role in the Mizrahi Renaissance movement and her fiction's engagement with Mizrahi agency, resistance and political activism. Existing literature overlooks how *The Sound of Our Steps* revindicates Arab Jewish cultural heritage and disrupts the Ashkenazi-centered Israeli literary canon. It also fails to adequately address her contribution to the Mizrahi political struggle to reassert autonomy and claim the liberation of not only the Sephardim/Mizrahim but also the Palestinians. Matalon's efforts to re-center North African and Middle Eastern identities within Israeli literature go neglected. Critics have not fully engaged with the novel's anti-Zionist political drive, its depiction of 1960s-70s Israeli political activism or its deliberate de-centering of Ashkenazi perspectives, which are either absent or filtered through the standpoint of Egyptian Jewish characters. This gap in the literature undermines the novel's broader socio-political commentary and its significance in reshaping Mizrahi literary and cultural trajectories. This article fills this gap by framing Matalon's work within the broader Mizrahi plight for self-representation and demonstrating how her fiction serves a role in political critique for decolonizing Israeli literature.

Ronit Matalon and the Mizrahi/Sephardic Renaissance

Matalon disrupts conventional writing forms and defamiliarizes language in her fiction in an act of subversion against the mainstream culture and literature endorsed by Israeli hegemony. Though she writes primarily in Hebrew—the language associated with the occupying power according to her political stance—Matalon intentionally incorporates words from Egyptian Arabic, Palestinian Arabic and English to challenge her readership and unsettle the traditional Zionist-Israeli narrative. Tamar S. Hess argues that Matalon mixes Hebrew, Arabic, French and English to develop a distinctive linguistic "formula or nusaḥ" that replicates the Levantine linguistic mix, a style echoing the speech patterns of "immigrants and second-generation, Israeli-born speakers" (295). Likewise, Shohat upholds that

> Arabic/Hebrew syncretism has emerged even in the realm of Hebrew literature. Arabic is a notable presence within Hebrew fiction written by Jewish-Iraqi authors such as Ezra Haddad, Sami Michael and Shimon Ballas, all of whom shifted, in Israel, from writing in Arabic to writing in Hebrew... At times, the texts explicitly cite Arabic vocabulary translated into Hebrew in parentheses or in footnotes. In other instances, the expressions in Hebrew implicitly evoke Arabic—usually colloquial Arabic—an evocation 'audible' for the Arabic speaker even 'through' the Hebrew. (Shohat, "Invention of Judeo-Arabic" 32)

Matalon uses a similar linguistic approach to empower the stances and accounts of marginalized and immigrant communities within Israel, especially those of Palestinian, Mizrahi and Sephardic backgrounds.

Matalon's novels are both controversial and celebrated within the Israeli context for their juxtaposed narrative style and for addressing sensitive political, cultural and racial issues. Hess contends that Matalon's works explore pressing challenges in Israeli society, including "the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza … [and] inner-colonialism" (295). She presents a wide range of characters and perspectives, including Zionist, anti-Zionist, pro-Palestinian and pro-Nasserite viewpoints. In fact, Matalon offers a cynical portrayal of society and unearths the tensions and intersections among these differing ideologies and cultural backgrounds. Hence, Matalon "should be read within the Mizrahi context of Israeli culture, within the frame of post-colonial thought and of political critique" (Hess 295).

Her characters exhibit ethnic, social and political identities defined by fluidity and ambiguity. Hess argues that "questions of ethnic identity, immigration, cultural strata and social and financial class ... are explored in her work through the prism of shifting Levantine identities" (297). These shifting identities often appear in her politically active characters whose views mirror Israel's polarized political landscape. Her characters voice the contrasting nationalist movements, from left-wing versus right-wing, Zionism versus neo-Zionism, to Mizrahi mobilization versus Ashkenazi dominance. This exploration of multiple narratives in Matalon's work allows for greater dialogue on the overlapping dimensions of Sephardic identity within the political contexts and social dynamics of Israel.

In her fiction, Matalon reflects on her identity in relation to immigrant parentage from Egypt, marked by the privilege of Israeli birth yet burdened by the weight of familial history. This dual position enables an exploration of marginalized suffering within a narrative space that brings Mizrahi immigrant experience into contact with broader societal discourses. Matalon articulates the ambiguity of her national and cultural identity, stating, "[t]he fact that I am the daughter of immigrants but not an immigrant myself must not be obscured—that is to say: I am already someone who acts by force of a sense of place and of Hebrew, someone who is already a native inhabitant—or at least partly one" (*Read and Write* 48). Her novels become arenas where dominant forces of power clash with the immigrant quest for agency and the aspirations of indigenous Palestinians for return and self-representation.

Matalon's literary input aligns with the Mizrahi/Sephardic cultural renaissance in Israel during the 1970s and 1980s, a period characterized by a renewed interest in the heritage, traditions and identities of Arab Jews. This movement was a response to the Euro-Zionist narratives that have shaped Israeli society since the establishment of the state in 1948. It was initiated by a group of young Mizrahi and Sephardic activists in Israel who called themselves the "Black Panthers," taking inspiration from the American movement of the same name. The "Black Panthers" of Israel undertook the mission of delegitimizing the imposition of a collective Jewish identity and unsettling the Zionist notion of "Mizug Galuyot," which refers to the forced assimilation of Israeli Jews into a unified national melting pot. They sought to expose the social and cultural inequalities embedded within Israeli society and to reclaim their erased histories and identities. Once in Israel, Shohat observes that "Arab-Jews, trapped in a no-exit situation, have been forbidden to nourish memories of at least partially belonging to the peoples across" the neighboring Arab countries, noting that "the pervasive notion of 'one people' reunited in their ancient homeland actively disauthorizes any affectionate memory of life before the State of Israel" (Taboo Memories 222-3).

The systematic occlusion and censorship of pre-exodus histories, cultures, and expressions of longing prompted the young "Black Panthers" in Israel to assert and celebrate their identities

publicly. The activism of the Israeli "Black Panthers" empowered the Mizrahi community to embrace cultural identity and claim a rightful place in Israeli society (Elia-Shalev xiii). The influence of this movement was far-reaching. In fact, Mizrahi filmmakers, writers, novelists, critics and artists found a space to express their unique voices and artistic visions. Their work portrayed the experiences and legacies of Arab Jews, offering a counter-narrative to Israeli media, which often highlights the Ashkenazi perspective while either erasing or stereotyping Mizrahi perspectives.

Matalon, a key literary figure of the Mizrahi Renaissance, played a crucial role in shaping dialogue around Mizrahi identity and introducing minority stories into the canon of Israeli literature. Works like *The Sound of Our Steps* and *The One Facing Us* easily make her "one of the dominant voices that took an active part in this change" (Tsal 305). This cultural renaissance was a vital step toward asserting the agency of Mizrahi and Sephardic voices and defending their heritage at a time when the contributions of Arab Jews were often sidelined. This project of cultural reclamation in literature defines the movement, evident in the works of other Sephardic women writers such as Chochana Boukhobza, who renegotiates Tunisian Jewish exile in Paris (Belahrache and Barhoun, "Diaspora and Belonging" 3), and Ruth Knafo Setton, whose protagonist undertakes a "reverse exile" to recover Moroccan Judeo-Islamic heritage (Belahrache and Barhoun, "A Sephardic Female Odyssey" 74). Mizrahi Renaissance figures like Matalon aimed to address the gaps in cinematic, literary, artistic and musical representations of the Mizrahim/Sephardim.

In her article "The Invention of the Mizrahim," Shohat critiques the way Zionism suppresses Jews from Middle Eastern and North African backgrounds and universalizes their experiences and identities into one unified categorization, highlighting the erasure of diverse cultural narratives and the imposition of a singular identity that ignores the unique experiences of Mizrahi Jews. She suggests that this standardization of Jewishness serves to divorce Mizrahi Jews from their Arab and Muslim cultural roots, instead aligning them with a Eurocentric, Westernized Israeli identity:

> In the case of Middle Eastern Jews, the Euro-Israeli separation of the 'Jewish' and 'Middle Eastern' parts has ideologically facilitated the actual dismantling of the Jewish communities of the Muslim world, while pressuring the Oriental Jews in Israel to realign their identity according to Zionist Euro-Israeli paradigms. My point is not to idealize the situation of the Jews of Islam, but to suggest that Zionist discourse has undermined comparative studies of Jews in the Muslim world in relation to other minorities. ("Invention of the Mizrahim" 6)

Shohat contends that this process of cultural erasure forms part of a broader effort to "repress the 'Middle Easterness' of Mizrahim" and to present Jewishness and Arabness in irreconcilable opposition ("Invention of the Mizrahim" 8).

Matalon's fragmented narrative style mirrors the fractured identities of her characters, who, like the Mizrahim Shohat describes, are caught between their Arab Jewish heritage and the pressures of integration. Shohat's observation that Mizrahi identity is "a Zionist 'achievement,' one which marks a departure from previous concepts of Jewishness" ("Invention of the Mizrahim" 14), resonates with Matalon's portrayal of characters who struggle to reconcile their pasts with their presents. Shohat suggests that "existence under Zionism has meant a profound and visceral schizophrenia, mingling stubborn self-pride with an imposed self-rejection" ("Invention of the Mizrahim" 15). Applying Shohat's framework, this article examines Matalon's *The Sound of Our Steps* to contest the sociopolitical constructs that define Mizrahi identity and to revindicate the multifaceted experiences of Mizrahi Jews. Shohat's assertion that

Mizrahi identity is "dynamic, mobile, less an achieved synthesis than an unstable constellation of discourses" ("Invention of the Mizrahim" 16) synchronizes with Matalon's emphasis on hybrid identities.

Unhomely Home: Between Ruin and Repossession

In *The Sound of Our Steps*, Matalon frames the protagonist's home as a dilapidated "shack" (Matalon 7) that resists all attempts at domestication. This crumbling house, which Lucette, the Egyptian Jewish mother, fails to repair, symbolizes the insecure status of the Mizrahim and Sephardim in Israeli society. Despite Lucette's efforts to fix her home, it remains an uninhabitable space that is in constant need of reconstruction. Tsal observes that the home in the novel is marked by "profound absence and lack; it is a fragile site, easily crushed by the external world, a patch in need of stubborn reconfirmation, to be remade again and again" (Tsal 307). The novel's depiction of Lucette entering her home reinforces this sense of fragility and disarray:

> In one wide-angled glance, from the semidarkness of the hallway, she took in the shack and the area around it, she registered, noted, and classified what she saw: a slight change in the placement of the vase on the oval table, shoes left on the carpet, a cup on the coffee table, someone slouching on the sofa, a squashed cushion, a chair out of alignment. Even before she put down her bag, she stood with it in the hallway, her eyes narrowed, jaw clenched, collecting evidence, coming up with evidence of collapse, of breakdown, of the chaos of our home's disintegration. (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 7)

This precarious domestic space is a concrete manifestation of Lucette's own psychological and social instability.

After a long day, Lucette returns to the house, determined to claim her space in an external world that is alienating and hostile. In contrast, her home, despite its physical deterioration, represents a space where she can assert her authority and exercise a degree of agency over her surroundings and family. In fact, "the concept of 'home' is a major motif, and is presented as the antithesis to the Zionist space" in Matalon's *The Sound of Our Steps* (Mendelson-Maoz, *Multiculturalism in Israel* 12). For Lucette, the act of repairing and maintaining the house is not merely a practical necessity but a symbolic effort to reclaim a sense of ownership. Lucette's homecoming is an act of reclamation:

> would trumpet her entrance, her return. She proclaimed it ... Her entrance was an effort to awaken the house to her, to rouse her heart in response. She restored it to herself after the hours of exile, of not-home, of not being able to scream ... [she] took command of her domain, declared her sovereignty, banished whatever needed banishing, at least until order was restored, until her repossession of the house had been established. It only seemed that her yelling had any substance, that it said something. I could have said it was a cry of despair, but no: it was a cry of furious longing. That's what it was: the fury of longing. (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 7)

Her home becomes a site of both repossession and decay. In other words, Lucette's continuous efforts to restore her home manifest a more profound desire for belonging in an unwelcoming world.

Lucette is never fully satisfied with her existence in Israel, and she is constantly struggling to fix the superficial and external parts of her life to become less estranged. She obsessively repairs her home, appearance, children and clothes, unable to tolerate disorder and filth. She condemns "any disturbance of the right and proper order" when she returns home. Outside, she projects a presentable and restrained image to appeal to the Ashkenazi masses. She wears "her good clothes, not fancy at all but good or proper" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 1), ensuring to look appropriate when she steps out of the house. Meanwhile, she conceals her Mizrahi maternal persona that she reserves for her children at home. This compulsion is reflected in Lucette's insistence on aimlessly changing the color of her shoes: "When they were brown, she dyed them black. When they were black, she turned them brown. The brown didn't turn out too well, the black showed through. She gave them to the shoemaker, Mustaki. ('How are you, ya Mustaki?')" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 1). The act of dyeing the shoes is less about necessity and more about asserting control. The narrator elaborates: "a few times she gave them to Mustaki and then didn't wear them ... I think she didn't do the repairs to wear the shoes but to put things right, to clean up another corner of the world, to keep up her war against the disintegration of things" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 1). Her desire to reshape her surroundings stems from a sense of loss and emptiness in the Israeli host society.

At work, she represses her frustration, hunger and impulses to scream. Yet, the moment she enters the house, she experiences emotional catharsis by releasing the tension and anxiety that she has restrained during the day. Lucette "burst through the front door, starved after long hungry hours of not-home, of longing for home, of keeping up appearances out in the world, which was not-home. The weariness corroded her like acid, a weariness of body, but more than that, the weariness of keeping up appearances, of not-home" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 7). This sudden outpouring of emotions illustrates the extent of her efforts to keep her Sephardic maternal identity masked. She develops two identities: an Ashkenazi-conforming persona and an Egyptian Arab one at home with her family. At home, her suppressed urges manifest in intense outbursts: "she threw a plant or a vase … Or she smashed the dirty cups in the sink and bled from the splinters. Or she kicked the leg of the table, hurting her toe. Or she tossed a pot off the stove … Or she screamed" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 7). These episodes of purging reflect the toll of her daily physical and her struggle to maintain cohesion in an isolating society.

Mizrahi socio-political conditions are evident in the novel, demonstrating the impossibility for Arab Jews to thrive in a socio-economic culture that reduces them to the labor and working class. Discussing a potential burglary, Lucette states: "no, that's not right, the keys were in the plant pot next to the front door. We weren't worried about burglars. She wasn't worried, so we weren't either: 'What are they going to take? The tiles off the floor? Let them. We'll put down new ones'" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 1). This indifference reflects the family's limited resources and marginal social position. The mother's nonchalant attitude about replacing tiles highlights the difficulty of escaping generational poverty in a country that keeps immigrants trapped in a cycle of economic hardship. Despite her efforts to improve her living conditions, Lucette and her family remain impoverished, barely making ends meet. Once inside, she sees "scenes of devastation, a desert. The thirsty lawn, the shriveled rose beds" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 7). This persistent social inequality is further illustrated in Lucette's modest livelihood and her humble "shed provided by Amidar (a state-owned housing company) in a poor neighborhood on the outskirts of Petach Tikva" (Mendelson-Maoz, *Multiculturalism in Israel* 122). The simplicity of their living arrangements and the limited resources at their disposal not only reinforce their financial hardships but also mirror the broader socioeconomic barriers that prevent their social mobility.

Beyond economics, Lucette also expresses her rebellion against the outside laws and regulations. She transforms into a Mizrahi rebel, revolting against the social and political structures that seek to subdue her and her community. Her frequent declaration that "it's the end of the world" when she steps "inside" her home (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 7) reflects her frustration over "outside" politics. Her disdain for the legal and social systems imposed on her is made explicit when she voices her mistrust of local authority: "She hated the law and whoever made it. The law is whatever happens to suit him, she thought, and she said what she thought, too: 'Your law is just what suits you, mister'" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 7). Her rhetoric aligns with the broader resistance movements led by Mizrahi groups against Israeli authoritarianism. In fact, the country's "socioeconomic and demographic [imbalance] … brought about a growing antagonism among peripheral groups toward the core elites. Some Mizrahi Orthodox rabbis" became popular "in poor neighborhoods, becoming political spokesmen who publicly challenge Israel's relationship with … the rule of (secular) state law" (Hirschl 56).

The Flight of the Shack: The "Wandering Jew" and Deterritorialization

The mother persistently seeks to recreate a sense of familiarity for herself and her children, embedding Egyptian customs deeply within the home. Everyday practices like food preparation, linguistic choices and domestic rituals form an enduring link to her cultural roots. For example, when Lucette feels anxious or restless, she turns to Egyptian "tea with milk," a ritual that offers a sense of solace:

> Tea with milk is what she drinks when she can't drink a thing, not a thing. Tea with milk is the sign of emptiness, which has at its heart a longing for comfort, a kind of babying that she usually denies herself but now will accept … Tea with milk is a rare moment of consent. Her consent to weakness, softness, motherhood. She is most a mother when she's drinking tea with milk, dunking a slice of yesterday's dry bread in it, fishing out the soggy bits of bread with her fingers. Tea with milk gives her a sense of the true proportions of what she has and, mainly, what she doesn't have. She admires austere modesty, but as a matter of style, not substance, really not substance. (7)

Tea with milk and leftover bread, prepared the Egyptian way, are both her signature drink and a source of comfort. In such moments, Lucette allows herself an authenticity that remains suppressed in her interactions beyond the domestic sphere.

In embedding this ritual of tea with milk in her narrative, Matalon asserts that for the deterritorialized subject, cultural memory replaces physical territory. She unsettles the ideology of the "New Jew," an idealized figure who dismantles ties with the diasporic past. Placing Lucette, an Arab Jewish woman, in a foreign Israeli Ashkenazi context, Matalon problematizes conventional notions of territory, belonging, and identity.

Lucette becomes a "Wandering Jew" in Israel, the very nation that promised a permanent home for Jews everywhere. Her Egyptian Jewish identity is erased, beginning with the forced change of her name into an Ashkenazied version: "despite the practiced, almost natural use she learned to make of it, [it] never lost its strangeness, its twisted smile, just as her Hebraized name. (It was Lucette, but when she arrived in the country they told her, you're Levana. For years she would turn around whenever someone called her Levana, looking for the person with that name)" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 10). This depiction resonates with the figure of the immobilized "Wandering Jew" in the Francophone diaspora, like the father figure in Chochana Boukhobza's novel, whose exile in Paris is defined by "static, involuntary confinement" rather

than liberation (Belahrache and Barhoun, "Diaspora and Belonging" 9). In her coerced transformation into the "New Jew," Lucette is forced to deny her Egyptian Jewish roots and replace them with an artificial, state-sanctioned identity.

The family is also landless and on the verge of homelessness, which challenges Israel's claim of offering a homeland to a people without land. Mendelson-Maoz contends that the difficulties of "coping with questions of identity and memory render the [Matalon's] characters homeless. They endlessly engage in reconstructing their identities through writing and photographing in a process that … stresses how impossible it is to be at home and to feel at home and how impermanent identities are" (Mendelson-Maoz, *Multiculturalism in Israel* 102). For instance, the mother's inability to tend to her garden and the failure of her plants to grow subvert the Zionist ideal of the ingathering of Jews to settle, build and make the land thrive. Her garden, "*Elgnena,*" is portrayed "as a penal colony, a forced labor camp—for her, for her fellows. *Elgnena* as a sanatorium" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 26). Emphasizing her mother's "non-gardening" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 26) skills, the narrator recounts her continuous yet futile attempts to nurture plants. The mother exclaims: "I don't understand why I never succeed with these roses" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 25). Lucette's persistent but fruitless attempts to cultivate her land delineate displacement and unfulfilled belonging. Thus, Matalon counters the paradox of claiming a homeland while simultaneously displacing others, exposing the tension between the ideological promise of rootedness and the lived reality of exclusion and instability.

Following her failed attempts to cultivate her garden, Lucette seeks the help of a Palestinian gardener, Mustafa, who is widely employed by the Jewish residents of the neighborhood. Unlike Lucette, Mustafa is able to grow and sustain plant life. Upon assessing her garden, he reassures her, "the soil is good, there's nothing wrong with the soil, very good soil" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 156). His words suggest that the issue does not lie with the land itself but with the one attempting to cultivate it. The soil responds to Mustafa—a Palestinian—but rejects Lucette's efforts. Frustrated, she tells Mustafa, "'You see?' She pointed in despair at the wilted bushes, bending down and turning the soil over with her fingers: 'It's all because of this lousy soil, sand and more sand, *mafish fayida*, there's nothing to be done with it'" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 156). The land metaphorically recognizes its rightful caretakers, reinforcing the deeper themes of uprootedness and land ownership. In fact, in the Zionist imagination, "cultivating the Land of Israel—making the desert bloom—" signifies both a bond with and a claim to national territory; thus, the failure to grow trees and flowers, even in a small backyard, takes on symbolic weight, underscoring displacement and disconnection" (Mendelson-Maoz, *Multiculturalism in Israel* 125). This sense of foreignness and exile is further intensified when the narrator imagines the shack flying "high above the orange welding shop, the health clinic, above the thorns that covered the rectangle of land we left behind us, going up in flames at last, above the neighborhood and the shacks" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 48). The symbolic act of detaching from the ground evokes both a yearning for escape and the impossibility of rooting oneself in a hostile environment. Hence, Matalon affirms the image of the Mizrahi Israeli Jew as a constantly dislocated and dispossessed figure in Israel, emphasizing the impossibility of establishing oneself in an occupied territory.

As a Levantine, Lucette constantly uses the Egyptian dialect to express the intensity of her emotions. In this case, language becomes an alternative to geography for Lucette, who insists on using Arabic when addressing her children and other Mizrahi Jews. One of the most significant expressions she employs is "ya bint" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 7), a term she reserves exclusively for her daughter. The term is a legacy passed down from Lucette's mother, Nona. "Ya bint" symbolizes maternal love and endearment of mother and daughter. The narrator, Lucette's daughter, recalls this tradition when she greets her mother upon her return

home: "Did you miss us, ya bint, did you miss us? (Her mother, Nona, called her 'ya bint,' daughter. She sometimes called herself ya bint when scolding herself for something, but tenderly: 'Yallah, get up already, ya bint, do something'" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 7). This linguistic practice preserves Lucette's Arabness in her household, enabling her to resist Hebraization and sustain a connection to her diasporic past. In contrast, she employs Arabic to convey feelings of hatred and remorse. She refers to her husband, Maurice—also Egyptian—as "*elthaaban*" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 48), the Arabic word for snake. Maurice "was 'like a snake,' in Arabic, which was much more snakelike: '*elthaaban*.' 'The *thaaban*,' she said, 'when you cut off its head the tail goes on playing,' she said: 'That's *elthaaban* … '*El-lisan elhilweh*,' she sighed" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 48).

In the Egyptian Jewish household, Lucette and her family uphold a strong connection to their cultural roots through language, music and media. They sing Arabic songs, listen to Arabic radio and speak in the Egyptian dialect, which becomes part of what Lucette calls "our mentality" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 10). The grandmother, Nona, for example, often sings the same "Umm Kulthum song," much to her friend's annoyance (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 63), and listens exclusively to an Egyptian radio station, "Kol Yisrael's" Arabic broadcast, where "Amm Hamdan" gives "his daily sermon … 'Ikhwani, ya wlad masr eltayyibeen' ('My brothers, the good sons of Egypt') (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 83). Resistant to change, she relies on the Egyptian dialect in her daily interactions. When speaking to her daughter, she mostly uses Egyptian: "Yallah ya binti, enough, it's the middle of the night, nuss ellayl" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 83), while simultaneously ridiculing her grandson's broken and incomprehensible Arabic: "what did you say? Just say it in Hebrew, because of the Arabic you talk I can't understand a word. It's as broken as the Arabic of the Greeks in Cairo" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 117). She also reflects on the loss of her daughter's vitality and true self following their "emigration" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 112). She laments: "'I left the real, sweet Lucette behind in Egypt.' … 'The real Lucette stayed in Egypt'" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 112). Similarly, Lucette insists on watching only Arabic television, with "Arabic news" always playing in the background (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 128). This cultural immersion extends to Maurice, the father, who affectionately calls his daughter "ya omri" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 128). Their daily language choices and adherence to Egyptian traditions enable the family to maintain a cultural identity intact within their home.

Another instance of expressing Levantine roots occurs in a surreal scene where the narrator describes the metaphorical "flight" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 45) of the shack, which lifts off the ground and floats into the air. This fantastical event is orchestrated by the mother, who is referred to as "*elmuhandis*, the engineer" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 45), a term that denotes her role as both the archetype of the powerful man in Egyptian cinema and the symbolic guide for the family. The mother, "*Elmuhandis* is lifting the shack above the Nona's quarter-shack trapped between Amsalem's half and the *amm*'s quarter with the cows, and a special multipurpose cloud that screened the Friday afternoon Arabic movie with the character of the important man in the suit who was always called *elmuhandis*" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 45). This imagery emphasizes the role of Egyptian culture within the family dynamics. In using the metaphor of the floating shack and the mother as "*elmuhandis*," Matalon bridges the past and present, the real and the imagined.

The Family's Activist: Dispossession, Protest and Loyalty

Maurice, the father, is the epitome of the Mizrahi working and struggling class in the novel. Matalon uses his character to offer social commentary and voice the issues associated with the

Mizrahi movement in Israel. He emerges a militant and outspoken activist, haunted by the trauma of his family's forced exodus to Haifa. His upbringing in Cairo, Egypt, shapes his personality and radical convictions in Israel. These formative years spent on the streets of Cairo heavily contribute to developing his political discourse and intellectual and ideological beliefs. Maurice

> grew up in the street, from a child he hung out in the streets of Cairo. Cafés and cafés. His mother, poor woman, was an aristocrat …. His sister was highly educated … she was as beautiful as Laila Mourad, the actress …. He learned in the street, he learned in the cafés from those people who were communists, all day long politics, he didn't want to come here to Israel. I wanted to because of my brothers, and he came. As soon as we got off the ship in Haifa he got that obsession with the *Mizrahim* into his head, from the minute we landed. Discrimination. He was right, but he didn't do anything sensibly, he spoiled everything. (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 40)

His education, journalistic pursuits and political stance are rooted in these café sessions, where he is exposed to a culture of intellectual debate and protest. His reluctance to leave Egypt further signals his deep attachment to his homeland, a sentiment that continues even after his relocation to Israel.

Unlike his children, Maurice identifies strongly with the dispossession of Mizrahi Jews in Israel and aligns himself with their cause, while maintaining an affective and political affiliation with the broader Arab world, particularly Egypt. In the novel, he is "a political activist dedicated to fighting the Ashkenazi establishment's discrimination of Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews, while abandoning his responsibility for his family" (Mendelson-Maoz, "Memory and Space" 3). He dedicates his journalistic work to exposing and discussing the community's hardships and advocating for social and economic transformation. His frustration with their Mizrahi marginalization leads him to reject personal advancement and social mobility in favor of sustained solidarity with the Mizrahi collective. His commitment drives him to establish a political organization named "Suhba" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 40), to which he devotes himself with near-religious fervor. "Suhba" becomes the platform through which Maurice openly confronts systemic discrimination against Mizrahim.

Maurice's solidarity with Egypt makes him an outcast in Israeli society. His empathy for Egypt during its war with Israel is a betrayal according to his daughters. Following Egypt's defeat, he experiences profound shame and outrage, identifying with the Egyptian soldiers and the humiliation of the Egyptian public. His anti-Israeli reaction sparks tension within his own household. He denounces the Israeli media for its dehumanizing portrayal of Egyptians. His response is steeped in anger:

> It wasn't the mother's kind of boiling … it was the dull rage of the final, empty sobs of a baby who despaired of its mother's coming, of a fatuous expectation, his face turned blue in humiliation. He repeated this word several times—'humiliation' … 'What a humiliation. They humiliated them like dogs, worse than dogs' … I really am in mourning for … the way they keep on showing how the Egyptian soldiers ran away without their shoes, they show it again and again, humiliating the other in his defeat. They can't see that there's a tomorrow, that you have to talk to the people you humiliated. Some leadership. (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 148)

His views ultimately ignite a heated argument with his daughter, Connie, who is outraged by his stance. Horrified by his sympathy for Egypt, she lashes out at him: "You're an Arab, not a Jew, that's what you are, an Arab. Get out. Pick yourself up and get out of here, you traitor"

(Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 148). Her reaction exposes the entrenched nationalist ideology that Maurice repudiates, while also revealing the internalized fractures that shape Mizrahi identity within Israel.

In Matalon's fiction, it is evident that she experiments with the taboo and censored. When describing the family's relocation from Egypt to Israel, she deliberately uses the term "immigration" instead of the Zionist term "Aliyah," a bold and politically charged decision for an Israeli writer. The Zionist apparatus frames Jewish exodus as "Aliyah," a term laden with biblical and ideological weight. "Aliyah" means ascent or elevation to the Land of Zion, eschewing the experience of its violent uprootedness and erasing the dispossession endured by Mizrahim, Sephardim and Palestinians. Mendelson-Maoz asserts that Matalon uncovers the "clash between *aliyah* and immigration … *aliyah* … forms a pedagogical narrative of Zionist thought and education that defines the successful enterprise of settling in Palestine and building a new society. The *immigr-ation* narrative is a specific realization of this general idea" (Mendelson-Maoz, "Memory and Space" 3-4). Her choice of the term "immigration" aims to denounce the romanticization of exodus, foregrounding instead the reality of forced displacement. Matalon expands on this in her article, writing, "only a handful of writers dared to use the term 'immigration' instead of the Zionist 'Aliyah' as an act of revolt. In my view, the moment when 'immigration' fully replaces 'Aliyah' marks a significant shift. Using 'Aliyah' rather than 'immigrant' erases the hardships of immigration, framing it as a temporary step toward complete assimilation, rather than acknowledging the struggles of the process" (*Read and Write* 45-6). Similarly, in the novel, Lucette's exodus is a "catastrophic … emigration" that removes her "femininity" (Matalon 12). Maurice also adopts the same terminology, challenging the Zionist rhetoric: "after immigration to the land of our fathers and settling in it, I never severed my connections with the country, even when I was abroad" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 41). His use of "immigration" instead of "Aliyah" signals his opposition to the national myth that idealizes Jewish settlement while concealing its violent consequences.

Like her linguistic defiance, Matalon also refuses to erase Egypt and Palestine from her narrative. Lucette maintains a close and trusting relationship with Mustafa, the Palestinian gardener, despite the anti-Palestinian hysteria propagated by the Israeli state. Even when other Israeli neighbors fire Mustafa out of fear—buying into the state's portrayal of Palestinians as "knife-wielding" criminals—Lucette remains loyal: "Let them fear for their ass if they want to. The only one I'm afraid of is God" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 156). She refuses to submit to anti-Palestinian paranoia and acknowledges Mustafa's humanity. Their relationship transcends the typical employer-worker dynamic, and it evolves into a bond of mutual respect and trust. Lucette admires Mustafa's intelligence and eloquence, telling him, "You should be a lawyer, *ya* Mustafa, with brains and a tongue like yours, a *muhami*" (Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps* 156).

Conclusion

Ronit Matalon's *The Sound of Our Steps* documents the ongoing struggle of Mizrahi Jews to reclaim their voice, identity and place within a racist and repressive society. Matalon exposes the contradictions inherent in the Zionist portrayal of Jewishness and diaspora. The novel projects a Jewish reality marked by ostracization, dislocation and cultural occlusion. Its fragmented narrative form and linguistic hybridity reflect the characters' divided identities, caught between Arab Jewish heritage and the pressures of conformity within an Ashkenazi-dominated Israeli society. Matalon's work interrogates Euro-Zionist paradigms and advances a Mizrahi counter-narrative that calls into question dominant formulations of Israeli national

identity. The portrayal of Maurice, Lucette and their children reveals the fissures within Israeli identity, questioning the rigid binaries of East and West, Jewish and Arab, home and exile.

At its center, *The Sound of Our Steps* seeks to humanize Mizrahi experience while foregrounding forms of everyday resistance. Maurice's political commitment and Lucette's efforts to preserve Egyptian identity within the confines of a decaying shack reflect broader Mizrahi demands for dignity and recognition. Matalon's delineation of Egyptian Jewish immigrant characters dramatizes the psychological and emotional traumas of living in a society that demands conformity while denying cultural authenticity. The interweaving of emigration, diaspora, and belonging enables Matalon to dismantle systemic inequalities faced by Mizrahim while underscoring their cultural richness and resilience. Through her work, she asserts that identity is not monolithic but a dynamic, ever-evolving interplay of history, culture and personal experience. Hence, *The Sound of Our Steps* is Matalon's re-examination of Eurocentric meta-narratives and affirmation of the silenced diversity and multiculturalism in Israeli fiction. Matalon's work is a vital part of the Mizrahi Renaissance, a movement that seeks to reclaim the past and reimagine a more inclusive and equitable Jewish future.

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