

Half-Price Citizens: Sephardic Jews in Israel

Monday 31 December 2007, by [WARSCHAWSKI Michael](#) (Date first published: 11 July 2007).

Who are the victims of Zionism? Evidently, the Palestinians. But are they the only victims of this colonial movement? To this question, Ella Shohat responds clearly in the negative, by asserting that Zionism has also produced Jewish victims [1]. An academic of Israeli origin, Shohat has taught in New York for many years. In Israel, except in small circles, she has always been completely ostracised by the academic and intellectual world.

Without constituting an autobiography, Shohat's writing recalls her own history - a woman, a Jewish Arab and in addition an anti-Zionist - like that of many Israelis born in the Arab culture, who never could, for this reason, be recognized as true members of the Israeli national community, in particular amongst the country's elites.

The Zionist movement was born, at the beginning of the 20th Century, as an attempt to respond to anti-semitism. Its ideologues and pioneers have all been the children of European culture, colonial and modernist, encompassing its racism towards all that was not European. Wishing for the Jewish communities of the Arab world to emigrate - in need of manpower familiar with hard labour and no more expensive than local Arab labour, or to realise the dream of "return" of Jewish communities to their historic homeland - the Zionist leaders never considered those who were called the "brothers from the Eastern communities" as true equals.

Some of the oldest Jewish communities in the world, such as the Jews of Iraq or Yemen, were truly manipulated in coming to reinforce the young state; the Zionist elite did not hesitate in using terrorist methods to frighten Jews into leaving their countries, as in the case of the Iraqi Jewish community, where Shohat comes from.

If some leading Zionists never hid their anti-Sephardic racism, the majority held a paternalistic view, promising an equal place to the new Arab Jewish immigrants, following a period of socialisation and adaption to modernity, so as to be like the Ashkenazim. Victims of an uprooting they did not desire, the Arab Jewish immigrants of Israel are, for the author, refugees. Admittedly privileged compared to the Palestinian refugees, but refugees nevertheless, and victims of a structural and more or less open racism.

This essay was published in 1988 in the New York journal Social Text, at the time when, in Israel, the second generation of Zionism's Jewish victims began to call into question Ashkenazi hegemony, first in the political sphere and then in the cultural. Yet, it was not until 2001 that the essay was translated and published in Hebrew...by the Alternative Information Centre - an organisation of the radical left - and a new publishing firm, Kadem, specialising in the works of Arab Jewish authors. Which is to say it is still on the periphery of the dominant Israeli culture.

However, by the time this seminal text was finally published in Israel, it was not totally isolated. Writers such as Sami Shalom Chetrit, researchers like Yehuda Shenhav and film makers like David Ben Chetrit [2] are finally recognised for their true worth and are beginning to find their place. They all carry an extremely critical view of the racist foundations of Israeli society, and for the most part, call into question Zionism for what it has done to the Palestinians.

P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] Ella Shohat, *Le sionisme du point de vue de ses victimes juives. Les juifs orientaux en Israël* [Zionism from the Standpoint of its Jewish Victims. Oriental Jews in Israel], La Fabrique, Paris, 2006, 124 pages, 8 euros.

[2] David Ben Chetrit's last film, *Dear Father*, was devoted to the conscientious objectors in the military and was presented in preview in Paris at the beginning of November 2006.