**The Hegemonic Ashkenaziness of Hebrew Theater:**

**A Critical White Studies Perspective**

**Abstract**

The article uncovers and critiques the hegemonic Ashkenaziness in Hebrew theater, from its inception to the present day, through a critical white studies perspective. Hegemonic Ashkenaziness is comprised of four main components: Hebrew culture, Eurocentrism, privileged citizenship, and belonging to a socio-economic middle class. The development of this article emerges from these elements. Hebrew culture and Eurocentrism are exhibited through a repertoire of theater presentations comprised of Yiddish plays, translations of European plays, and a dismissive and appropriating attitude toward Mizrahi [Middle Eastern] Jews. Privileged citizenship refers to the privileged status of Ashkenazi artists and actors in the theater. The element of belonging to the socio-economic middle-class refers to the Ashkenazi audience and the cultural capital held by this population. The article concludes with the theater's potential contribution to the process of relinquishing hegemonic Ashkenazi supremacy and transforming it towards Mizrahi-Ashkenazi heterogeneity.

**Keywords**: Israeli theater; Hebrew culture; Ethnicity; Ashkenaziness; Orientalism

**Introduction**

In Israeli discourse, secular, middle-class Ashkenazi Jews of European descent are widely perceived as the hegemonic core in all areas of Israeli culture and society. From its inception in the early 20th century until today, Hebrew theater produces and reproduces a hegemonic Ashkenazi identity, both in the mainstream and on the fringe. This is seen in the repertoire of performances; the identity of the artists, directors, and producers; the composition of the audience; and the nature of criticism. This privileged “Ashkenaziness” is transparent, hidden behind a “generic” and self-evident Israeli identity, similar to the hegemonic white identity in Western culture.

From the end of the 20th century, the field of critical white studies has offered a perspective that breaks down the social privileges of whiteness and white culture, including representations, symbols, and narratives that are taken for granted (Dyer, 1997; Frankenberg, 1997; Roediger, 1998). Racial or ethnic identities (such as whiteness or Ashkenaziness) are not intrinsic, but rather are social constructions that are related to historical processes and social power relations. Homi Bhabha argues that whiteness is a power whose existence remains invisible; the tyranny of the transparent:

The critique of whiteness, whether from literary studies, labor history, autobiography, or sociology, attempts to displace the normativity of the white position by seeing it as a strategy of authority rather than an authentic or essential “identity.” Since “whiteness” naturalizes the claim to social power and epistemological privilege, displacing its position cannot be achieved by raising the “gaze of the other” or by provoking the “return” of the repressed or the oppressed. The subversive move is to reveal within the very integuments of “whiteness” the agonistic elements that make it the unsettled, disturbed form of authority that it is—the incommensurable “differences” that it must surmount; the histories of trauma and terror that it must perpetrate and from which it must protect itself; the amnesia it imposes on itself; the violence it inflicts in the process of becoming a transparent and transcendent force of authority (Bhabha, 1998, 21).

Raz Yosef (2005, 123-124) explains that the term “Ashkenaziness” is jarring to Ashkenazi Israelis, who tend to see themselves as liberal, and who experience their Ashkenaziness as: “Invisible, transcendent, extending beyond the bounds of skin color. They are astonished when Mizrahim [Jews of Middle Eastern descent], especially, turn a critical ethnographic gaze towards them, turning their attention to their Ashkenazi whiteness - an act that seems, to them, racist.” He concludes that one should “…turn (or return) a critical look at that white Ashkenazi point in space, which is not indicated and is allegedly not racist, with which one tends to identify and to infer difference,” (ibid., 124).

Sara Chinski’s pioneering work (2002) in unpacking Ashkenaziness in the plastic arts in Israel has led to a similar trend in other fields, including Israeli cinema (Yosef, 2005), Hebrew literature (Hever, 2008), and cultural history (Chacham, 2020).

My goal in this article is to uncover and establish the meanings of Ashkenaziness and to break down the process by which it is produced in Hebrew theater. I will demonstrate that Ashkenaziness in theater is complex, contains contradictions, and is unstable, as it draws boundaries separating it from other ethnic identities, while at the same time erasing its own particularity and becoming transparent. Further, I will show that in Israeli theater, Ashkenaziness is transparent not only when confronted with an Oriental identity of Jews of Middle Eastern and North African descent – as in the case of performances that replicate Orientalist stereotypes (Urian, 2004), or in the case of critical Mizrahi theater performances on the fringes of the field (Shem-Tov, 2018, 2019a; 2019b; 2019c; 2019c, 2021). I will emphasize transparent exhibitions of Ashkenaziness as they take shape on stage, not only as opposed to Orientalism, but in reference to the complex concept of hegemonic Ashkenaziness as a product of Zionism. A hegemonic Ashkenazi identity develops out of the contrast between the antisemitic image of the Eastern European Jew as degenerate, parasitic and miserable, and the image of the “new Jew” who is secular, modern and vibrant. I emphasize that these tensions result in an Ashkenaziness whose foundation is fluid in character. Further, I will show that Hebrew theater participates in the establishment of Ashkenaziness in Israeli culture, through four main components: Hebrew culture, Eurocentrism, privileged citizenship, and belonging to the middle socio-economic class.

**The Four Components of Ashkenazi Hegemony**

Orna Sasson-Levy (2013) proposes the term hegemonic “Ashkenaziness,” which describes the following characteristics: a connection between Ashkenazi ethnicity (which can be defined by origin, culture or habitus) and veteran status in Israel, being in the middle class (at least), secularism, full citizenship, and identification with the State of Israel. Sasson-Levy clarifies that there are Ashkenazi people who are not connected to this hegemonic Ashkenaziness, such as immigrants from the former USSR, if they have not yet integrated into the middle class. Alternatively, there are Israelis who are not from an Ashkenazi background, yet have adopted the habitus of hegemonic Ashkenaziness, and therefore are part of it. Sasson-Levy shows how there is a dual Ashkenazi discourse, which delineates ethnic boundaries and at the same time blurs them. Marking the boundaries between who is “Western” and who is not, and erasing these boundaries, allows Ashkenazi Jews to remain a transparent, unmarked social group, thus maintaining its status as the universal norm; the unmarked marker. This dual discourse perpetuates the Ashkenazi privileged status in Israel. Zionism created a unified Hebrew culture, blurring Jewish cultural heterogeneity, “…while it also created ‘equal and more equal’ - social hierarchies that largely overlap with the ethno-cultural contours of Israeli society,” (Yonah, 2005, 13). Zionism produces a stratified and hierarchical citizenship. The Zionist ethos is built on principles that create a hierarchy of the privileges of various groups, at the top of which is a hegemonic Ashkenaziness:

The ethnic principle that differentiates between Jews and non-Jews, and gives a clear preference to the former; the principle of country of origin that differentiates between European groups with abundant cultural capital and non-European groups with little cultural capital; the principle of relative contribution that distinguishes between the larger contribution of the European groups and the smaller contribution of the non-European groups to the establishment and strengthening of the Zionist project; the gender principle that views the Zionist project as an ideological and political framework that enables the existence of an independent Jewish community that succeeds in shedding the ‘feminine fragility’ (characterizing the lifestyle of the Jews in the Diaspora) and rediscovering its ‘masculine' qualities’. Therefore, the ethno-republican ethos sees Zionism as a European and masculine project, embodying a promise of national redemption for all Jews (ibid., 34).

In the research literature, Ashkenaziness is discussed as the opposite image of the oppression, discrimination and struggle experienced by Mizrahi Jews, who come from the Middle East, over their status and identity. Research has shown how inequality between these groups is the result of government policies that were inequitable in the distribution of state resources in the areas of labor, housing, education and absorption (Swirski, 1981). The study showed how the ethno-class structure was formed, in which Ashkenazi Jews became the Israeli middle class. Also, the postcolonial perspective presents Orientalist conceptions towards Mizrahi Jews that shaped cultural hierarchies between these groups, and created material inequalities (Shohat, 1988).

Aziza Khazzoom (2008) argues that Israeli ethnicity is rooted in processes of Orientalization, through which one group uses an East / West dichotomy to mark the other group as inferior. The subtitle of her book: *How the Polish Peddler Became a German Intellectual* sums this up well. Hegemonic Ashkenaziness is a response to the old Eastern European diasporic Ashkenaziness, which was perceived as problematic and as preventing the Westernization of Jews in Europe. In the 1950s, veteran Ashkenazi Jews from Eastern Europe barred Mizrahi Jews from positions of influence in Israeli society, because Mizrahi migration undermined their security, given that they had not yet finished their own process of Westernization. Thus, Ashkenazi Jews in Israel acted in a similar way to German Jews in the late 19th century, whose recently-achieved status as Westerners was perceived as being threatened by the mass immigration of Jews from Eastern Europe. Ashkenazi Jews, who, in the diaspora, had been perceived as “peddlers” underwent Westernization and, in Israel, became “German intellectuals” in the hegemonic Ashkenazi culture. The Westernization of Ashkenazi Jewry was achieved through the rejection of Yiddish and religious tradition.

Hebrew theater was born and flourished in Eastern Europe. Its relationship to the Jews of Central Europe in particular and to Western culture in general were shaped by processes of Orientalization. Hebrew theater, therefore, perceives itself as Western. It is based on a Hebrew culture of “negation of the diaspora.” That is, it erases Mizrahi identity from a Eurocentric culture, in which European aesthetics and themes are the normative standard.

Following this discussion, four components of Ashkenazi hegemony arise: 1) Hebrew culture; 2) Eurocentrism; 3) privileged citizenship 4) belong to the middle class. This article analyzes how these four elements are understood in Hebrew theater.