**Literary Writing in the Other’s Language in a Pluralist and Multilingual Society: The Novel *In the Shade of the Jujube Tree* by Jeries Tannous**

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**Abstract**

Writing in the language of the Other in Israel is prevalent among Palestinian-Arab authors who adopt the language of the Jewish majority as their creative tongue next to their native Arabic. Despite the powerful creative presence of these authors in the local cultural landscape, they have attracted little scholarly attention. This study explores the political, sociolinguistic, and psychological aspects of Arab authors in Israel writing in Hebrew, focusing on Jeries Tannous' 2007 novel *In the Shade of the Jujube Tree*[[1]](#footnote-1). Based on a content analysis of the novel and a semi-structured interview with the author, this study demonstrates that the use of Hebrew by Arab authors in Israel has three purposes. First, the symbolic-normative purpose: using the other’s language to establish an alternative collective identity and bring the minority culture from the margins to the mainstream. Second, the functional purpose: using Hebrew because the author in some cases is more proficient in that language than in his mother tongue. Third, the emotional purpose: using Hebrew to express individual and collective mental distress and traumas.

**Keywords***:* Palestinian-Arabs in Israel; Translingual writing; Jeries Tannous; Majority language; Minority groups; Cultural identity.

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**Introduction: Writing in the Other’s Language**

The phenomenon of writing in the other's language is a significant aspect of societies subjected to foreign cultural hegemony during colonial and postcolonial periods.[[2]](#footnote-2) This phenomenon refers to historical ethnic groups present in a territory for centuries or new immigrants emerging from major cities due to massive migration flows.[[3]](#footnote-3) For example, in the 18th and 19th centuries, Russian elites preferred to speak, read, and write in French, while German was a major language among merchants and government officials in European countries. French became the main language of government officials and educated individuals in Africa and Asia due to French conquests. English also became the main language in Asia and Africa in the 19th century.[[4]](#footnote-4)

This phenomenon is a result of a process known by Homi Bhabha as "Hybridization".[[5]](#footnote-5) Bhabha describes in his theory, which refers to Edward Said's theory, how a new cultural identity is emerging in a multicultural world.[[6]](#footnote-6) Contrary to Said's dichotomous view, which separates a suppressor colonizer from a suppressed colonized, Bhabha argues that in the inter-cultural encounter between the colonizer and the colonized, a bilateral and complex exchange takes place. Despite the inequality between the two sides, colonial rule absorbs values and cultural components from the controlled society, and at the same time, it instills in the locals exposure to another culture and redefines their identity.

Deleuze and Guattari coined the term "minority culture" in their monographic work of Kafka, which refers to literature written by an ethnic, national, or other minority in the majority language.[[7]](#footnote-7) This literature has three characteristics: de-territorialization, connecting the individual and the political, and the system of linguistic expression.[[8]](#footnote-8)

**The Palestinian-Arab Minority in Israel**

Israeli society is deeply divided. The relations between the various communities are characterized by inequality, alienation, lack of dialogue and mutual negation.[[9]](#footnote-9) The divide is particularly deep between the Jewish majority and Palestinian-Arab (hereafter, “Arab”) minority – which represents about a fifth of Israel’s population – given the intractable national conflict between them.[[10]](#footnote-10) The Arabs have undergone a historical process of alienation following the 1948 war, which involved the destruction of some 450 of their communities, and the uprooting of 750,000 people. After the establishment of the State of Israel that year, the Arabs became a minority, and their national struggle against the state revolved around land expropriations and lack of socioeconomic and political equality, worsening their relations with the Jews.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Inequality and power struggles between the two communities are also evident in the linguistic realm. Hebrew is the dominant language in the landscape and in public institutes, while Arabic is marginalized.[[12]](#footnote-12) Its dominance results in its increasing use by Arabs in both formal and informal contexts.[[13]](#footnote-13) The widespread practice of excluding Arabic became formalized in 2018, upon the passing of the Nation-State Law, which downgraded it from an official language to a “special status” language, leaving Hebrew as the only official language in Israel.[[14]](#footnote-14) In the education system, there is also a gap between the two languages. For Arabs, proficiency in Hebrew is a condition for social mobility, whereas for Jews Arabic is perceived as unimportant, hence their low motivation to acquire it.[[15]](#footnote-15)

These ongoing injustices, combined with the effects of the intractable conflict, have shaped the identity repertoire of the Arabs.[[16]](#footnote-16) The Arabs’ identity is inherently conflictual, given the ongoing contradictions between their civil identity as citizens in Jewish state, and their national identity as members of the Palestinian people.[[17]](#footnote-17) This requires the Arabs to struggle to change the state’s dominant Jewish identity and create one that can be shared by all its citizens, while protecting their unique cultural and ethnonational identity.[[18]](#footnote-18)

The Arab identity is dynamic, and has undergone significant changes since the establishment of the State of Israel. It has been affected by multiple factors, some of them external, economic and political, and others are internal implications of economic and political changes, such as modernization and urbanization.[[19]](#footnote-19) Studies point to three main periods in which the Arabs’ identity was shaped. In the first, between the 1948 and 1967 wars, their civic-Israeli identity was prominent, given their desire to become integrated in the state. In the second, between the 1967 and the 1973 wars, the ethnic-Palestinian and national-Arab elements were pronounced, and the civic-Israeli aspect became weakened, following the Israeli occupation of the Gaza Strip and West Bank, which resulted in increased contacts between the Arabs within Israel, the Palestinians under occupation, and the rest of the Arab world. In the third period, from 1973 until today, is characterized by emphasis on the ethnic-Palestinian component and a weakening of the national-Arab and civic-Israeli ones. At the same time, the Islamic component has become stronger than in the other two periods.[[20]](#footnote-20)

The inner diversity of Arab society in Israel also affects the various aspects of its identity. In terms of religion, it is made up of Muslims, Christians and Druze. The Druze are distinct in terms of their identity definition, as the Arab-cultural and civic-Israeli aspects are pronounced, at the expense of the Palestinian-ethnic aspect. This is a result of the unique characteristics of the Druze community, including serving in the Israeli military and their institutional separation from the rest of the Arab population through separate religious courts and public schools.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Some scholars argue that although alienated from Israeli identity, it is present in Arabs’ lives in utilitarian terms, and that Arab society is undergoing functional (rather than emotional) Israelization.[[22]](#footnote-22) This process is facilitated by the Arabs’ growing integration in the Israeli labor market and the study of Hebrew and Jewish culture as mandatory subjects in Arab schools.[[23]](#footnote-23)

The research review above confirms Edward Said's theory that identity is based on multiplicity, differences, and development rather than stability and unity. Said's concept of "hybrid identity" encourages breaking barriers between identities in multicultural societies through cross-cultural interactions and dialogues. He believes that all cultures are hybrid, intermixed, differentiated, and interwoven, with no single, pure culture among them.[[24]](#footnote-24)

**Writing in the Other’s Language: Arab Authors in Israel**

Bilingualism among Arabs in Israel began in 1948, with Hebrew gradually gaining influence in Arab literature. The first period, until 1976, saw Arab authors struggle with Hebrew and maintain Arabic purity. From 1976 to the 1980s, Arab intellectuals gained Hebrew command but were concerned about its role in the Zionist-Israeli discourse. They challenged the majority language by highlighting Arabic's richness through the cynical and ironic use of Hebrew words. Since the 1980s, Arabs have mastered Hebrew through formal education and daily interactions with Jewish society, leading to spontaneous bilingualism in speech and writing.[[25]](#footnote-25) Many intellectuals have become truly bilingual, becoming authors and even writing in Hebrew.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Scholars argue that the phenomenon of Arab authors writing Hebrew literature is strongly related to their sociopolitical and historical background.[[27]](#footnote-27) These authors, belonging to a minority culture within the Jewish-Israeli majority culture, have a complex condition that involves attempting to "un-Jew" Hebrew to make it more Israeli and less Jewish.[[28]](#footnote-28) Political power relations and the penetration of the majority into minority culture have led to bilingual Arab writers adopting Hebrew for instrumental purposes and writing literature.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Shakkur and Tarbiyah argue that Palestinian-Arab culture is not attractive enough to Jews and is seen as unmodern, so these authors believe it is important to depict this culture in their Hebrew-language writings for political and humane reasons.[[30]](#footnote-30) Tannenbaum argues that it is not only against the background of the complex, dialectic political and cultural conflict that the psychological and cultural world of those Arab authors who have chosen to write Hebrew literature can be understood, but also against a more personal, emotional one, as language is intimately related to both individual and collective identity.[[31]](#footnote-31)

The authors' writing is seen as a multilingual phenomenon mirroring their lived reality, with most studying in the Israeli education system and acquiring Hebrew at a young age.[[32]](#footnote-32) Tannenbaum also shows how the second language is sometimes used as a defense mechanism or a way of coping or even escaping stress, blame, and other emotions.[[33]](#footnote-33) Writing in a language that is not one’s native one is called “translingualism”.[[34]](#footnote-34) This concept provides a broader perspective on the relationship between language use, psychological states, and sociopolitical issues in multilingual and multicultural societies.

Arab writers live in a dynamic, multilingual reality, and their writing may be seen as mirroring the phenomenon of translation, based on a less rigid conception of one's identity.[[35]](#footnote-35) Writing in a new language offers authors unique and safe spaces to invent new identities and sound new voices, positioning themselves as legitimate, talented members of the new community.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Hebrew-language writing by Arab authors has been a contentious issue among critics and laypeople, including Arabs and Jews. Some argue that Arab authors blur the Jewish national identity in Hebrew literature,[[37]](#footnote-37) while others view them as exceptional and deserving of benefits as representatives of the minority.[[38]](#footnote-38) Hever believes this phenomenon is exceptional in the Israeli cultural landscape but can undermine traditional national cultural boundaries. However, he maintains that the canon of Hebrew literature maintains the linkage between the author's ethnic identity and the language, despite Arab authors challenging these conventions.[[39]](#footnote-39) Arab critics also criticize the phenomenon, arguing that it understates its value and has a negative impact on local Palestinian-Arab literature and society. They warn that such writing betrays national identity, with Arabic being a key component.[[40]](#footnote-40)

**The Bilingual Arab Writer Jeries Tannous**

Born in 1937, Tannous is a Christian Arab, the son of peasant farmers from the village of Maghar. He studied at the village school until the eighth grade and then moved to the municipal high school in Nazareth. He acquired his BA from Haifa University, having studied both Arabic and Hebrew languages and literatures. Since 1955 and for 48 years, he has been working as a Hebrew teacher in various Arab high schools. Tannous writes prose and poetry in both languages and has authored three novels in Arabic: The Memory of Days (2008), Memory (2005), and The Hand of Faith (2005). In addition, he also wrote the Hebrew novel that is the focus of the present work. Finally, he wrote a dictionary called Pleasant Conflict (2006) on the similarities and differences between Hebrew and Arabic.[[41]](#footnote-41)

In his 2007 novel, In the Shade of the Jujube Tree: Pictures from My Neighborhood’s Life, Jeries Tannous describes the social reality in an Arab village from the perspective of a nine-year-old boy. This novel is akin to the autobiographical genre, as it describes real-life wartime events that took place in the author’s native village, Maghar, in 1948, as well as presents various aspects of rural life. Nevertheless, Tannous refuses to classify his work as an autobiography but considers it a novel, explaining that the events described are not personal but collective, typical of all Arab villages prior to the establishment of the State of Israel:

My novel is not an autobiography but a series of chapters whose events unfold in each of the neighborhoods of our villages during the first half of the previous century. The protagonists of my novel are present in each of the neighborhoods of Palestine’s villages at that time. The events of the war had to rely on what happened in my village, Maghar, and they essentially shed light on the story of that homeland.[[42]](#footnote-42)

This novel attracted considerable attention due to the sensitive nature of the historical period on which Tannous wrote—that of the military, political, and cultural encounter between Arab and Jewish culture—and the implications of that encounter for the Arabs.[[43]](#footnote-43)

**The Present Study**

The phenomenon of Arab authors writing in Hebrew is thus criticized on both the Jewish-Israeli and Palestinian-Arab sides. This controversy has often led to ignoring this phenomenon in both the literary and research spheres, so that very few studies have dealt with it. Note, in addition, that these studies have usually focused on the few writers that have attracted popular attention.

The present study focuses on the Hebrew-language writing of bilingual author Jeries Tannous. His writing is particularly interesting in the present context since he has published in both Arabic and Hebrew. Hence, his choice of writing in Hebrew, unlike perhaps that of others, has been deliberate rather than a default one due to more advanced expressive skills in the other’s language. In addition, it is important to study Tannous’ translingual writing given the lack of scholarly attention to it due to his relative public anonymity, which led author Hanna Ibrahim to call him “the author hidden in his shell”.[[44]](#footnote-44)

This study examines the political, sociolinguistic, and psychological aspects of the phenomenon of Arab author living in Israel who write in Hebrew by focusing on the case study of Jeries Tannous’ 2007 Hebrew novel In the Shade of the Jujube Tree. Basing the analysis on one literary work, which is the only work written in Hebrew by Tannous, can be a major limitation of the current study since basing the research conclusions on the analysis of one work cannot reflect sweeping generalizations regarding the phenomenon of literary writing in Hebrew by Arab writers in Israel. Hence, it is recommended to conduct ongoing studies that expand the research sample while examining this phenomenon among other writers with the aim of providing more general and holistic research insights.

The research questions are:

RQ1: What are the political, sociolinguistic, and psycho-emotional characteristics of the translingual writing phenomenon articulated in the novel?

RQ2: What are the author’s motivations for writing in Hebrew?

RQ3: How does the author address the hegemonic narratives of the national conflict?

RQ4: How is the Jewish-Israeli Other reflected in his writing?

Content analysis was used in order to identify the sociolinguistic and psycho-emotional characteristics of writing in a second language. This approach involves textual analysis designed to achieve an accurate and objective description of certain messages in these texts in order to derive conclusions applicable in broader contexts. One of the most important steps in content analysis is classifying the data into categories and subcategories.[[45]](#footnote-45)

In the first step, the texts to be analyzed were selected: In the Shade of the Jujube Tree and the transcription of a semi-structured interview with the author, where he reported on his linguistic and emotional experiences while writing it and his motivations for writing in Hebrew (see the interview questions in Appendix A). These were used to support and elaborate on the findings arising from the analysis of the novel itself. The interview was held in Arabic in the author’s home with his informed consent. It was videotaped, transcribed, and then professionally translated into English for the purpose of this study. In the second step, the contents of the two texts were classified into two major categories derived from the research questions: the literary background and the main messages that recurred within them. The first included major themes in the novel and interview, and the second included the sociolinguistic and emotional characteristics of writing in a second language. In the third step, the results of the analyses were presented in the findings section.

**Findings**

***1. Major themes in the novel and interview***

Content analysis of the novel and interview indicated in several themes, including the individual and collective peasant identity; attitudes towards the Jewish Other; and the Arab-Israeli conflict. These are analyzed in turn below.

*1.1 Individual and collective peasant identity*

Many of the novel’s chapters (1-18) deal with the pre-statehood period and describe Arab society in its socioeconomic and cultural aspects, centered as they were on land and agriculture. This description is not designed to glorify the author’s ancestors or wax nostalgic about the past, but to confront Zionist national ideology, which uses various narratives and political, religious, and literary texts to legitimize the State of Israel, such as the motif of describing the country before Jewish immigration as “an empty land meant for a people without a land”.[[46]](#footnote-46)

Tannous highlights the importance of the land and its cultivation by the Arabs in order to shatter the myth of the “empty land” that is so dominant in Zionist discourse, and which legitimizes the country’s Jewish settlement. In doing so, he creates a counter-myth that emphasizes the attachment of the Arab individual to his land, proving his rootedness in the country and conversely, the detachment of the Jews from the same land. The author stated this explicitly when saying that he wrote that novel in order to “inform the Jewish reader of our powerful attachment to the land and country”.[[47]](#footnote-47) In the novel, he writes:

I’m the son of a family of *fellah*s [peasants]. My father is a *fellah*, scion to proud and respectable *fellah*s. For many generations, his ancestors lived in the village and cultivated the fields. […] His fathers and their forefathers over many generations lived in the neighborhood, and so my father considered his neighborhood and land precious. I heard these things said by my father when a stranger outside our neighborhood offered him to buy some of his land.[[48]](#footnote-48)

What business do the Jews have here, at our place? We have been landowners and *fellah*s ever since God created hard labor. I never heard from my grandmother, not even once, that the fields we’re cultivating used to belong to Jews at one time or another. She always used to tell me: Listen, son, this is the land of your fathers and forefathers. They earned an honest living from it. You too will grow and become a respectable *fellah* and keep it and it will give you bread and honor.[[49]](#footnote-49)

 This description indicates that the Arab *fellah*’s attachment to his land is powerful, and that for him, it is not only a source of livelihood, but carries with it an emotional and symbolic significance, as a source of honor.

 Elsewhere, the protagonist, the little boy, tells us that his parents’ interest in the land outweighed their interest in him and that they found no time to listen to him and understand his pains:

My parents have no time to hear my cries. It suffices for my father to fight the rocky soil that breaks his plow. It suffices for him to wage his stubborn war against the thistle and the thorn, and his bread of adversity. It suffices for my mother to toil by the sweat of her brow, from before the cock crows and without ever ending! How then can they find the time to hear my pain?[[50]](#footnote-50)

Thus, not only did the work of the land take priority over childrearing, but the children did their share by paying that personal price. So precious was the land for the narrator, that everyone, including children, were willing to sacrifice for it. It is also made clear that agriculture is a key component of the narrator’s individual and collective identity, or a “core value” to use Smolicz’s terminology.[[51]](#footnote-51) The author therefore defines himself as the son of “Abu-Jamil the *fellah*”, and the son of a “*fellah* family”.

In the interview, Tannous referred to his deep attachment to the land, referring to both as a single, indivisible entity:

Someone from Haifa University asked me once, why the Jujube? So I told her that when I was a baby all wrapped in whites, my mother placed me under a Jujube tree and went to work in the field. Suddenly, she heard a baby cry, and knew it was me. She approached me and found me on the ground among the thorns, sand and blood. When my mother told me about it I said to her that my taboo was written on the ground: blood, man, land. [In Hebrew these three are derived from the same root: *dam, adam, adama*].

*1.2 Attitudes toward the Other*

In the novel under study, the Other is the Jewish Israeli and his Zionist narrative. Tannous describes his initial encounter and unfolding relationship with that Other:

 Not once have I heard my father speak ill of the Jews. […] There are Jewish villages around us, and we hardly have any contact. There is no hostility between us and them […]. We spoke with our Jewish neighbors in Ginosar [on the shore of Lake Tiberias] and they promised us to maintain the good neighborly relations we have always had. We all know them and their leader Igal [future general Yigal Allon], and these are respectable people, and Igal’s “word” is a word. They keep their promises.[[52]](#footnote-52)

Apparently, Tannous portrays the figure of the Jew in his novel as a passive and quiet neighbor, the relations with whom are characterized by peace, tranquility, and mutual respect. Moreover, it is that neighbor who promises to protect the narrator’s land and village from the occupation. The narrator does not blame the Jew for the loss of his homeland, but considers the Jewish military responsible for the massacres, uprooting, and destruction. In the interview, Tannous reinforces his perception of the Jewish Other as a neighbor with whom a moderate and equal dialogue should be conducted, rather than as an enemy to be treated with hostility. According to the author, extremism with relation to the Other prevents constructive interaction: “Things need to be balanced and moderated. What is the benefit of extremism? It is useless. If you want to know that moderate discourse is, read Shakespeare”.

The lack of equal and respectful dialogue between the two parties to the conflict perpetuates it, leading to multiple losses on both sides:

We both hang on and pull with all our might, each side trying to win it all. Each one of us thinks that it is all his and that the other has no right. We both struggle, and then something happened that made us both equally mad: the tasty, beautiful stalk is cut in two, and each gained only half of it. Had we had a common language, we would not have struggled and could have compromised, but we were both too greedy, unwilling to give up the entire stalk.[[53]](#footnote-53)

Here, the author alludes to the Arab-Jewish struggle for the land, suggesting that the two sides do not have a shared language that can serve as a cultural bridge reducing the intensity of the conflict.

Reference to the Other also includes the Other’s historical and cultural narratives, particularly those that clash with the Palestinian-Arab narrative and collective memory. Two different historical narratives plague the conflict. For the Palestinians, Israel’s victory in the 1948 war involved the uprooting of the Arabs from their land; hence, the war is considered a national catastrophe, or Nakba. The Zionist-Jewish narrative, on the other hand, suggests that the Arabs left the country during the war and became refugees of their own free will.[[54]](#footnote-54) What is the dominant historical narrative in the novel? Does it point the blame at the Jewish Other for uprooting the Arabs? Or at the Arabs for having abandoned their lands?

Tannous’ answer to those vexing questions is not straightforward, and the description paints a complex picture without clearly favoring either narrative. On the one hand, the author describes cases where *fellah*s were uprooted, as in his description of the massacre in Eilabun and the ensuing deportation of its inhabitants: “The Jews arrived in their village and they surrendered and naïvely believed no harm would come their way, as they have not taken part in the war, but alas, now they became victims and their martyrs were many and from their village they were uprooted”.[[55]](#footnote-55) On the other hand, the author acknowledges that atrocities such as the massacre and deportation in Eilabun made local Arabs panic, with some fleeing their villages to Lebanon:

The deportation and the slaughter of the sons of the people of Eilabun were cause enough to those of our neighborhood who had hesitated. I heard our neighbor plead with my father, saying: let’s flee, let’s leave the neighborhood. The Jews will do to us what they did to the people of Eilabun […]. Many young men from our neighborhood and others packed their bags and abandoned the village, making great haste, heading north to Lebanon.[[56]](#footnote-56)

*1.3 The Arab-Jewish conflict*

The second section of the novel (Chapters 19-22) moves on from the description of the pre-statehood period to describing the Arab-Jewish conflict over the land (in the 1948 war). Here, the author sheds light on the catastrophe experienced by Palestinian-Arab society as a result of losing the land and being uprooted from the very essence of its existence in the homeland. Tannous’ strategy, as revealed in the novel, is to begin with a bucolic description of rural Arab Palestine, whose society centered on the land and its cultivation, to show how dear it was to the *fellah*, to the point of preferring it over his children, and therefore seen as a key element in both individual and collective identity. Next, the author proceeds to describe the loss of the land, to highlight the enormity of the Arab defeat and downfall.

This second section is also designed to correct commonly held stereotypes about the Arabs in the Jewish mind. Tannous uses the first tense in order to offer an alternative perspective, portraying the Arabs as victims. This portrayal is opposed to the dominant view in Zionist literary discourse of this population as an aggressive enemy. Tannous uses the first person in an attempt to offer a different perspective on the Arab population as innocent victims rather than as aggressors:

My father plowed and planted, pruned and picked, and we lived a peaceful, tranquil life. Who would come to fight us and for what? Never has my father dispossessed anyone, his land he inherited from his own father, and he from his own. […] In our neighborhood, we have no weapons. My father’s only weapon is the knife to cut tobacco leaves and the hatchet to fix the plows. […] I have never heard my father speak ill of the Jews. He has never held a grudge against them; they have never occupied his attention. Why do they harass us? […] Why do they want to uproot and dispossess us?[[57]](#footnote-57)

As described in this novel, the Arab population did not participate willingly in the 1948 war – certainly not out of a desire to attack the Jews, but was forced upon them as they needed to defend themselves. It led to heavy losses on the Arab side, due to the power imbalance between the two sides:

“And what shall we do, dear neighbor, I cherish my home and my newly planted olive seedlings. Indeed, it is for my sons that I have planted them. What good would those seedlings do to my sons should the soldiers of the Haganah [Jewish militia] enter [our village] and slaughter the youngsters? Who will eat the olives?” “What you say is true”, answers my father. “But should we go and leave everything behind? We must fight, at least to defend ourselves”. “We must do something”, says the neighbor. “What shall we do with our rifles and pistols? Can we beat back the Jewish soldiers with their airplanes, cannons and other weapons whose names we don’t even know?”[[58]](#footnote-58)

***2. The characteristics of writing in a second language***

*2.1 Freedom of speech*

The description of the daily life of the Arab *fellah*s in the pre-statehood period is at the center of the novel, marginalizing the national issue, with the Arab-Jewish conflict covered only in the novel’s last four chapters. Accordingly, it may be speculated that writing in the Other’s language allows the author greater freedom of expression than writing in the first, liberating him of the commitment to “large”, historical, national and political collective issues and giving him the opportunity to express his individual identity, his own thoughts and feelings, his day-to-day. This is captured in the following quote: “The camel, that same giant beast, was used to carry heavy loads in peacetime as in wartime. How do I know about the wars I haven’t seen? My father often spoke about the days of the war with the English”.[[59]](#footnote-59)

This quote sheds some light on the author’s disinterestedness in the war, since he describes issues as perceived by the narrator, a nine-year-old, who is interested in his tangible environment more than in historical, national events. He therefore excels in describing the animals in the household – the ox, mare, colt, camel, cow and donkey – in exquisite detail, while failing to describe the “war with the English” (the 1936-39 Arab Revolt designed to end Jewish settlement in Palestine that ended in destruction and defeat), which he had not experienced personally, and only heard about from members of the previous generation. Even the events of the 1948 war that he did experience firsthand are only described briefly near the end of the novel, with emphasis on the child’s difficulty to fathom its motives. This difficulty is expressed by the narrator by using multiple, naïve questions: “How much power there is in war?”; “Who will come to fight us and for what?”; “What did the English have to do in our country?”; “In my neighborhood, I have never seen a single Jew, so how would they come now and take over our neighborhood? Where would we go, which fields would we work? What thrashing floor would we play on? Do the Jews think that my father and the other *fellah*s in the neighborhood let them take our land and our homes?”[[60]](#footnote-60)

In addition, the use of a second language also frees the author to discuss sensitive, embarrassing and shameful issues, particularly verbal and physical violence directed at children: “The shepherd’s mighty arm catches up with me and knocks me over from the colt’s back, and a torrent of spanks and kicks, a hail of curses wash over me”.[[61]](#footnote-61)

In addition, the narrator often expresses “negative” or “unpleasant” emotions:

* *Hatred:* “We hated big brothers”;[[62]](#footnote-62) the verb “hate” recurs often in the novel.
* *Fear:* “I was afraid more than anyone else, and my heartbeats threatened to betray my fear”.[[63]](#footnote-63)
* *Weakness:* “Lucky for me, this was nighttime, and nobody noticed my weakness nor groped or fumbled in my pants”.[[64]](#footnote-64)
* *Vengefulness:* “God, lend me the skill to avoid exposing my plot, so that my brother would know what it is to suffer”; “Serves him right, the trampler of children. He is yet to witness suffering”.[[65]](#footnote-65)
* *Envy:* “I have never ceased to envy my brother”.[[66]](#footnote-66)
* *Failure:* “The winners cheer, and the losers have a sullen look on their face, and can’t stop complaining and shouting. The uproar is loud. As usual, I’m on the losing side, as in all games”.[[67]](#footnote-67)

The novel also provides many descriptions of behaviors seen as unrespectable and unpleasant, such as:

* *Cheating in prayer:* “I would cheat and repeat the prayer four times rather than five”.[[68]](#footnote-68)
* *Animal abuse:* “The blessing was over and a hail of rocks rained upon him, on the lizard, and for the poor creature, one rock is enough to pin him down. We pounce on him, grab him in our hands, slay him with a jackknife […] as though explaining to him that it is better for him to die of our rocks than to die like his mother, who fell into the clay oven, and she blew out her intestines and was roasted on its embers that whisper like a serpent.[[69]](#footnote-69)
* *Theft:* “What do you say we catch one of these pests [a chicken] and run over to the vineyard of Widow Um-Daoud, and molest it and have our fun no matter what?”[[70]](#footnote-70)
* *Lies:* “And the neighbor elaborates in rich details (mostly untrue) as he discovers my manliness and heroism to my father and the others present”.[[71]](#footnote-71)
* *Illicit relationships:* “Everyone on the neighborhood knows that he was caught keeping out of sight with Anisa in the barn”.[[72]](#footnote-72)
* *Cursing and mocking others:* “You rascal, you dog”; “shut up”; “son of a shrew”; “accursed like your father”; “cursed is the guard”; “I’m such an idiot”; “son of a gun”; “Adnan, Farid the coward, Elias the cruel, his brother Marwan, spoiled Issa and me”.[[73]](#footnote-73)

Finally, the author’s freedom of speech is reflected in criticizing social norms and religious rituals. In several passages, the narrator is critical of the church and priests, for example, “Woe betides the priest who promised us the fires of Hell. […] He would always made it clear that Heaven belongs to the servants of God and all the pure ones. Apparently, Heaven is destined for him and his kind, and if that is so, then I can do without it”.[[74]](#footnote-74)

*2.2 Authentic and objective description*

The 1948 war is an emotionally charged if not traumatic issue for the Arab minority that remained in the State of Israel, due to the defeat and compounded losses of the Arab side. Hence, descriptions of its events are liable to arouse extremely negative feelings of sorrow, anguish, and rage. Tannous’ writing in the Other’s language in his novel indicates that the issue of the war can be addressed less one-sidedly if we compare it to war description by other authors who wrote in Arabic, and even with the writing of Tannous’ himself in his native tongue. Arguably, writing in a second language enables the author to observe the conflict from a more external viewpoint and free himself, to a certain extent, from his subjective perspective. The author’s statement in the interview that he has experienced the wartime events himself is indicative of his desire to convey the impression that in his novel, he describes true events objectively and authentically – as a witness:

I have experienced both the Second World War and the 48. In the 48 war, I was injured and my friends were killed. Fortunately, my family escaped – in the middle of the road my dad asked us to stop and rest a bit. My uncle’s wife was about to give birth, they helped her and she delivered a boy. Why am I telling you this? Because this is what it means to live in a time and place.

The attempt to seem authentic and objective is also reflected in the description of the wartime events, in that Tannous avoids a sweeping bias towards a single historical narrative, either the Arab (uprooting) or Jewish (escape). In both the novel and interview, as shown below, the author merges the two narratives, thereby presenting a more complex and accurate view:

In my book *In the Shade of the Jujube Tree*, I wrote a kind of biography of a village neighborhood, and shrewdly, I inserted a horrific description of a massacre in a nearby Christian village [Eilabun], located some three miles from my village. The Jewish military gathered the inhabitants and picked the finest of their youth, fourteen in number, and shot them one by one, telling the inhabitants to leave the village in the direction of Lebanon. I described the expulsion march that passed through my village, which I saw with my own eyes. The Jewish army waited for the refugees to pass through our village on their way north and describe the massacre to us. This persuaded many of our villagers to flee. By the way, as an eleven-year-old, I took part in the burial ceremony of the massacred.

*2.3 Minority culture in the majority language*

Although written in Hebrew, the language of the Other, clearly Tannous’ novel has not broken with the Palestinian-Arab cultural characteristics that are part and parcel of his own identity. Accordingly, the novel is replete with expressions, proverbs, poems and terms borrowed from Arab culture, such as *majadra, qumbaz, kefiyyeh, rajad, masnad, hakamsha,* and *naqifa*. Most important is the use of the Arabic word *fellah* throughout the text, to highlight the small-farmer identity as a key element in the Arab identity.[[75]](#footnote-75)

Whenever the author mentions an Arabic expression or quote, he explains it in Hebrew in a footnote, a strategy designed to transmit Arab culture to the Other’s language, and to influence the Other through language as a cultural bridge. In other words, move Arabic from the Israeli margins to the mainstream and establish an identity alternative to the Zionist identity that dominates the Israeli literary discourse. For example,

We are neighbors and your son is our own, and God will testify of me and all of us that we love Issa like a son. Indeed they are children and “the judge of children hangs himself” – this is an Arabic proverb (*Qadi al-awlad intahar*) meaning that whoever tries to do justice among children is bound to be disappointed.[[76]](#footnote-76)

In the interview, the author described his role as bridging between the two cultures. To do so, he tries to expose the Jewish reader to the culture of the Arab population in Israel, its narrative and collective memory:

The Arab reader liked my writing, because I conveyed to the other side the depth of our attachment to our country, as if saying to the Arab reader, don’t worry, I’ll spread the word about our love to our country, and the terrible injustice done to us to the Jewish people, prevented as it has been by others from knowing the truth.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

In their Hebrew writings, Arab authors aim to integrate Palestinian Arab culture into Israeli identity by breaking conventions and expanding it to include minority groups. They challenge the Zionist-Jewish national identity and promote an alternative identity, the indigenous Arab identity. The narrator in In the Shade of the Jujube Tree, a nine-year-old, demonstrates the deep-rooted Arab presence in Israel, challenging the myth of a "land without a people" central to Zionist ideology. This anti-myth of deep Arab belonging is presented in a subversive manner. Jeries Tannous, in an interview, shared his deep attachment to the land, referencing the Hebrew words "blood, man, and land". He emphasized the popularity and esteem of his book among Arab readers due to his ability to convey the depth of this attachment to the Jewish reader. Studies suggest that minorities write in the majority language to challenge hegemony,[[77]](#footnote-77) particularly Arabs writing in Hebrew. They fear Zionist ideological discourse will erase their Palestinian narrative, motivating them to challenge Hebrew as the majority language. This is due to the physical expropriation of their place identity, replacing Arabic names with Hebrew ones, and transforming the country's settlement landscape.[[78]](#footnote-78)

In the novel under study, Tannous attempts to create a cultural encounter between Arab and Jewish cultures. He is open and tolerant towards the Jewish Other in an attempt to “correct” the stereotypes of the self and Other as reflected in the literary consensus in Israel in works in both Arabic and Hebrew that portray the Other as threatening, inscrutable, and hostile.[[79]](#footnote-79) Thus, it may be argued, as do Shakkur and Tarbiyah,[[80]](#footnote-80) that the author considers himself a messenger, a mediator, and a bridge-builder between Arabic and Hebrew and their associated cultures, considering his literary writing a potential path for resolving the conflict.

Apparently, the desire to disconnect the Arabs from the homeland has led the author to emphasize the collective indigenous identity of his people, and to express the different way in which he perceives himself and the national Other.[[81]](#footnote-81) Tannous’s writing, in which he brings together Jewish-Israeli culture through his use of Hebrew and Palestinian-Arab culture through the discussion of the minority’s national and cultural characteristics, supports the claim that the identity of the Arabs in Israel is multidimensional,[[82]](#footnote-82)and that the civilian-Israeli component is indeed included in its repertoire.[[83]](#footnote-83) This suggests a desire by the Arabs to integrate in Israeli socioeconomic life, while at the same time retaining their cultural and ethnonational identity.[[84]](#footnote-84)

This literary writing, which combines diverse cultural elements, is the result of a process Homi Bhabha refers to as “hybridization”.[[85]](#footnote-85) In the inter-cultural encounter between the colonizer and the colonized, a bilateral and complex exchange takes place. The colonizer instills in the colonized a new culture and redefines their identity. The resulting “hybrid identity”, to use Edward Said’s terminology, shatters cultural barriers as a result of the intercultural interaction in diverse societies.[[86]](#footnote-86)

The novel by Tannous explores the author's experiences with writing in Hebrew, revealing that it provided him with openness and freedom of expression. Writing in Hebrew allowed him to focus on his personal autobiography and self-expression while also liberating him from the political, national, and historical aspects central to Palestinian-Arabic literature. Tannous describes Hebrew as a "green pasture" that facilitates expression and flows like quiet water. His openness is evident in his criticism of socio-religious customs and behaviors, which are often deemed embarrassing and shameful. Writing in a second language can help overcome censorship, especially in traditional societies like Arab society in Israel, where social cohesion or coercion dominates behavior. Writing in Hebrew can also serve as therapy, allowing the author to cope with mental distresses that are difficult to articulate in his mother tongue. This literature can also convey the pain and emotional burden caused by the traumatic past of the Arab population in Israel, especially in light of the Jewish-Israeli establishment's denial of the Nakba.[[87]](#footnote-87) Thus, literature, particularly written in Hebrew, can be used by Arab authors in Israel to express their trauma and help others heal.[[88]](#footnote-88) Another reason for choosing Hebrew is the very fact that the author’s mastery of the language is greater than his expressive skills in his own mother tongue. For Tannous, writing in Hebrew flows effortlessly.

On the other hand, writing in a second language constrains the author by requiring a more complex portrayal of the collective voice of both Arabs and Jews. This complexity is evident in the novel, where the Jew is seen as both a kind and cruel war criminal. The 1948 events are described in a way that matches the two national narratives, with the Palestinian narrative focusing on the violent uprooting of Arabs and the Jewish narrative focusing on the mass escape of Arabs. In a similar context, Arab author Anton Shammas believes that the language of grace, Hebrew, is the only way to express the confusion of Arabs in Israel.[[89]](#footnote-89) Hebrew provides a new filter for these authors to examine their complex reality.[[90]](#footnote-90)

The discussion above suggests that the Hebrew writing of Arab authors is not necessarily strongly associated with the political context and the Arab-Jewish conflict, as argued by many scholars.[[91]](#footnote-91) Rather, highly personal and emotional aspects are central to this writing, as seen in In the Shade of the Jujube Tree and as described by Tannous himself. True, he did refer to the national issue and describe the war, the massacre, and the deportation of Arabs from their village, but was more preoccupied with the individual identity, with his own thoughts, feelings, and daily life receiving greater attention. From yet another point of view, it may be argued that the addressees of this literature, who are usually the Jewish reader, their background, and their relationship with them affect the characteristics of this writing from different aspects, given that the literary text as a communication channel includes the three main interrelated elements: the addressor, the addressee, and the message.

Hence, the Hebrew-language literature of Arabs in Israel is different from its Arabic counterpart, as their addressees are different. Arabic literature has usually dealt with collective issues, mainly the national Palestinian-Arab struggle, leading many literary critics to call it “recruited” or “resistance literature”.[[92]](#footnote-92) This literature has tended to relate to the Jewish Other in negative and even hostile terms.[[93]](#footnote-93) Conversely, Tannous’ writing in In the Shade of the Jujube Tree places individual issues at the center, relates to the Other positively, and calls for an equal and dignifying dialogue with him.

To conclude, the use of Hebrew by Arab authors in Israel, as analyzed in the novel In the Shade of the Jujube Tree, has three purposes. First, the symbolic-normative purpose: the use of the other’s language to establish an alternative collective identity and bring the minority culture from the margins to the mainstream. Second, the functional purpose—using Hebrew because the author is more proficient in that language than in his own mother tongue. Third, the emotional purpose: using Hebrew to express individual and collective mental distress and traumas, represented by domestic violence and the Nakba, respectively.

**Appendix A: Interview Questions**

* What are your motives for writing in Hebrew?
* What challenges have you faced in shifting from Arabic to Hebrew in your writing?
* Where would you position your writing? Is it Arab literature, Hebrew literature, or a hybrid form, "Arabrew," that combines the two?
* Have you encountered any harsh responses or criticism against your writing in the novel *In the Shade of the Jujube Tree*? How did you deal with them?
* Turkish author Elif Safak famously said: “When I write in both languages, Turkish and English, I feel I write from the heart in my mother tongue, but from my mind in another language." What do you think about that statement?
* Do you feel writing in a second language affords you greater space and freedom of expression?

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1. Jeries Tannous is considered a bilingual writer who wrote one novel in the other language, i.e., the Hebrew language, in addition to three novels in the Arabic language. Hence, this study is based on the novel "In the Shade of the Jujube", which is the only novel written in Hebrew by the author. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
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4. Elad-Bouskila, “Writing in His Language”. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature,* trans. D. Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Cergol. Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977), Joseph Konrad (1857-1924), Ha Jin (1956-), and many Arab authors from North Africa and Middle Eastern countries have all written "minority literature" in English. Nabokov, born in Russia, moved to the United States and published his first works in Russian before moving to England. Konrad, born in Ukraine, also lived in Russia before moving to England. Chinese writers like Ha Jin also moved to the West and wrote in English. This phenomenon was also prevalent in the Arab world during colonial times, with Moroccan writer Taher Ben Jalloun (1944-) and Lebanese writer Amin Maalouf (1949-) publishing their works in French. Elad-Bouskila, “Writing in His Language”. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
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12. Muhammad Amara, *Arabic in Israel: Language, Identity and Conflict* (London: Routledge, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Abdelrahman Marii, “Relating to the Other in Conflict Situations”, in Buchweitz et al. (eds.), *In Others’ Words*, 83-123. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
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16. Muhammad Amara, *Where Is Palestinian-Arab Society in Israel Heading? Conditions and Transformations, Reality, Challenges, and Options for Openness* (Haifa: Maktabat Kul Shi’, 2022) (Arabic). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Amara and Schnell. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
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24. Said. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
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36. Pavlenko. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Shakkur and Tarbiyah. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
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39. Hever. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. 40 Kayyal, “The Linguistic Blending”. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Jeries Tannous, *In the Shade of the Jujube Tree: Pictures from My Neighborhood’s Life* (Nazareth: Al-Nahda, 2007) (Hebrew). [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Jeries Tannous, *The Memory of Days* (2008), p. 3 (Arabic). [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
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49. Ibid., p. 213. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
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53. Ibid.*,* pp. 15-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Marii. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Tannous, *In the Shade of the Jujube Tree*, pp. 245-246. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Ibid., pp. 246-247. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Ibid., pp. 206-214. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Ibid., pp. 221-222. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Ibid., p. 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Ibid., p. 205, 206, 210, 211. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Ibid., p. 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Ibid., p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Ibid., p. 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Ibid., p. 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Ibid., p. 41, 151. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Ibid., p. 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Ibid., p. 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Ibid., p. 145. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Ibid., p. 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Ibid., p. 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Ibid., p. 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Ibid., p. 41, 17, 30, 78, 79, 100, 150, 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Ibid., pp. 208-209. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Note that the word is often used in Hebrew literature, connoting a sociocultural separation, as *fellah* automatically means an Arab small farmer or peasant, whereas the Hebrew equivalent of “farmer” is used to denote a Jewish farmer (usually landowner rather than laborer) (see, e.g. “Muhammad” by Moshe Smilansky (1934)). [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
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89. Snir, “Foster and Loving Children”. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
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93. Athar Haj Yahya, “The Other Side of the Coin: The Reflection of the Other in Mahmoud Darwish’s Poetry”, *The New East*, Vol. 59 (2020), pp. 95-118 (Hebrew). [↑](#footnote-ref-93)