Exile, Literature, and Jewish Writers

I don't exist in this country, not as a writer, a citizen nor human being. I don't feel that I belong anywhere, not since my roots were torn from the ground.
—Samir Naqqash

The act of moving from one place to another, of leaving one country and settling in a different state, gains a specific set of connotations and has definite emotional significance once it is labeled with the term "exile." The word itself requires some response, some engagement on the part of the speaker, the listener, the reader. It holds a special position in literature and literary studies, as well as in the experience of the Jewish people.

Paul Tabori, author of The Anatomy of Exile, offers the following definition of exile:

An exile is a person compelled to leave or remain outside his country of origin on account of well-founded fear of persecution or for reasons of race, religion, nationality, or political opinion; a person who considers his exile temporary (even though it may last a lifetime), hoping to return to his fatherland when circumstances permit—but unable or unwilling to so as long as the factors that made him an exile persist.¹

The term exile refers to a person who has been separated involuntarily from home or country, as well as to the act and state of being

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separated, the circumstance(s), and period of time of separation. The same word refers to both the person and the condition.

Involuntary exiles include those people who leave seemingly of their own accord but really because of circumstances beyond their control. The exile is reluctant to leave, and only does so when “leaving is only just better than staying.” The involuntary and individual nature of the condition of exile distinguishes it from the condition of the expatriate or the refugee. The expatriate voluntarily departs from his or her native land without the yearning to be reunited. The expatriate has been characterized as the reverse of the exile; his “main aim is never to go back to his native land or, failing that, to stay away as long as possible.” Though similar to the refugee in lacking control over his or her departure, the exile is seen as more of an individual, less passive, and more capable of creativity and decision-making.

The chronological or psychological aspect of the situation reinforces the geographical or physical dimension. “Distance in space reinforces the effect of distance in time.” The exile is deprived of the homeland, the setting for times past. This leads to the development of certain mental structures, ways of attempting to bridge the distance. The exile is subject to bouts of nostalgia, in which memories of the past are richer than the actual present. The loss of home creates the desire to regain it whether through return or recollection. Home becomes more precious for having been lost, and most precious by having been lost forever.

The condition of exile has both temporary and permanent qualities. While colored by the hopelessness of permanence, it is dynamic and subject to change. This change does not necessarily occur through a change of the conditions leading to the exile but can happen on the part of the exiled. The period of exile may come to an end not by the return home, but by a change in the exiled one’s perception of home. Once the exile stops thinking of returning home and begins to put down roots, the state of exile has come to an end. At that point the exile can be redefined as an immigrant.

In contrast to exiles, immigrants move to a new place with the explicit goal of settling there. If “exile” implies separation from one’s home and impermanence, “immigration” transforms the notion of home. The main issue for the immigrant is settling, not return. The problems and processes related to integrating into one’s new home, and indeed making it home, are foremost. In practice some distinctions between exile and immigrant become blurred. The very early
stages of immigration may be experienced as a variation of exile. Immigrants may remember their previous home with longing and occasionally wish to return. Exiles may begin to adapt—however slightly or reluctantly—to their temporary home. Whether one is an immigrant or an exile may lie in one’s perception of the situation rather than in the situation itself.

The condition of exile, “a discontinuous state of being” leads to a crisis of identity. Changes in the environment have led to changes in the frame of reference by which personal identity is formed and maintained. In his discussion of the experience of foreign intellectuals in nineteenth-century Paris, Lloyd Kramer writes:

Exile challenges more than the social and intellectual identities, however, for it often brings about major psychological adjustments as well. The experience of living among alien people, languages, and institutions can alter the individual’s sense of self about as significantly as any of the traumas known to psychologists. The referents by which people understand themselves change dramatically when they are separated from networks of family, friends, work, and nationality.8

In trying to adapt to the new setting, the exile may become estranged from his or her own self. The discontinuity on the outside mirrors the discontinuity inside. Robert Edwards traces the sense of self-alienation from classical and medieval thought on exile.9 Exiled people no longer feel themselves to be the same persons as they were in the past,10 nor do they fit into their present. “The exile is always an alien at one stage or another of his destiny.”11 The exile remains on the outside, looking in, whether critically or longingly.

It is this search for identity, at least in part, and the dual existence of living here and there that gives rise to exile literature. Exile is considered both a defining and an excluding condition for the writer. The former view, that “any major artist and truly creative mind [is] a foreigner in his own country,”12 presents the artist as outsider. Ovid serves as the classic example of the connection between exile and poetic creation.13 In more modern times, a great number of well-known and highly regarded writers have experienced exile. As Maria-Ines Lagos-Pope states, “It is significant and not coincidental that among the most recent Nobel prize winners for literature one finds several exiles.”14 The exile status of writers in this century has become “a commonplace thing.”15 On the other hand, David Williams places the exile
outside of community and social intercourse (word exchange, he suggests, is a metaphor for community) and asserts "the exile is a man without the opportunity of dialogue, [a man who] lacks speech." If literature is communication, then the one who remains outside of the community cannot create.

These two opposing views are not irreconcilable, for it is in the very nature of writing that outsiders may try to transcend the condition of exile and join their new community. The literature of exile—writing by the exiled and about the state of exile—is the result of this attempt.

The writer exiled to a different linguistic environment is faced with the choice of holding onto the familiar or venturing forth to a new language. Some of the former are writers who continue to write in their mother tongues because of the (real or perceived) inability to learn another language, while some of the latter are those who feel "the language has chosen them." Writers who consciously choose the language of their writing necessarily weigh several factors.

In his study Transcending Exile Milbauer asks,

Why . . . would a foreigner undertake such a painful and exhaustive endeavour as mastering a new language in order to eventually make it into a medium of his art, a means to reach an audience, an instrument of intellectual survival?

One Iranian writer in exile in the United States discounted marketability as irrelevant and love for language as insufficient; the writer considered only the international status (of English) as decisive.

There are those who choose not to undertake this "painful and exhaustive endeavor." They keep their mother tongue as their first language to avoid this difficulty. Further reasons include keeping their link to their past, contributing to their national culture, or avoiding a (perceived) state of (linguistic) exile. Continuing to write in one’s mother tongue even when one is removed from its native environment does not necessarily lead to linguistic stagnation. Ewa Thompson proposes the possibility of "linguistic cross-fertilization" and enrichment of the literary koine. According to the exiled writer Czeslaw Milosz:

A writer living among people who speak a language different from his own discovers after a while that he senses his native tongue in a new manner. . . . new aspects and tonalities of the native tongue are discovered, for they stand out against the background of the lan-
guage spoken in the new milieu. Thus the narrowing down in some areas (street idioms, slang) is compensated for by a widening in others (purity of vocabulary, rhythmic expressiveness, syntactic balance). 26

Those who do learn and use a new language are often aware of the difficulties involved in the adjustment. Nabokov describes the switch to English (from Russian) as “exceedingly painful—like learning anew to handle things after losing seven or eight fingers in an explosion.” 27

Another writer speaks of always writing with an accent. 28 This accent is sometimes noted by the reader. Conrad’s “adoption by English” is deemed as less than thorough by some of his critics: “But grammatical quirks, indigenous to French rather than English, continued to plague that convoluted style we associate with Conrad.” 29 Personal style may be differently interpreted as linguistic incompetence. A writer sensitive to this danger may compensate with showy displays of linguistic virtuosity or conscious avoidance of experimentation. 30

The disadvantages of writing in a second language can often be compensated for—at least in part—by a greater sensitivity to the meanings and sounds of words that non-native speakers bring to their writing. Compensation may also be found in the chosen language’s perceived advantages over the writer’s mother tongue. Conrad favored English over his native Polish because of his belief in the former’s greater linguistic variety. 31 Nabokov switched to English in order to obtain a new audience. 32 The reasons for writing in one language or another are as different as the writers’ situations. Whatever the motivation, the linguistic medium does have its impact on the writing and reading of the exile literature.

Exile literature has been alternately defined as literature that uses the experience of exile as subject and theme, 33 or literature that is written in exile. 34 The latter category views “the writers’ expression as a reaction to [the exile situation]; the artistic greatness into which their suffering and pain, their fear and desperation have been sublimated and transformed.” 35 Claudio Guillén distinguishes between the literature of exile in which “exile becomes its own subject matter” and what he calls the literature of counterexile. This literature is inspired by (but transcends the actual condition of) exile in a shift toward universalism. In other words, the literature of counterexile draws inspiration from the writer’s particular experience of exile but is not limited by this experience. 36 In the modern era, the experience of exile is also generalized into a metaphor for the alienation of the individual. 37
At the heart of the condition of exile is the state of homelessness, which implies both the loss of a home and the need for one. The writer in exile may attempt to mediate this lack through the creative process—that is, by recreating home through art. The actual childhood homes of the writers under discussion here are recorded in their writing and presented to the reader.

Much of exile writing is autobiographical, rooted in the experience of the alienated individual. The literature is an expression of the state of exile, and a strategy to resolve this state. Seidel defines the exile’s task to be transforming “the figure of rupture back into a ‘figure of connection.’” Through art the writer mediates between the past and the present. In her autobiographical Lost in Translation Eva Hoffman discusses some of the issues involved in this act of balancing:

The conservatives of the sentiments believe that recovering their own forgotten history is an antidote to shallowness. The ideologues of the future see attachment to the past as that most awful of all monsters, the agent of reaction... Only certain East European writers, forced to march into the future too often, know the regressive dangers of both forgetfulness and clinging to the past. But then, they are among our world’s experts of mourning, having lost not an archeological but a living history. And so they praise the virtues of a true memory. Nabokov unashamedly reinvolves and revives his childhood colors in the glorious colors of teşknota [nostalgia]. Milan Kundera knows that a person who forgets easily is a Don Juan of experience, promiscuous and repetitive, suffering from the unbearable lightness of being. Czeslaw Milosz remembers the people and places of his youth with the special tenderness reserved for objects of love that are no longer cherished by others.

The ideal therapeutic process by which the “exiled writer” ceases to be an exile is through communicative writing. By coming to terms with the present and remembering the past, the writer succeeds in integrating the experience of transition, and through communicating this experience joins the community without being negated by it.

To understand the meaning of exile for the Iraqi Jewish writers in Israel, one needs to explore the special connotations of this concept within the Jewish tradition. Arnold Eisen states that “to write a history of Jewish exile is to write the history of the Jews.” The Hebrew term galut (exile) expresses the “Jewish conception of the condition and feelings of a
nation uprooted from its homeland and subject to alien rule.” It refers to both the condition of being uprooted and the community of the uprooted. The word has come to designate the Jewish communities in exile, which are also known collectively as the Diaspora.

While the theological significance of the concept *galut* cannot be explored within the constraints of this study, it is important to point out certain ideas and themes that are relevant to our understanding of its meaning for the Iraqi Jewish writers. The literature deals with *galut* on both the symbolic-mythic and the actual-historical levels. The shifting between these two levels adds to the difficulty in trying to encapsulate ideas about the meaning and cause of exile. Theories of *galut* include responses to questions of causality and characterization within religious, national, and political frameworks.

The beginning of Genesis offers three prototypes of the exile experience: the narratives of the banishment of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, the forced wanderings of Cain, and the dispersal of the builders of the Tower of Babel. Moreover, these biblical stories reflect the progression toward noncommunicability in exile from the interspecial communication between Eve and the serpent to the creation of different languages at Babel. “Come, let us go down and confuse their language there, so that they can no longer understand one another.” Exile here is of universal nature: forced separation from home, continual rootlessness, and the impossibility of communication.

Historically, the first exile of the Jewish people resulted from the destruction of the Holy Temple by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E. Over time, Jews became dispersed due to natural catastrophes and political oppressions, as well as through seeking the possibility of economic and social betterment. From the beginning, exile created a state of crisis. The severance of the Jewish people from their home caused a break in the historical continuity of national life, brought an end to those practices of the Israelite religion which were associated with the Temple, and put into question the belief in the Jews as God’s chosen people. The theological and philosophical responses to the crisis changed over time; however, certain themes and patterns recur. At the core is an attempt to reconcile faith with disaster.

The concept of *galut* has certain Jewish connotations and symbolic dimensions when it is specified as exile from the Land of Israel. Judaism had to be redefined outside of Zion. The destruction of the Second Temple and, later, the exile from the land, necessitated radical changes in practice if the Jewish religion were to survive. No longer
could the Jews make pilgrimages to the Holy Temple and offer sacrifices upon its altar. Nor did the laws concerning the land apply to the lands of exile. The absence of the Holy Temple and the banishment of the Jews from the site led to modifications in religious practice. These modifications, such as the substitution of liturgy for animal sacrifices, the founding of synagogues and establishment of alternate celebrations for the pilgrimage festivals, allowed Judaism to flourish in exile. Major adaptations in the practice of the Jewish religion led to more emphasis on sacred time than on sacred space. This change enhanced the ability of Judaism to survive this state of exile.

The exile of the Jews involved not only the expulsion from the Land of Israel, but a series of expulsions from temporary “homes” and the scattering of the Jews throughout the Diaspora. The displacement and dispersal of the Jews among other peoples caused a crisis of religious, national, and political identity. Minority status endangered the autonomy and integrity of Jews as a nation. The subjugation of the dispersed Jewish communities to foreign rule outside of their own land, first to “pagans” and later to the Christian and Islamic empires, posed a challenge to their ability to maintain a distinct political identity. It was this loss of the political-ethnic center, according to H. H. Ben-Sasson, which turned the Diaspora into galut. At the same time, the Jews’ self-definition as “exiles” helped preserve the concept of nationhood in these circumstances.

For the religious identity of the nation, the condition of galut was highly problematic. The quality that makes Jews unique—the election of Israel as God’s chosen people—is thrown into question by their exile. If Jews are the chosen, how could God have permitted them to be banished, dispersed, and subjugated by the nonchosen? Outsiders challenged the status of the Jews on this basis. Medieval Christian thought viewed the extended exile(s) of the Jews as proof that they were no longer God’s elected ones. The Christians believed that the Jews had fallen into disfavor over the sin of the crucifixion.

One of the answers to the question of chosenness was to interpret exile as a collective punishment, building on the biblical idea of banishment as a punitive measure for transgressions. Jews sinned and needed purification; the land spewed out its inhabitants because of defilement through idolatry. This expression of divine displeasure was recast by Yehudah HaLevi and others as proof of Israel’s chosenness. Powerlessness was seen as necessary for spiritual growth. The waiting mode of exile may be reinterpreted as a prozdor (corridor) to renewal.
Alternatively, *galut* is seen as part of the Jews’ universal mission to atone for others’ sins. The *galut* thus becomes a normative Jewish condition to allow the Jews to fulfill their role as God’s eternal people and to serve as *or lagoyim* (light unto the nations) which they can do only through exile and dispersal, living among those in need of enlightenment. Exile becomes a missionary opportunity for *tikkun olam* (reforming the universe). Returning to the Land of Israel would mean giving up the mission and the meaning of life. Exile, according to Maimonides, is therefore a condition of order and not chaos, part of God’s sublime (and incomprehensible) plan at Creation. It is unnecessary to look for natural causes for the exile, because history is different for the Jews. Extended exile thus proves the election of Israel rather than its banishment. The fact that Jews were neither assimilated nor annihilated demonstrated God’s protective intervention.

Just as loss presents the possibility for recovery, exile (*galut*) offers the hope of redemption (*ge’ulah*). Jacob Neusner discusses the coupling of return with exile and the primacy of this pattern in the historic consciousness of the Jews in his book *Self-Fulfilling Prophecy*. The first return from the Babylonian Exile, c. 450 B.C.E., established the pattern that has assumed a significance out of proportion to the actual number of Jews who fulfilled it. Returns from subsequent places of exile reinforced this pattern. Neusner argues that this bipartite structure, exile and return, is fundamental to the religion that unites the Jews and shapes their world.

Longing for the return to Zion has inspired great literature over the two thousand years of the Diaspora, odes to Jerusalem, and the annual invocation of *L’shanah HaBa’ah B’Yerushalayim* (Next year in Jerusalem) at the conclusion of the Passover seder. “Jews cultivate a sense of exile as a condition of authentic Jewishness.” The experiences—actual, historical, and mythical—unite the Jews as a people and set them apart from others.

In his study tracing the development of the concept of exile and land in Jewish thought, Arnold Eisen describes the mystification of the land (and therefore of exile) in the Genesis narratives, the spiritualization of homelessness in Deuteronomy, and the particularization of *galut* in rabbinic times. Exile became the “political estate of a particular people,” i.e., the Jews.

The Zionist movement was a relatively recent response to the experience of exile. It was a variation on both the traditional conception of exile and modern European nationalism, made possible—if not neces-
sary—in part by the complementary developments of Emancipation and the Enlightenment. The ideology of Zionism called for a radical reassessment of the *galut* and the condemnation of anything that hints of “*galut* mentality” (*galutiyut*).

There is hardly a single blemish to be found on our body and soul that Zionist thought and its literature does not “diagnose” as a product of *galut*. Everything in our life and existence that is displeasing to the thinker or writer, every complaint that the nations of the world make against us, all stem from *galut*.

The motif of sickness and ill health is recalled and embodied in the image of the Diaspora Jew, the weak, pale, defenseless shtetl dweller. Critical to the Zionist interpretation of history is the condemnation of the Jews’ politically powerless condition in the Diaspora.

The Zionists agreed that the very lack of Jewish sovereignty was an “unnatural” condition. Every other nation had its state; and the Jews were powerless and despised because they had no land, no sovereignty. A Jewish polity was seen as necessary to restore the Jews to normalcy.

Furthermore, the Zionist movement emphasized the geopolitical and national over religious significance of *galut*. While the Bible endowed the geographical site of the Land of Israel with symbolic importance, the religious interpretation of its uniqueness was not enough. Paradoxically, Zionism was a secular movement calling for the return to the land made holy by the Jewish religion. It focused on a place sanctified by the past and the future.

Modern Zionism shifted from a symbolic reading of exile to one more political, from a focus on homelessness to a definition of statelessness. For political Zionists, modern Zionism was a variation of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century nationalist movements. The movement therefore called for *shiilat hagolah* (the negation of the Diaspora) and an ingathering of the exiles. For religious Zionists this meant preparation for, or a hastening of, the messianic era. *Galut* compromised Jewish national life and the possibility of becoming a nation among others.

According to the Zionist conception the meaning of return is imbued with secular holiness. Moving to Israel and leaving the *galut* is an act of *aliyah* (ascension). Immigration is so central to Israeli society that the history of the prestate settlement is divided into *aliyot* (waves
of immigration). "Each immigrant is considered a victory of sorts, a kind of bodily enhancement of the [Zionist] vision..."  

It is ironic that the success of Zionism in establishing a state caused a rupture in the Jews' experience, similar to that caused by exile. The Zionist dream of the ingathering of the exiles has in effect made exiles of many of the ingathered. The heart of the paradox is the clash between the Jewish notion of exile, which functions on the national level, and the universal notion, which concerns the individual. To leave one's personal home, even for one's ancestral land, may be for some more of a shock than a cure. The realization of the symbolic national dream can be experienced as an exile from one's homeland.

Such sentiments are particularly true for many members of the Babylonian Jewish community, the community established by the first Jewish exile in 586 B.C.E. This community was deeply rooted in Iraq—well integrated, although not assimilated. Many of the Jews were proud Iraqi nationalists, considering themselves first and foremost Iraqis.  

Only a small minority were active Zionists at the time of the mass exodus from Iraq (1949–51). Most left Iraq due to worsening sociopolitical conditions in their homeland; as they said "leaving was just better than staying." Yet coming from a traditional Jewish background their expectations were, at least in part, shaped by this tradition. The irony that the realization of the Zionist dream created exiles arises from the dual identity of the Iraqi/Diaspora Jew in the twentieth century.

For centuries Jewish literature has been written in exile. Whether written in a Jewish language or the local vernacular, marginality has been an almost inherent quality of the literature. Yudkin speaks of the “persistent sense of orphanhood in modern Hebrew literature” and a sense of dislocation: this literature is separated from the past much the same way as the Land of Israel is separated from the land(s) of the Diaspora. The bilingual (and multilingual) tradition of the Jews generated by the fact of the Diaspora lies at the very foundation of modern Hebrew literature and has been referred to as “belletristic multilingualism” in recent studies.

The title of this book, Exile from Exile, presents the tension between the two poles of interpretation; the move to Israel from Iraq is an end to the national state of exile and the beginning of a personal exile from one’s homeland. The imposition of the national paradigm on the individual experience results in ambivalence and confusion. National redemption and personal exile are played out in the experience of the individual. There are two sides of the “double exile”:

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intensification and negation. In the first case, the writer as double exile is exiled not only from the homeland but also from its language and culture,\textsuperscript{78} from an established audience, and from the literary markets and partnerships.\textsuperscript{79} In the second sense, the double exile functions as a double negative and cancels out. Those exiled (metaphorically) or marginalized in their own homeland are often demarginalized by the second exile. This is, of course, the fulfillment of the Zionist vision. Qualities that they developed in response to the first exile or marginalization—such as adapting to the majority culture—serve them well in (adapting to) their new setting. The marginalized who are forced to develop an independent sense of self, are less likely to be shaken by the crisis of identity. In fact, both of these possibilities—intensification and negation—exist at opposite ends of a continuum that folds back on itself, a Möbius strip of return and exile.

The writers under discussion have chosen different strategies with which to resolve their banishment from Iraq. This book explores these strategies, examining the question of language choice, representation of the present (exile), memories of the past (home) and the (re)construction of home. Underlying the study is the perception that their writing belongs to the category of exile literature. I offer a reading of this body of work within the dual concepts of exile and Israeli literature. In the next chapter I look at the history leading up to this exile.