

Editor's Introduction

Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff—A Cosmopolitan Levantine

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In the mid-1950s a Jewish couple in Cairo whose two adult daughters had moved away—one to Israel and the other to France—let out their spare rooms to Tunisian and Algerian nationalists temporarily living in the Egyptian capital. The couple developed a particularly close relationship with one Algerian guest. Together they would frequently engage in lengthy discussions on topics ranging from philosophy and literature to the politics of national self-determination—Arab nationalism and Zionism alike. The couple learned their guest's identity only after he was arrested by French authorities. Their esteemed house guest had been Ahmed Ben Bella, the mastermind of the National Liberation Front (FLN) who later became the first prime minister and then president of the Algerian Republic.

The events described in this story are as difficult to imagine happening today as they were in Israel in 1959 when Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff, the couple's Israeli daughter, published an essay describing her own discovery of her parents' encounter with Ben Bella. This essay, "Rebel, My Brother," like many of Kahanoff's other notable pieces, reflects upon a lost world of cultural interaction between Jews and Arabs. *Mongrels or Marvels* collects some of the engaging works of this distinctive essayist and novelist.

Born in Cairo in 1917, Jacqueline left Egypt in 1940 for the United States, where she remained for the duration of World War II. She then spent several years living in Paris before moving to Israel in 1954. Although Jacqueline first found her voice as a writer in America, Egypt and Israel provided the two primary geographic, cultural, and psychological anchors in her work. Her representations of both interwar Egypt

and Israel in the first decades after the establishment of the state provide insights into important historical and cultural moments. Her writings about the past reflect an impulse that extends beyond preservation and transmission of a lost culture—although her work is important in this regard. Her writings, particularly the narrative essay genre with which she is most closely associated, also reflect an effort to engage with contemporaneous social realities.

To this end, in her Israeli pieces Kahanoff draws upon her experiences of cultural interaction in interwar Egypt to form the basis of a social model she terms *Levantinism*, a word derived from the Levant, the geographical region of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Arab East. In its adjectival form as popularly understood in Israel at the time Kahanoff was writing, “Levantine” connoted a corrupting, orientalizing force to be resisted at all costs. Kahanoff, on the other hand, vaunted the antiparochialism inherent in the admixture of multiple cultural influences and put forward Levantinism as a positive social model.

As a writer and public intellectual, Jacqueline Kahanoff had a significant effect on Israeli culture. However, she never wrote in Hebrew. Throughout her life she wrote in rich English and occasionally French, although the work that defines her career was composed during her years in Israel and published in Hebrew translation. Paradoxically, much of this significant body of work has never been published in English to date. This volume is intended to introduce this important writer to a wider audience and to make her work available in the language in which it was written.

In what follows, we aim briefly to introduce the reader to Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff’s life and work. First we outline the significant events in her life, particularly as they shaped her perceptions and affected her career. We also describe the Egyptian bourgeois cosmopolitan society within which she was raised and that forms a recurrent topic of her writings. Then we provide an overview of the trajectory of Kahanoff’s career and the range of her literary production. Kahanoff is best remembered for a cycle of essays titled collectively “A Generation of Levantines” (1959), in which she advocates for the “Levantinization” of Israeli society. We therefore map the concept of Levantinism as it develops through Kahanoff’s career, as well as analyze and interpret its shifting

valences. Although her proposals were met with some resistance within 1950s Israel, her work has had a lasting effect on several generations of Israeli writers and intellectuals, so we end by attempting to assess the scope of this effect on Israeli literature and culture.

East to West and Back Again: Personal and Intellectual Trajectories

Jacqueline was born in May 1917 into a well-to-do Jewish family in Cairo. Like many of the Jews of modern Egypt, both sides of the family were relative newcomers to that country. Jacqueline's maternal grandparents, the Chemlas, immigrated to Egypt from Tunisia, and her father's family, the Shohets, hailed from Iraq. Through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Jewish community in Egypt grew and flourished because of immigration from throughout the Mediterranean basin, the Arab world, and Eastern Europe. In 1840, the Egyptian Jewish community was estimated to number five thousand to seven thousand, and by the year of Jacqueline's birth, the community had grown to nearly sixty thousand.¹

Despite the fact that both of Jacqueline's parents, Joseph Shoheit and Yvonne Chemla, came from Arab backgrounds, the family spoke French in the home. Indeed, French was prevalent among middle-class and upper-class Egyptian Jews and served as a *lingua franca* in their professional and social dealings with educated Egyptians and members of other minority and foreign communities of their class. Among the Jews who had arrived in Egypt within one or two generations were also some families that spoke Ladino, Italian, and Yiddish at home. In Rabbanite and Karaite families,* whose presence in Egypt predated the waves of immigration, Arabic was the primary language.

Jacqueline received her formal education at the French Mission Laïque school in Cairo. Her schoolmates and friends also spoke French, in the main, but had some knowledge of English as well. Jacqueline achieved

* Rabbanite Jews follow Talmudic law and comprise the majority of world Jewish communities; Karaite Jews, a small community, follow the laws of the Hebrew Bible, rejecting Talmudic law.

an excellent command of English from her early exposure to the language at the hands of her British nanny and governess.

Unlike her father, Jacqueline, as well as a great number of the Egyptian Jews of her class and generation, never felt at home in the Arabic language. Although many Egyptian Jews could speak Arabic in the local dialect, most of them didn't learn the written language, *fusha*, which was taught at school or acquired by traditionally educated Muslims through memorization of the Quran. This linguistic situation presented yet another difficulty for the new immigrants in becoming full members of the cultured community of the Egyptian nation. Since Jacqueline was not educated in literary Arabic, she was not familiar with the great works of Arabic literature, nor was she aware of the literary efforts of modern Egyptian authors who were influential in shaping Egyptian culture during her formative years. Many years later, according to a story she related to friends, as an adult living in Paris she studied elementary Arabic because she felt embarrassed as an Egyptian not to know the language and literature of her home country.

Jacqueline never felt at home in Hebrew either. In her youth she had not been educated in Hebrew, as it was common to offer formal religious education only to boys. The only religious ceremony she mentions in her writings is the Passover seder, commemorating the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt under Moses. In her essay "Passover in Egypt," included in this volume, she describes the time she realized how little she knew about her own religion when she tried to explain Jewish practice to a Muslim friend. However, her writings as an adult demonstrate great affinity for biblical sources. The representations of Abraham, Hagar, Rebecca, Jacob, Rachel, and Joseph that pepper her work offer insightful reflections on the characters and the biblical narratives. Also, although she was intrigued by and sympathetic to the Zionist project of rebuilding the land of Israel, an effort she witnessed firsthand when she visited Palestine as a tourist in 1937, she, like most Egyptian Jews, did not envision settling there and therefore did not endeavor to learn Hebrew for that purpose. Jacqueline learned Hebrew to a functional level only after her immigration to Israel in 1954 at the age of thirty-seven. Throughout her adult life in Israel, however, she remained self-conscious about her command of the language and never

wrote in it. Her writings intended for an Israeli audience were composed in English and then translated for publication into Hebrew.

The options for intellectually curious women were limited in Egyptian bourgeois society, a complaint Jacqueline frequently made in her writings. Upon completing her secondary education in 1937, she attended courses in law in the French school designed to prepare students for a career in the Mixed Courts, the judicial system for noncitizen residents in Egypt. Even at the time of her enrollment, the courts were being disbanded under the stipulations of the Montreux Convention. Jacqueline and several of her female friends also volunteered at medical clinics and tried their hands at running their own services in the impoverished Jewish quarter, *harat al-yahud*. As she writes, their efforts were thwarted. She retrospectively disparages these endeavors as dilettantism, characterizing them as diversions undertaken by young women marking time until marriage.

Despite these various activities, Jacqueline intimates in her essays and in interviews that she had always, even as a child, wanted to be a writer. In "A Culture Stillborn," included in this volume, she describes her earliest efforts at writing fiction published in a short-lived Franco-phone literary journal in Cairo. Unfortunately, these early pieces have not been located.

Like many educated women of her generation, Jacqueline found her escape from social strictures in marriage. At the age of twenty-two she married a physician, Izzy Margoliash, and in 1940 the young couple sailed to the United States, where he joined a medical practice in San Francisco. For the next decade she lived there and, among other places, in Chicago and New York. In the United States during World War II she was able to pursue an education and her dreams of becoming a writer. She attended Columbia University from 1942 to 1945 and received a bachelor's degree in general studies and a master's in journalism. During this period, she separated from Margoliash and took an apartment with her childhood friend Denise Mosseri, the daughter of a wealthy and influential Egyptian Jewish family, who helped support her intellectual pursuits. New York proved to be a productive environment for the budding writer. While there, she wrote and published her first short stories in English and began work on a novel, *Jacob's Ladder*.

During and immediately after the war, Jacqueline also took courses at the New School for Social Research and began circulating with European intellectuals, including Claude Lévi-Strauss, Raymond Aaron, and Claude Vigée, who had reached the American continent as exiles escaping from the growing Nazi threat. Many of the ideas and concepts evident in her later work are drawn from the intellectual universe she discovered in the United States, even if her writings about the country are disparaging of the bleak, industrial landscape and the racism she witnessed. Although many of her later works reflect upon the multicultural society of the Cairo of her youth, those representations are shaped by the intellectual discourses she encountered when she lived in the United States.

Jacqueline's attachment to French culture did not recede during her many years in the United States, nor during a brief period in London where she apparently completed the manuscript of *Jacob's Ladder*, published in 1951. Following the novel's publication, Jacqueline moved again, settling in Paris to be near her younger sister, Josette. However, she was creatively frustrated. "In France," she wrote, "I couldn't write, except in diary form. I had nothing to say to the French."²

In 1952 in Paris Jacqueline married Alexander Kahanoff, an acoustical engineer by profession, who had been a friend from her youth in Cairo. The couple decided to settle in Israel and arrived in that country in 1954. Israel at that time was a new state grappling with severe security concerns, as well as with the problem of the displaced Palestinian refugees wanting to return to their homes. Furthermore, Israel was confronted with the need to provide residences and employment for more than a million Jewish refugees arriving from Eastern Europe and Middle Eastern countries.

The Kahanoffs settled in Beersheba, at the time a small town surrounded by desert approximately seventy miles from Tel Aviv that was mainly inhabited by newcomers. During her two years there, Jacqueline Kahanoff began publishing again. She served as a freelance writer for agencies such as the Jewish National Fund, United Israel Appeal, and the Youth Aliyah movement and also published her first journalistic pieces for Israeli newspapers. In addition, she wrote articles for the American Jewish press featuring stories about newcomers to Israel from

Middle Eastern countries. Out of fear of reprisals directed against her family still living in Egypt, these early articles were published under the pseudonyms Dina Monet, Louise Sassoon, and Dimona. After her parents left Egypt in 1958, she started publishing under her married name.

In the spring of 1958 she published an article, "Reflections of a Levantine Jew," in the American journal *The Jewish Frontier*. Nissim Rejwan, an Anglophone Israeli intellectual of Iraqi origin, who also published an article in the same issue of the journal, took note of Kahanoff's work. Rejwan takes credit for introducing Kahanoff to Aharon Amir, the man who was responsible for presenting her to the Israeli public by translating her fluid English prose into Hebrew.³ Amir, a noted translator, poet, and public intellectual, had recently begun a journal, *Kesbet* (Rainbow), which was to have a long and influential run. Amir used his new journal as a platform for introducing Kahanoff's work, featuring her four-part series "A Generation of Levantines," beginning in the second issue. Amir's inclusion of Kahanoff's essays in his journal positioned her as an intellectual figure in Israel only a few years after her arrival in the country.

Literary Production

Kahanoff once noted that "the role of an artist is, I think, to reflect the multiplicity of a lived and living truth, through the prism of an individual experience, inseparable from an individual style."⁴ However, she found the form of personal artistry that she espoused to be a source of both inspiration and limitation. She admitted: "The conflict between an urge for self-expression and a deep distrust of self-exposure is one I have never quite solved. One consequence of this is that I've written quite a lot, but published relatively little, mostly in fragmentary form."⁵ The texts included in *Mongrels or Marvels* are intended to assist the reader in patching together the fragments without attempting to create an uncharacteristically seamless whole. We have arranged this volume chronologically by content, starting with the pieces that draw upon anecdotes from Kahanoff's childhood in Egypt and ending with reflections on her place within Israeli culture and society. This organization

permits the reader to follow the trajectory of Kahanoff's life, piecing together the recurring themes and issues that span her career. Reading through her masterful works this way, we are struck by the narrative shape she gives her life through her writing. To assist our present-day readers, throughout the book we provide footnotes to historical events and personages of Kahanoff's day, and offer a glossary of terms and concepts at the end of the book that might have been familiar to an Israeli readership but are less well known to an English-speaking audience.

Kahanoff is best known for her nonfiction essays that interweave anecdotes from her personal and family experiences with sociocultural analysis and critique. Through these narrative essays the reader most clearly hears the writer's voice and comes to see her distinctive vision of society. The work with which her name is most closely identified, the "Generation of Levantines" cycle, included in this volume ("Childhood in Egypt," "Europe from Afar," "Rebel, My Brother," and "Israel: Ambivalent Levantine"), defines the genre. In it, through reminiscences and family stories, Kahanoff depicts the multicultural society she experienced in Egypt and employs it as a model for the development of Israeli society.

Her narrative essays were published in Hebrew translation by Israeli literary and intellectual journals. Many of the significant pieces written in this genre are collected in a Hebrew anthology of her works titled *From East the Sun* [*Mi-mizrah shemesb*] that appeared in 1978 shortly before her death. That volume, edited by her Hebrew translator Aharon Amir, long constituted the bulk of her legacy in Israeli cultural memory, although at the time of this writing, it is out of print.⁶

Kahanoff also produced fictional work. Indeed, her first extant published pieces, published under the name Jacqueline Shohet, are works of semiautobiographical or, to use her term, "sociologically honest" fiction.⁷ Her literary works were warmly received while she was living in the United States as a young woman. She published her first story, "Cairo Wedding," in the journal *Tomorrow* in 1945.⁸ The following year, her story "Such Is Rachel" won second prize in a new writers' contest held by the prestigious *Atlantic Monthly*, which published the story.⁹ Both stories, included in this volume, reflect situations in which young women strive to break out of patriarchal social strictures.

During the same period in which she succeeded in publishing these stories, Jacqueline also received a Houghton Mifflin fellowship to complete *Jacob's Ladder*, published in the United States and England in 1951. The novel is a coming-of-age narrative of Rachel, the character who first appeared in "Such Is Rachel" and whose family is much like Jacqueline's. The primary conflict in the novel is Rachel's revolt against her English governess, a struggle that occurs against the backdrop of Egyptian resistance to British rule. These works all reflect an innocence, nostalgia, and touch of the exotic that may well have appealed to readers emerging from the shadow of World War II. Readers will find two excerpts from *Jacob's Ladder* in the following pages ("Journey to a Better Land" and "A Line in the Sand").

The tension Kahanoff describes between revealing and concealing herself as an artist through her writing is also evidenced in her production of fiction. In her essay "A Culture Stillborn" Kahanoff explains how her concerns over her family's misgivings about her early efforts prevented her from completing her second novel, a project she worked on for decades. This unpublished novel, *Tamra*, even in its unfinished state, projects a maturity lacking in her early work, and while it remains "sociologically honest," it represents a departure from the overtly autobiographical content of *Jacob's Ladder*. The excerpts from *Tamra* included in this volume ("Ma'adi" and "Alexandria"), depicting a youthful romance between a Jew and a Muslim, represent previously uncharted territory in Kahanoff's repertoire.

During her later years, Kahanoff returned to writing fiction, publishing a handful of short stories in the 1970s. We have included one of them, "To Remember Alexandria," which interweaves the world of memory with the realities of Israeli life.

Throughout her career, Kahanoff also functioned as an important cultural mediator, introducing international literary and intellectual trends to a broad Israeli readership. For example, an article titled "The Literature of Cultural Mutation" ("Sifrut shel mutatsia hevratic"), published in the Tel Aviv daily newspaper *Haaretz* in December 1972, discusses the works of Indo-Caribbean writer and Nobel laureate (2001) V. S. Naipaul, the Asian American writer Santha Rama Rau, the Belgian Chinese writer Han Suyin, and the Franco-Tunisian Jewish writer

Albert Memmi. Through the early 1960s Kahanoff regularly contributed articles of cultural and literary criticism to the important, widely read Hebrew newspaper *Ma'ariv*. These reviews discuss the works of such luminaries as Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir as well as Peggy Guggenheim, Alfred Kazin, Malcolm Lowry, and John Steinbeck. Starting in 1967, she published a regular culture column, "The Spirit of the Times," in *Ba-Mahane*, the journal of the Israeli armed forces, opening new worlds to a generation of Israeli youth. She was also a frequent contributor to *At*, a popular Israeli women's magazine. Topics ranged from a critique of the French *nouveau roman* to meditations on food and culture, and from a discussion of literary archetypes to reflections on the culture of Portugal. While the short format of these popular columns makes them less weighty than her contributions to literary journals, it is through these media that Kahanoff reached her largest audience.

Of this wide-ranging and abundant body of work, a number of longer pieces are worth mentioning individually. In 1963 Kahanoff edited the anthology *Modern African Writing* (in Hebrew) and wrote the introduction to it, presenting the emerging voices of contemporary African poetry and prose to an Israeli readership. In the same year, she published a lengthy study in the journal *Amot* of the French poet Charles Péguy, a writer whose work engaged her for many years.¹⁰ And in 1972 she published a series of articles on contemporary Japanese literature in the literary supplement to the newspaper *Davar*.¹¹ From this work we see the diversity and global scope of Kahanoff's interests during a period when other leading Israeli writers and intellectuals were engaged with imagining the individual within the state. This work also provides an important counterbalance to her narrative essays and offers a glimpse of the broader horizons she offered to her Israeli readers. We have included one such essay in this volume, "To Live and Die a Copt," a review of *Beer in the Snooker Club*, by Egyptian novelist Waguih Ghali. Ghali, like Kahanoff, wrote in English. The novel she discusses, featuring a romance between a Copt and a Jew, reflects upon the social changes Egypt underwent during the 1950s.

Discussions of Kahanoff's work generally overlook the fact that she was perhaps most prolific as a freelance journalist. Although her journalistic pieces were ephemeral, her work as a journalist adds an impor-

tant dimension to understanding Kahanoff as a writer. As mentioned above, during her stay in the United States, she studied journalism at Columbia University. Her journalistic career, from which she earned her living, began in Israel in 1956 with a series of articles documenting the experiences of Jewish immigrants to Israel from the Arab-Islamic world, translated into Hebrew, in the daily newspaper *'al-Hamishmar*.¹² In that same year she published two series of articles in the *Jerusalem Post*: one on Moroccan Jewish immigrants living in an outpost community along the Israeli-Egyptian border,¹³ and the other on the immigration to Israel of Jews from Egypt.¹⁴ She continued writing as a journalist until the last years of her life, publishing pieces on a wide variety of topics in the Hebrew and English Israeli press, as well as in American Jewish publications, including *Hadassah* magazine, to which she was a regular contributor for more than a decade. The topics she covers in her articles serve as an index to her shifting interests in various aspects of Israeli society over the length of her career. In this volume, we have included one article in this vein, "Reunion in Beersheba," documenting the challenges faced by one bourgeois Egyptian Jewish family as they adapt to a more austere life in Israel during the mid-1950s.

Kahanoff's most substantial journalistic piece was a commissioned book-length report published in 1960 on the Ramat-Hadassah-Szold Youth Aliyah Center for a series by the Fédération Internationale des Communautés d'Enfants (FICE), then a UNESCO-sponsored organization. This project, which documents the organization and pedagogical techniques of the center and provides case studies and statistics, grew out of Kahanoff's experience writing reports for social service agencies during the 1950s. In the preface to the volume she writes: "Born in the Orient and educated in the West, I myself know the difficulties of resolving different worlds within oneself. . . . I became interested in Youth Aliyah not so much because of what it had done for children from Germany twenty-five years back, but because of what it was doing right now to help the children from Iraq, Yemen, Morocco and Egypt find a common language with those from Poland, Hungary, and Rumania."¹⁵

Another piece with a lasting influence is Kahanoff's "To Die a Modern Death," published in two parts in 1967 in *Kesbet*.¹⁶ The essay expresses Kahanoff's reactions to the progression of her father's illness while she

attempts to navigate the Byzantine, technocratic Israeli health system in the interests of his care. The piece is a sustained appeal for the reintroduction of dignity and humanity into end-of-life care and remains an important teaching tool for the training of social workers in Israel.

In the late 1970s Kahanoff also documented her own battle with cancer in a series of articles published in *At*.¹⁷ From her sickbed, Kahanoff witnessed the world changing around her. In November 1977, Egyptian president Anwar Sadat visited Israel, the first Arab head of state to do so. Sadat's visit and the subsequent peace negotiations leading to the Camp David Accords in September 1978, and culminating in the March 1979 peace treaty between Egypt and Israel, were particularly momentous for Egyptian Jews living in Israel.¹⁸ As the borders opened between the countries, many Egyptian Jews returned to visit their old home. Kahanoff was in no physical condition to join them; however, she mustered the strength to compose two short reflections on these developments, both of which are included in this volume. The first, "My Brother Ishmael: On the Visit of Anwar Sadat," appeared in the December 1977 issue of *At* within a special section of essays welcoming the Egyptian president at the time of his visit. The second, "Welcome, Sadat," Kahanoff composed as an afterword to *From East the Sun* published in 1978. Kahanoff also personally sent copies of this essay and the book to Egyptian First Lady Jehan Sadat. These reflections on Sadat's visit and the possibilities of peace between Egypt and Israel are the last works she wrote.

Reflections on Levantinism

As mentioned above, Kahanoff's reputation as a writer is most closely identified with the "Generation of Levantines" essays and the critical rubric of Levantinism that she began to develop in her work during the late 1950s. The Levant has a long history of cultural contact and exchange. As Kahanoff's friend and colleague Nissim Rejwan notes, the term *Levantine* describes individuals who embody this admixture: "to be a Levantine is to live in two worlds or more at once without belonging to either."¹⁹ Kahanoff's Levantinism functions as both history and social theory, oscillating between description and prescription, the past

and the future. The past she documents is the Egyptian Levantine society of her youth, and the future is an imagined pluralist society within Israel, which in her later work is extended to a utopian cosmopolitan society spreading throughout the Levant. Her representations of the past are fraught simultaneously with reverential nostalgia and distaste, yet in her writings she returns to that society over again as a flawed but once functioning model of pluralism. The United States and France proved disappointing to Kahanoff, as she felt alienated by segregation and elitism, respectively. Nevertheless, we can trace her intellectual formation and the origins of Levantinism to her work published during her years in the United States in which she first depicts the multicultural but deeply divided patriarchal milieu in which she was raised.

When Kahanoff arrived in Israel in the mid-1950s, she found a state emerging out of an ideological movement, a society in formation. Kahanoff's notion of Levantinism developed in this context. Through Levantinism she takes up the utopian spirit of the Zionist project, but her proposed social model calling for the revival of "the Levant as a geographic entity, comprising many genuinely native peoples and cultures" sits uncomfortably with Zionist ideology, which espoused the abandonment of the diasporic past in order to create a modern Israeli identity.²⁰ Kahanoff chose to make Israel her home, and her writing demonstrates a commitment to improving the functioning of its society. Yet, although she lived and wrote in an era that valued the collective, she refused to conform to dominant ideologies, maintaining her individualism and her critical voice.

Kahanoff did not invent the term *Levantine* nor its application within the Israeli context; rather, she inverted its meaning and reclaimed it. As critic Gil Hochberg articulates, the Levantine is "a *borderline figure* that marks the slippery lines between West and East and as such is found to be inferior not only to Europe but also to Europe's imagined Other, the Orient."²¹ When in the early 1950s Israel experienced large waves of immigration of Jews from the Arab and Islamic worlds, there was much consternation over the effect their cultural integration might have on the relatively new state. This vision was anathema to the Socialist Zionist parties under the leadership of David Ben Gurion, who viewed Levantinization, or the infusion of "oriental" tendencies into Israeli cul-

ture, as a corrupting force. Absorption of these immigrants was conducted with a patronizing attitude toward their cultural heritage, and educational programs assumed developmental backwardness in terms of both skills and intellectual potential.

By labeling her model Levantinism, Kahanoff appropriated the loaded term that had taken on these negative connotations as a tool for redressing the discriminatory policies it fostered. In the words of one critic: "From the first publication of her essays, Jacqueline Kahanoff caused a revolution in the term 'Levantinism.' This was a 'revolution' in the meaning from a shameful word to a possible description of honor for people who exist in dual cultures."²² As we see in the writings included in this volume, throughout her life Kahanoff indeed validated hybrid cultural identities.²³

But her writings on Levantinism transcend a feel-good multiculturalism in order to explore its potential to function as a model for constructing a just, pluralist society. Kahanoff's writing is nuanced and engaging, and her sober tone radically contrasts with the hysterical pitch of those who predicted Levantinization as the corruption and downfall of Israeli culture.

However, Kahanoff maintained an unrealistic optimism toward the social possibilities of the Egyptian, bourgeois Levantine model. Her perspective is perhaps attributable to her departure from Egypt before the cosmopolitan society she writes about went into steep decline. She left Cairo for the United States in 1940, returning to visit her family in 1946, at which time Egypt was in great upheaval as pressure mounted on the British to evacuate their troops from Egyptian soil once and for all. The Jewish community was not much affected at this stage by the anti-colonial struggle, however, and Western influence was still very much in evidence. Kahanoff did not have any firsthand knowledge of the effect on Egyptian society of the events of 1952—the burning of Cairo in January and the coup d'état in July—nor of the repercussions of the 1956 Suez conflict on the communities of foreigners and Jews.

In the wake of the radical transformation of the regional balance of power following the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, Kahanoff recast her conception of Levantinism into a vision of a cosmopolitan society encompassing the entire region. Her writing from this period hews closer to

mainstream Israeli political rhetoric than her earlier writings. In an unpublished essay, "From East the Sun," dating from 1968, which we have included in this volume as the author's afterword, Kahanoff writes, "Reconstructing a pluralist Levant may offer a workable alternative to imperialism, neocolonialism, Christian, Moslem, or Great-Power rivalries and domination, by suggesting a framework in which people have the right to be free, different, and equal, rather than one in which the 'superior' would subject, eliminate, or at best tolerate others in the name of universalism."

This vision is likely to strike the present-day reader as culturally imperialist. Indeed, although Kahanoff devoted a great deal of effort to unmasking legacies of European imperialism and internal forces of colonialism within Israeli society, she never recognized her own colonizing tendencies toward Arab-Islamic culture. Her social model is derived from a notion of a Levantine subculture composed primarily of minorities that served as a bridge between East and West but had little direct contact with the majority culture outside of their milieu. The disconnect from Arab culture is present in many of her writings but is particularly evident in a passage from *Jacob's Ladder* included in this volume, "A Line in the Sand," in which the young protagonist, Rachel, tries and fails to overcome her stereotypes of Muslim Egyptians. This passage is striking both for its honest portrayal of the prevalent cultural stereotypes and for the unsettling effect it produces in today's reader. When in her later work, such as the 1973 essay "A Culture Stillborn," Kahanoff begins to contend with the role of Arab culture in the formation, fostering, and demise of Levantine society in Egypt, we see a world of limited possibilities that appears doomed to fail.

Although her efforts to create a social model are circumscribed by these limitations of vision, Kahanoff's work demonstrates a deep commitment to social justice. Throughout her life Kahanoff advocated for gender equality. Her voice of resistance to the patriarchal society in which she was raised is perhaps most evident in her two early short stories "Cairo Wedding" and "Such Is Rachel." In the 1970s, fired by the success of political feminism in the United States and Europe, Kahanoff again turned her attention to women's roles in society, from technology and the economy to culture and the arts. Many of these pieces first

appeared in publications geared toward women. Yet, interestingly, despite the very personal tenor of much of her work and her keen awareness of gender issues, in her writing she rarely reflects on her experience as a female intellectual in Israel.

Kahanoff's Legacy

Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff died in Tel Aviv in October 1979 at the age of sixty-two. Although her career as a writer of essays and fiction in Israel spanned less than two decades, her work has had a lasting effect on Israeli culture. Much loved by her peers, she was a welcome guest and sometime hostess to literary salons in Tel Aviv during the 1960s. Her essays were read during her lifetime by a generation that produced such Israeli literary luminaries as A. B. Yehoshua, Amos Oz, David Grossman, and Yehoshua Kenaz.

Other Israeli Hebrew writers have viewed their acquaintance with Kahanoff's writing as an integral part of their literary formation. The main influence of her essays was their ideational content; the literary form that she introduced to the Hebrew-reading public, the narrative essay, has not to date been emulated. Her ideas concerning the desirable place of Israel among its neighbors and vis-à-vis the modern world continue to permeate the writings of a younger generation of Israeli novelists, poets, and essayists. In particular, Kahanoff's brand of Levantinism has inspired writers such as Ronit Matalon and Nissim Calderon. Indeed, Matalon signaled this influence by including a character named Jacqueline Kahanoff in her novel *The One Facing Us* and reproduced two of Kahanoff's "Generation of Levantines" essays within the narrative.²⁴ Levantinism, as transformed in meaning by Kahanoff, has encouraged Jewish intellectuals in Israel of Middle Eastern origin to search for artistic means by which to express their own complex identities. According to Ammiel Alcalay, the publication of Kahanoff's collection of essays *From East the Sun* in 1978, and the rediscovery of her work by a generation coming of age during the late 1970s, arrived at a critical juncture in the development and expression of Mizrahi identity in literature and film.²⁵