
Reviewed by Devi Mays, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN.

Michal Mahgerefteh’s slim volume of poetry, *In My Bustan*, packs a powerful punch, a mere 66 pages of verse broken into five sections that give voice to the complex interwoven strands of the contemporary Jewish experience. Many of the poems are intensely personal, expressing Mahgerefteh’s own memories, experiences, and spiritual explorations. They are simultaneously universal in their articulation of overlapping yet distinct elements of modern Jewish identity that can be emphasized separately yet combine to form a whole more nuanced than the sum of its parts.

The multivalent and multilingual nature of the collection manifests in its title, *In My Bustan*. “Bustan” means “garden/orchard/life” in Farsi, Moroccan Arabic, and Hebrew, according to the glossary at the book’s end; numerous words in these languages, as well as in Yiddish, dot the text, revealing Mahgerefteh’s linguistic, religious, and ancestral heritage. The bustan in question could hearken back to the lemon-scented grove of her grandmother’s garden, as in “Peaceful Thoughts to my Sleep” (4-5), to the Garden of Eden, where Lilith assisted Chava in implanting life into the womb that would yield the House of Israel, as in “Lilith and Chava” (9), or her own bustan, where “Lately, I’ve been withdrawn/trudging the realm of identity” as a “starved soul/ful of fragrance,” as in “My Ancestor’s Voice” (28). The scents of the garden— orange and lemon, nana (mint), blackberry, fig, almond, eucalyptus, and cedar— pervade the poems, offering a quality reminiscent of the *Song of Songs*. These fragrances combine with the aromas of the house— cumin, garlic, lamb, couscous, mint tea, chai, odors that offer whiffs of Mahgerefteh’s Moroccan and Persian ancestry.

Family, religion, and spiritual exploration are three central and connected themes of this collection. The bustle and scents surrounding Shabbat dinner and the brith milah provide the basis for happy large family get-togethers in “Friday before Shabbat” (6-7) and “The Brith Milah Ceremony” (10-11); gatherings accented by smatterings of Arabic
words, laughter, and Mizrahi tunes. Conversely, “For Twenty-Three Years,” “Upon Her Death,” and “A Sigh of Grief” become mourners’ dirges to a mother lost to cancer. Here, the plant growing in the bustan is grief: “Sorrow sprouts from/ the soil creeping like/ twined roots as he [her father]/ recites Aishet Chayil” (19).

While family and religion combine positively in many of the poems, Mahgerefteh also presents several poems critical of certain religious viewpoints. “Red Thread around my Wrist” recounts a visit through the Jewish Quarter of Jerusalem to the Western Wall, where a wigged woman objects to the poet’s short-sleeved shirt and uncovered hair, “whispering odious words,/ shoving a scarf and a prayer book/ into my arms.” Mahgerefteh responds, “Some inscribe their hearts on paper,/ etching tears of generations onto/ stones. Like many, I came to reflect,/ to tie a red thread around my wrist.” This encounter leaves her “defeated, whispering to myself,/ We are as ONE or nothing at all” (32). Similarly, “Unwanted Element” counters exclusionary religiosity: “Black kippah, black hat and/ black jacket are your refuge?/ You stand on the bima in a white/ tunic shouting to my chaverim,/ “Avoid her Shabbat Meals.” She exhorts the speaker: “Please understand,/ we are not black or white, we are/ cloaked in a fabric of many colors.” Despite these attempts to regulate and circumscribe Jewish religiosity, Mahgerefteh tells him “…against me you have/ no prayers that will separate/ me from the Circle of David,/ decompose my Sephardic/ essence nor ostracize me from the House of God” (34). Her essence, as she notes in “In Search of Yeeud,” is Jewish, “You planted/ my yeeud as Yehudia. You said, breathe it,/ every letter at a time, ‘til your limbs don/ the shawl of thick calluses. But O’ God,/ here Your image is stained within a false/ intent (I shout), religion, sermonizing failures” (51). With these poems, Mahgerefteh emphasizes the necessity for unity amongst Jews and acceptance of difference in Jewish practice, various permutations of performance combining into a variegated harmony, while underscoring the centrality of her own Jewishness, planted in her “before the amniotic fluid.”
Many of the remaining poems of the collection present Mahgerefteh’s kavana, intent, offering her own spiritual musings. “Psalm to Sefer Tehillim,” like the Viddui prayer of Yom Kippur, is arranged alphabetically, but rather than listing transgressions, delineates all the ways in which the words of the Psalms may enliven and enrich the soul (61). “Mizmor l’David: Collage of Psalms to Elohai” is composed of verses from various Psalms that Mahgerefteh has pieced together and interspersed with her additions to form a conversation between her and God: “O’ [give me] wings [that] I would/ fly away [from my past]/ and be at rest [in my present]/ [and] I will walk in my wholeheartedness/ [remembering how You favored me] (64). The collection finishes with a short, untitled poem: “Elohai,/ I am all that you are/ and everything you hoped/ I would be” (66).

Mahgerefteh’s poems offer a unique perspective that is simultaneously female, Mizrahi, Israeli and Diasporic, a mother/ daughter/ granddaughter/ poet/ artist, attached to Judaism and yet striving to interpret religion and tradition in an individual, inclusive manner. As such, this collection, many of whose poems had been previously published in numerous other journals, will be of interest to aficionados of Jewish poetry, as well as in courses on modern Jewish literature, particularly for instructors desirous of a contemporary female Mizrahi perspective, or those who want an example of how Biblical themes and imagery continue to play a central role in contemporary Jewish literature.