

“Win or Lose” by
Yossi Sucary, 2002

*Translated from Hebrew by Maya Barzilai
and Ruth Tsoffar*

Translators' Introduction

Yossi Sucary is an award-winning author and a professor of philosophy at Camera Obscura in Israel. Sucary was born in 1959 to a family that immigrated to Israel from Libya. He grew up in Pardes Katz, a suburb east of Tel Aviv. When he was nine years old, his family moved to northern Tel Aviv, a suburban area predominantly populated by wealthier Ashkenazi residents. Sucary dropped out of high school but completed his exams and went on to study philosophy and history at Tel Aviv University. His writings include essays, novels, novellas, and short stories.

Through his genre-bending writing style that often incorporates autobiographical elements, Sucary explores the intricacies of Mizrahi Israeli identity, challenging its false sense of cohesion and entrenchment in Zionist narratives. His writing offers a critical view of Israel's identity politics and its construction between East and West, Ashkenazi Jews of European origins and Arab Jews. While articulating a profound sense of estrangement that accompanies life in Israel—a sentiment that Zionism had long since purported to assuage—he is still able to build bridges and negotiate seemingly disparate extremes. In this manner, Sucary's texts undermine the teleological narrative of homecoming and the polarization of “diaspora” and “homeland.”

Such criticism courses through “Win or Lose,” the opening chapter of Sucary's first novel, *Emilia and the Salt of the Earth: A Confession*, which was published in 2002 and translated into French in 2006. After the death of his grandmother, the autobiographical narrator recalls her vexed relation to Israel. He remembers how Benghazi was the place where his grandmother wished to be buried, the place where she actually felt alive. In his depiction of Emilia, Sucary challenges and “corrects” the image of the stereotypical Mizrahi woman, who is usually portrayed as passive, timid, and domestic, limited to the confines of family life. Sucary's Emilia is dynamic, confident, and passionate, full of contradictions and riddled with anxiety and guilt. Reflecting on the death of his grandmother, the narrator recalls her vexed relation to Israel, tellingly identifying Benghazi as the place where she wishes to be buried, the place where she

lived fully. In his genealogical excavation of Emilia's figure, Sucary's attempt to fix or "catch" her slippery image is riddled with anxiety and guilt, perhaps reflecting the inherent complexity (or impossibility) of writing her into the hostile waters of Hebrew literature.

We embarked on this collaborative translation project ahead of an event that launched the theme year "Mizrahim and the Politics of Ethnicity" at the Frankel Institute for Advanced Judaic Studies. Organized by Ruth Tsoffar (University of Michigan) and Ella Shohat (NYU), the virtual roundtable was titled "Mizrahi Prose and Poetry: Meet the Authors." Other participants included Tehila Hakimi, Shlomi Hatuka, Amira Hess, and Mati Shemoelof. The aim was to bring into dialogue poets and prose writers of different backgrounds and generations. Each author read a short excerpt from their work in Hebrew, while the audience could also view the translations into English. That gathering led to the translation of this excerpt from Yossi Sucary's novel as well as other fascinating texts.

“Win or Lose”

I raised my face to the sky to shake the flow of words out of me, to divert it into a deep pit in my consciousness. But instead of that, the impact of the last meeting I had with her tackled me with all its might. My mother, she (my grandmother), and I were watching television on the eve of Independence Day in the empty apartment in Pardes Katz, and when the national anthem came on, she suddenly sat on the chair and said with an expression full of contempt and a matter-of-fact tone, “Benghazi. I need to go to Benghazi! A person needs to be buried where he lived, not where he died.”

I understood that only if I left the gravesite in the cemetery in Givatayim could I think about the figure of Emilia without letting her disturb me. I entered a neighborhood restaurant, where they serve Tripolitan dishes. I was disappointed: the food was superb, but it didn’t allow me to avoid my grandma. It reminded me of how unenthusiastic she was when it came to cooking. For her, the kitchen was a trap. Even in the coldest winters, she would open the windows all the way so that the smell of the dishes wouldn’t suffocate her with the common image of the warm Mizrahi woman. She used to often say that all those Moroccan women who don’t leave the kitchen are actually cooking their families in there. They serve their families straight into the mouths of the Ashkenazim with a very spicy sauce that erases guilt.

It suddenly hit me that my grandmother sacrificed herself for me in the same way that the other grandmas of my friends did for them. She filled the same role, but in a different world: black instead of white. The shiny, proud letters that made up my grandmother’s tombstone forced her upon me in her death, in the same way that her defiant stance forced her upon me when she was alive. One of her typical expressions floated around in my head: “This is how they lied to Grandfather Doha. They brought us here at night under the pretense that the Arabs will not see us leave, and we followed them blindly. But actually, they brought us here in this way so that we would not see our gravestones immediately, so that we would have the feeling that after the darkness there will be light.” Suddenly her words seemed more profound than ever. They even scared me a

little. I tried to recall other expressions of hers that would balance out these ones, that would soften them, but everything that came to mind only strengthened and sharpened them. My attempt to draw a parallel line between her and the Ashkenazim would have driven her crazy. It's true that she thought that they and her were playing the same game, but as far as she was concerned, they were the players, and she was the one being played; they were the hands moving the pieces, and she was a pawn that they put on the chessboard so they would have something to sacrifice when the crucial moment came.

I pushed away the *hraise* plate and took a sip of soda water. I assumed that in the end I would be able to outwit Emilia and catch her image from an unexpected angle, before she could catch me. In the evening when I came home, she appeared to me in many different versions, all of whom, I believe, have never been seen in public. And in all of them, her soul remained full of holes.

The next morning, when I put my books in my bag, a memory trace of her smell flashed in my mind. I thought about it until the shelf of original Hebrew books in my library overtook my field of vision. It suddenly caused me discomfort; this shelf and the smell of my grandmother could not live together under the same roof. In all the books that populated it, there was not one line with which Emilia could identify. She would have been revolted by most of the things that are written in them, especially those characterizations of the different "oriental ethnicities" (*edot hamizrah*). There was nothing more foreign to her character than being a hospitable person, outgoing, speaking ungrammatical Hebrew, innocent, full of imagination, and lacking the ability to read the reality as it is. She was a cold woman, with fluent Hebrew, obsessively suspicious toward strangers, and, above all, she had the amazing ability to accurately capture the gap between the way things appeared to the eye and reality itself.

Instead of going to Camera Obscura, where I started teaching philosophy, I sat on my chair and racked my brain for the qualities I inherited from her, but I did not come to any conclusion, and when a characteristic that is clearly common to both of us finally appeared in the threshold of my mind, I preferred not to let it enter for fear of discovering that this characteristic stems only from blinded self-love.

I replaced this attempt with general thoughts about the connection between me and Emilia. Even in this matter I did not reach any clear-cut conclusions. Perhaps only one: that her hole-filled soul is the ground on which I have been standing my entire life.