

Ella Shohat ~ Reminders Revisited: An Exilic Journey from Hakham Sasson Khdhuri To Joseph Sassoon Semah

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Keynote Lecture Professor Ella Shohat (New York University):

'Reminders Revisited: An Exilic Journey from Hakham Sassoon Khdhuri to Joseph Sassoon Semah'. She reflected on the significance of a place in the narration of the displaced Jewish-Iraqi community in the wake of overpowering political forces that, in one form or another, generated a historical vortex that rendered impossible a millennial existence in Mesopotamia. The enormous task of shepherding a Jewish community massively impacted by internal and external political pressures after the fall of the Ottoman empire and the establishment of the state of Iraq fell largely on the shoulders of the Hakham Bashi (the Chief Rabbi and also the President of the Iraqi Jewish Community), Sasson Khdhuri, the grandfather of artist Joseph Sassoon Semah. Although the majority of Iraqi Jews were dislocated in the wake of the partition of Palestine and the establishment of the state of Israel, the Hakham stayed to safeguard those who remained in Iraq, living through wars, revolutions, and a dictatorial regime that rendered hellish the situation of all Iraqis, but especially of Jews, existing as they did under the unrelenting suspicion of disloyalty. At the same time, some of the Hakham's children moved to Israel where the Iraqi-Jews, along with Sephardi/Middle Eastern Jews more generally, experienced exclusion, rejection, and otherization as Arabs/Oriental.

Against this backdrop, one can appreciate the self-exiling of some Mizrahim, including that of the grandson of the Hakham Bashi, artist Joseph Sassoon Semah, who left Israel in 1974 and has been living in Amsterdam since 1981. Tracing the familial passage from the Hakham's decision to remain in Iraq to his grandson's decision to depart from Israel encapsulates the fraught trajectory of a shattered community. These simultaneously in-place and out-of-place figures allegorize the

unsettled story of Jewish-Iraq. In her keynote lecture Professor Shohat explored some of the motifs in the work of Joseph Sassoon Semah to illuminate the twinned loci of “Zion” and “Babylon” in the present-day formation of contradictory affiliations and paradoxical notions of “exile” and “diaspora.” The emphasis on a “Third Galut” in particular will serve to unfold a tale of a Jewish rupture from an accustomed Arab cultural geography, as re-membered by the descendants of those forced to abandon the land between two rivers, resulting in a lingering feeling of at once homelessness and at-home-ness.