During the kibbutz movement’s now distant halcyon days, even Zionism’s most severe critics succumbed to its charms. Yet what many sojourners easily overlooked amidst their euphoric discovery was that the kibbutz was markedly unwelcoming to Israel’s internal ethnic others. As the late historian Tony Judt came to recognize, “the mere fact of collective self-government, or egalitarian distribution of consumer durables, does not make you either more sophisticated or more tolerant of others. Indeed, to the extent that it contributes to an extraordinary smugness of self-regard, it actually reinforces the worst kind of ethnic solipsism” (“Kibbutz,” New York Review of Books, February 11, 2010). Here I briefly sketch the intriguing contours of two young literary protagonists, ethnic “others” whose identities clash harshly with the self-idealizing communities to which they yearn to belong.

Atallah Mansour’s (b. 1934) In a New Light (B’or Hadash, 1966), the first Hebrew novel published by a Palestinian Israeli, scrutinizes the kibbutz’ willingness to live by its own values through the eyes of a lonely outsider. Born and raised in Palestine, Mansour briefly resided in a kibbutz in northern Israel. His novel highlights the poignant failures of the lofty Zionist dream of utopia even as it expresses significant empathy for those struggling on its behalf. At one starkly revealing moment, an observant kibbutz character ruefully acknowledges the disillusioning reality exposed in other works of the era: “We wanted to redeem the land, to protect Jewish labour and to secure peace, and it looks as if it isn’t easy to fulfill all three wishes” (63). In counterpoint, the novel’s predominant focus is on the limited horizons set for the Jewish state’s young Arabs, as Mansour stealthily crafts his narrator’s outlook as a prospective kibbutz candidate for membership in relation to the reader’s ignorance of his identity. In portraying the plight
of a young Palestinian passing as a Jew in his audacious dream to integrate in the institution regarded as the crowning glory of the Zionist state, Mansour delineates the divided identity whose presence the majority culture still struggles to accommodate decades later.

Known to his kibbutz comrades only as “Yossi Mizrahi,” for a time he appears to embrace the political and mythic codes of their Zionist society. One of the many ironies surrounding the narrator’s yearning to create a life for himself on his own terms is how in its essence, this mirrors the dream of the New Jew, whether emulated by refugees from Europe or by city dwellers who embraced the agrarian life of egalitarianism and self-sacrifice. He anguishes over why the married Jewish woman he is in love with seems reluctant to embrace his own struggle to belong: “Why should she care about my father? Why should she care whether I was an orphan, a bastard, a foundling or just a bad boy who had run away from home and joined a kibbutz? Hadn’t we been taught that we are there to set up the vanguard to the world of tomorrow?” (68). Of course the young Arab’s central tragedy can be traced to this fallacious reasoning—to his presumption that he, too, might be absorbed within the utopian socialist dreaming of the “we.” At the novel’s conclusion he retains the faint, somewhat ridiculous hope that the son who is the illicit product of his affair will serve as an agent of healing for the agonizingly bifurcated land of Arabs and Jews.

Though Israel is a nation built on waves of immigrants, only rarely has that history been examined in relation to the kibbutz movement, one reason to be grateful for Iraqi-born novelist Eli Amir’s Scapegoat [Tarnegol Kaparot], a bestseller in Israel—and adapted for the stage as well as television—but little known abroad, in spite of an exceptionally lively English translation. That is regrettable, because Scapegoat is one of the most highly entertaining and exuberant coming-of-age stories in the entire Israeli literary canon. With great psychological depth and insight, this novel offers readers a fascinating window into the cultural upheaval experienced by immigrant youngsters and their families. Most unusually, this narrative examines a history often ignored: that of the newly arrived youth from Arab societies who were sent off to live on kibbutzim under the auspices of Youth Aliya.

Amidst the clashing contact zones of Zionist socialism, Mizrahi immigrants were often unprepared for the paternalistic hierarchy that awaited them in their encounters with Israeli institutions. As the French scholars Esther Benbassa and Jean-Christophe Attias observe:

Israel, the country whose mission was to gather all the exiled...created still more exiles within its borders. Each diaspora settled into its own particularism in this promised land of reunification....The milk and honey of the dreamt-of promised land did not flow with the same abundance for everyone....Exclusion grew out of [the] conflation of the Easterner with the Arab: exclusion from the camp of the privileged, the educated, the Westerners, of those who had inherited the benefits of ‘civilization.’ (The Jew and the Other, 104).

Throughout the 1940s and early 1950s, the period when this ethos proved most consequential, several thousand young Iraqi immigrants were channeled to the communities of the United Kibbutz Movement.

Nuri, the young Iraqi immigrant narrator of Scapegoat bears witness to the biases, confusions, and destabilizations endured by that community. Utterly mystified by just what a kibbutz is, he and his peers are never-
theless sent away from their families, festering in the ma’abarot, in order that they might be remade in one of the kibbutzim that uneasily struggled to accommodate those that it never wholeheartedly believed had a proper place in their elite community. The youths are hurt and enraged when they overhear themselves repeatedly dismissed as “savages,” “Asiatics,” or primitives (as if Baghdad was not then perhaps the most cosmopolitan and sophisticated city in the Middle East). Fighting against the forces of indoctrination, these children from the ma’abarot, like so many immigrants in other times and places struggling between worlds, between disparate ways of being, naturally rebel: “Their efforts to teach us how to behave, what to sing, how to dance, what to read and how to be different from what we were imposed a strain on us…. They tried to provide us with ready-made identities, which we were supposed to put on like a new suit of clothes in order to be like them” (72). Expressing homesickness for their abandoned families only infuriates their condescending minders. Amir’s portrayal of Nuri’s terse confrontation with those ideologues lucidly reveals intran-sigence on both sides, the imminent failure of the assimilationist project in spite of its sharp thrust. The socialist youth leaders wish to curtail family visits altogether, and one insists to Nuri and his friends that those led to cultural regression: “After every trip to the ma’abara all our work here is undermined…. I too discarded the old world I came from and put it behind me and you’ll discard it too, and in the end it will be for your own good” (93).

As Nuri’s alienation escalates, he imaginatively retreats to his beloved hammock in his Baghdad home. He drifts between oppositional dreams of rebirth and rootedness, origins and diasporic longing. The kibbutz youth leaders remain coldly aloof from him, “as silent as Trappist monks” (96), and his sense of exclusion from the only two worlds he has ever known rapidly intensifies. Nuri envies the “princes of the valley,” the Sabra youth: “They were the new and I was the old, they the redemption and I the diaspora. I wanted to be like them, a new man, and I was neither one nor the other…. I was neither here nor there, a drifting plant in a no man’s land” (125). If once he swore that he would take root in the kibbutz, he now fears that he will only ever feel at home in the ma’abara. At best, though still a young person, he can only dream that his future children might fully belong. Like the wistful dreams of Mansour’s native Palestinian, Amir’s young protagonist must content himself with imaginings of the generation to come. Both are achingly exilic figures, profoundly not at home in their shared homeland.