From Family Bedtime Audience to Universal Readership
A Study in the Development of Modern Palestinian Novel

Only the voiceless remain unheard until they choose to break their silence. In the aftermath of Palestine Nakba[1] of 1948, some Palestinian story tellers, whether those in exile or those who remained under occupation, chose to resuscitate the visibility of the Palestinian people as well as their voice which was long silenced and muffled during the British Mandate for Palestine (1918-1948). Most of those storytellers wrote tales that dramatized both their personal and national plight. Unfortunately, however, the messages carried by those tales seem to have reached a tiny audience. It was left for the new post-Nakba generation of storytellers, who wrote in Arabic and other languages, to readjust the obfuscated focus on their national narratives. Accordingly, this study traces the development of the Palestinian art of storytelling by looking at some representative narrative works, starting with Isaac El-Husseiny's Memoir of a Mother Hen (1943) through Ghassan Kanafani's Men in the Sun (1962) up to Emile Habibi's The Pessoptimist (1974) and Jabra Ibrahim Jabra's In Search of Walid Masoud (1978), ending with Anton Shammas's Arabesques (1989). It also looks at the impact of these narratives on both local and global levels of readership and reception. To be more specific, the study looks at how the post-Nakba storytellers have made a difference by appropriating their stories for the parameters of the art of prose fiction. It also looks at how the modern Palestinian novel has constantly tried to deliver the Palestinian voice to both the local and the universal audiences, thus gaining broader reception, recognition, and readership.

Keywords: *Palestinian voice, narrative art, visibility, local, universal, readership, Nakba*

Preamble

Humans, whether those who used to lead an ancient, nomadic tribal way of living or those who enjoyed the facilities of a much more civilized and sophisticated lifestyle, do share the faculty of concocting their own tales. This hypothesis is demonstrated in the academic research papers covering almost all periods of human history, where findings in the fields of archeology, history, and anthropology are based for the most part on various forms of narratives whether carved or painted. Hence, nations are differentiated and recognized for what they have left behind and bequeathed over generations. Take, for instance, the

[1] An Arabic term describing the catastrophic mass expulsion of 2/3 of Palestine population by armed Jewish settlers who were given all facilities to migrate from Central & East Europe to Palestine in successive waves spanning 50 years since the 1st Zionist Congress in Basel 1897. On the eve of the British ending their mandate for Palestine May 15, 1948, militant Jewish gangs (Hagenah, Irgun & Stern) had already planned to use force to intimidate & expel the unarmed people of Palestine & steal their land & property to invent a "Jewish homeland" in Palestine. The tragic consequences of that period (known as Palestinian *Nakba Day)* were enormous: the loss of two-thirds of Palestine as a historical and geo-political reality, the creation of Israel as a state in that lost part, & the massive waves of homeless Palestinian refugees flooding the neighboring Arab countries.

Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh* written in Mesopotamia in the third millennium B.C.E. The central motif of this epic is the issue of human vulnerability in the breathless search for everlasting life. This implies that the Babylonians, as mortals, were concerned about the enigmatic meaning of life and death on earth and what could be awaiting them beyond mortality. To approach this enigma through art, they created their own mythical worlds and filled them with legendary but vulnerable, mortal humans and superior but invulnerable, immortal gods. In this regard, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is considered by various scholars as the eldest piece of written literature ever excavated and explored so far. Also, ancient Greeks and Romans had their own national epics and other types of literary works which were also filled with legendary mortals and immortals whose conflicting natures would spread their own word about human life.

Stories are our most familiar tools that communicate the meaning we attach to our experience in life. In other words, the stories we tell and live by often say something significant about who we are as socio-cultural beings whose existence in time and space is worth recording. Many forms of self-presentation often place emphasis on the process of individuation; that is, the individual is believed to construct his/her internal world almost single-handedly. However, narrative art as a means of shaping people's perspectives of their lives tends to construct and reconstruct stories of cultural identity, which remains despite information to the contrary, so remarkably stable. Oftentimes, the experiences told are part of the larger story of a whole people whose common history, culture, aspirations, and dreams might have been under-presented, misrepresented or dimmed by time. Perceived within this scope, such stories are also addressed to the outside world to gain understanding and garner support for the national cause they endorse and embrace. The impact of this national cause, whispered to family bedtime audience to avoid being sanctioned by arbitrary military occupation rule, would gradually cross borders to resonate with a wider perception of human plight at the universal level of readership, reception, and scholarship. Hence the birth of this research paper that looks at the emergence of the Palestinian storytelling and its development into narrative art culminating with what scholars and literary critics call the Palestinian novel.

Introduction

> "We possess art lest we die of the truth."
> (Nietzsche, *Will to Power*)
> "Whoever writes his story will inherit the land of words, and possess meaning, entirely."
> (Mahmoud Darwish, *Interview*)

It was late 19th century and early 20th century when the Ottoman Empire was demising and the political situation in Europe was taking a new shape. In that rapidly changing world, it was likely that communities, especially those whose fate was at stake, would tend to keep a written record of themselves for posterity. Like all communities worldwide, the Arabs in Palestine were telling their own stories in prose and verse. The Palestinians, who never enjoyed an autonomous

rule in their own country, saw themselves as part of a larger pan-Arab community, which – as hoped then -- would understand and endorse their national aspirations and dreams. The educated Palestinians wrote stories to withstand the waves of military occupation of their own land as well as the colonial project targeting Palestine and which the Zionist Movement under Theodor Herzl[2] undertook to carry out in collaboration with the British Mandatory forces in Palestine. As a matter of fact, the Arab Palestinian narratives were grounded in stark reality which was the substance used by story tellers to tackle themes such as occupation, national resistance, and national identity. This paper studies an anthology of modern Palestinian narratives in terms of the salient technical tools used to make the Palestinian voice more articulate than ever.

Early Palestinian Tales as Harbingers of Narrative Art

Apart from folk tales and other popular narratives, which were always part of the Palestinian socio-cultural life and national character for a long time, the Palestinians were also producing tales close to narrative art. The first Palestinian novel ever published in Palestine was Khalil Baidas's *al-Warith* (The Inheritor) which came out in 1920 (Wadi 1981: 21); that is four years after the Sykes-Picot Agreement[3], and three years after the issuance of the Balfour Declaration[4], by means of which the British government undertook to create a national home in Palestine for the Jews in Diaspora. In his tale, Baidas cautioned against the Shylock-image[5] of the Zionist project posing a threat to the socio-moral and socio-economic life of the well-to-do Palestinians, at the time the Jewish waves of immigration into Palestine under the British Mandate were multiplying; and the Palestinian national uprisings against such waves of illegal immigration were widely expressed in the press as well as in the public streets across Palestine. Let alone the aesthetic value of the tale, *al-Warith* does not seem to have entirely responded to the historical events behind its birth, nor betrayed those events; it simply positioned itself as a watchdog trying to envision what was going on then, but that vision was defective, for the story "failed to see the full impact of the Zionist project in Palestine" (Wadi 1981: 22). *Al-Warith* was simply an inkling of a serious attempt to mark a turning point in the fate of Palestine and the Palestinians. In narrative art, it was the beginning.

[2]Theodor Herzl (1860-1904) was an Austro-Hungarian Jewish journalist & political activist & the father of modern political Zionism. He formed the Zionist organization & organized the 1st Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland in 1897. He promoted the immigration of the European Jewry to Palestine in a premeditated plan to build a Jewish home there. The Arab Jews headcount in Palestine then amounted to 4%, and they used to own 1% of the land.

[3]Reference to the 1916 agreement negotiated between the British Mark Sykes and the French Georges Picot to determine the post-war partition of the Arab Middles East land.

[4]Arthur James Balfour, former British Foreign Secretary, sent a letter (dated November 2, 1917) to Lionel Walter Rothschild (a wealthy British Jew and a leading figure of the Anglo-Jewish community) in which he candidly declares the British support for "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people", and that "nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine."

[5]Shylock, a Jewish character in Wiliam Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, is a despicable and loathsome usurer.

It would take a period of forty-two years for the modern Palestinian novel to appear with the publication of Ghassan Kanafani's novella *Rijal fil Shams* (Men in the Sun) in 1962. This does not mean that the period between 1920 and 1962 was barren and produced no narratives to meet the parameters of the novel proper (Lukacs 1971). In fact, a lot of stories were told. However, only a few of them would implicitly tackle the drama of the Palestinians whose land, property, culture, and national identity were facing the most horrendous plan of falsification, distortion and extermination ever targeting a homogenous people on earth, save the native Americans, the Tasmanians, and perhaps the Armenians. Among those tales[6], Isaac Mousa El-Husseini's fable *Muzakkarat Dajaja* (Memoirs of a Mother Hen) published in 1943, is considered as the most popular and the most widely read tale ever in the Arab World during the 1940s.

Isaac Mousa El Husseini

Muzakkarat Dajaja

Muzakkarat Dajaja (henceforth Memoirs of a Mother Hen) mimics the traditional fables of Aesop and La Fontaine. However, it owes much of its narrative form, language and style to the Oriental and Umayyad literary heritage, namely the fables of *Kalila wa Dimna*.[7] The story uses animal characters as a vehicle carrying the writer's vision about life where the artistic, the mental, the narrative and the philosophical spaces overlap. It does not only foreshadow the Palestinian bleak situation on the eve of the Palestinian *Nakba*, but it also sees it as something ominous and predestined. Playing the pacifist who chooses to shun off avenging the looting of her home at the hands of the giant intruders (also animal characters) and standing in the way of her new fledging generation that angrily shouts requesting arms to defend and restore their home by force, Mother Hen preaches non-violence:

> You've got no choice but to disperse in the world and preach the value of virtue and convince the aggressors that their aggression won't pay off. Only then would you be able to resolve a larger problem of which yours is only part,
>
> and I'm pretty sure that we shall meet again in this very home after we've purified the world from those who strayed away from the right path.
> (El-Husseini 153-154) [My translation]

Although this Mother Hen is aware of the existential danger threatening to exterminate her ethnic race once and for all, she resorts to moral philosophy to complain against an armed-to-teeth European Jewish intruder carrying out a political project aiming to cancel hers. It is quite meaningless and absurd on the part of El-Husseini to try to resolve a big national tragedy in that way, for such an

[6]Reference is made to Iskandar El-Khoury, Mohammed Ezzat Darwaza, Gabriel Abu Sa'adi, Ishaq Mousa El-Husseini and others.

[7]*Kalila wa Dimna* is a collection of short fables written by Ibn Al-Muqaffa'a, a Persian-Muslim scholar who translated the original fables from Sanskrit Indian into Arabic during the Ummayyad Era. Each of those fables has a specific moral to transmit. It features animal characters who stand for either vice or virtue.

attempt would be readily dismissed as romantic nonsense, if not allegedly classified as a document of high treason. Although written in an allusive and indirect style to avoid the censorship of printed matter (see the military law decreed and enforced by the British Mandatory authorities in Palestine then), the fable does say one thing at best: it justifies the native Palestinians' military and moral defeat by tacitly, but unwillingly, surrendering to foreign colonial occupation of their land. Tolerance, as such, would not pay off as regards the Question of Palestine, and it would not pay off anywhere else either. Notwithstanding pitfalls in the theme and form of the tale, *Memoirs of a Mother Hen* cannot be dismissed as a worthless tale, nor can it be underestimated as part of the Palestinian literary heritage. As a matter of fact, the tale is one of the landmarks in modern Palestinian storytelling. All the elements of telling a story are intertwined to make this fable appeal to readers, irrespective of how moralizing it sounds. A review of the fable, as a type of narrative art known in world literature, pinpoints the heavy weight of the moral message carried by the simple and straightforward style addressing children as audience.

However, the actual Palestinian art of fiction started with the publication of Ghassan Kanafani's novella *Rijal fil Shams* (Men in the Sun) in 1962. It is a tale that technically meets the parameters of the modern novel as a distinct literary genre introduced for the first time in the Western European cultures during the 18th century[8].

Pioneers of the Modern Palestinian Novel

Ghassan Kanafani

Men in the Sun

Ghassan Kanafani[9] is a gifted storyteller. His first tale, *Rijal fil Shams* (henceforth *Men in the Sun*) marks the beginning of the modern Palestinian art of fiction. This research paper chooses this tale as a starting point for both literary and technical reasons related to the functional role of each of the elements of fiction making *Men in the Sun.* Kanafani uses these elements skillfully and diligently to build up the world of the tale as narrated from the third person vantage point.

Men in the Sun is a tragedy without a tragic hero. Besides the basic elements of fiction making the tale a new shoot in the Palestinian literary narrative art, the setting of the tale assumes centrality from beginning to end. It is the setting around which most of the action rotates that the tale carries much of the bulk of its meaning. The setting takes the form of a one-way journey taken by a few

[8]See Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding*. The University of California Press, 2001.

[9]Ghassan Kanafani was a journalist, an art teacher, a writer, and a member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. He was only 20 years old when he published his first novella *Men in the Sun*. Other published novels are *ma Tabaqqa Lakum* (All That's Left to You), *A'ed ila Haifa* (Returnee to Haifa), *Um Saad* & others. He was murdered by the Israeli Mossad in his booby-trapped car in Beirut, Lebanon, on 8 July 1972. He was only 36 years old then.

wandering souls trying to make a living across the desert. It is the story of three homeless Palestinian refugees of different age groups standing for three generations: the elderly Abu-Qais, the young man Asaad, and the teenager Marwan, who desperately broker an agreement with the smuggler, Abul Khaizuran, who is another Palestinian refugee working in Kuwait. Abul Khaizuran would hide them inside an empty water-carrying cistern that frequently crosses the Iraqi-Kuwaiti borders on a scheduled trip from Basra to Kuwait city. The smuggler uses honeyed words to win the deal, saying "… in Kuwait, a man can collect money in the twinkling of an eye … and where the first thing you will learn is that money comes first, and then morals" (Kanafani 6, 28). Ironically, the three men accept the leadership of Abul-Khaizuran, who was shot while fighting the British colonial forces in Palestine in 1936, sustained life-threatening injuries, and consequently got emasculated. Abul-Khaizuran is the water-tank driver who is well known by the police officers at both the Iraqi and the Kuwaiti border checkpoints. He works for a Kuwaiti Sheikh whose hobby is game hunting. Waiting for the slow bureaucratic paperwork clearance to be done at the Kuwaiti border checkpoint, the three men perish inside the cistern under the scorching sun of August. Nonchalantly, Abul-Khaizuran drives the lorry into the sandy and lifeless desert and pulls over to a garbage heap where he strips the three dead men of their personal possessions, including their identification papers. In an attempt "to shirk from his obligation and sidestep his responsibility for their cheap death and unwanted punishment" (Hussari 1993: 186), the smuggler blames it on the three dead bodies for not knocking (?) on the burning sides of the metallic water-tank:

> "Why didn't you knock on the sides of the tank? Why didn't you say anything? Why? Why? The desert began to send back the echo.*"*
> (Kanafani 56).

The symbolic association between the tightly closed water tank and the Palestinian refugee camp as two suffocating enclosures does not lend itself to further interpretation. Although these "Why" questions are meant to shift responsibility by blaming it on the victims, Kanafani's closure of the tale in that sad and tragic manner has lent voice to the voiceless, and the Cause of Palestine has gained a new platform.

Upon its publication in Arabic in 1962, the tale was received with appalling shock. Some critics[10], who may have invested much on the rising wave of the Arab Nationalistic Movement (Nasserism[11]) at the time, accused Kanafani of being a skeptic who threw the hopes of three Palestinian generations onto the garbage heap. The rhetorical question implied in their reactions to deconstruct the tale would be interpreted as follows. Is it on that garbage heap that a Palestinian runaway, with shattered personal dreams, should be thrown as nobody? Artistically, however, Kanafani's ingenious blend of the symbolic and the realistic does save

[10]See Farouq Wadi, *Three Landmarks in the Palestinian Novel*, Beirut: 1981.

[11]Reference to Gamal Abdel-Nasser, President of Egypt (1954-1970), and a pioneer of the national Arab awakening movement in the 20th century.

the tale from falling into the documentary, as he sacrifices neither of the two in the interest of recording a historical reality. In *Men in the Sun*, it is Kanafani the artist, not the politician which he was, who compels the Palestinian refugees to voice themselves and seek other alternatives, if they choose to recover and restore their national rights before they get ambushed, as dissociated individuals seeking personal gains, and eventually perish silently while the world at large keeps roaring noisily. By going that way to send a message, Kanafani is in no way a preacher; he is an artist.

Men in the Sun is often referred to as a long short story or a short novel or a novella (see Abbas 1972; Ashour 1977). However, at the artistic level of storytelling, this tale makes masterly use of all the elements of fiction employed in the novel[12]. In fact, all the elements of the tale contribute to making it a narrative masterpiece: time, space, character, setting, language, theme, and form. All these elements are well interlocked to add meaning and dimensions to the world of the novel in which the three main characters are doomed for having failed to make a moral choice. If compared to any other narrative prior to its publication, *Men in the Sun* can be considered as the first modern Palestinian novel ever.

Since its publication in Arabic in 1962 and its translation into English in 1978, *Men in the Sun has* been extensively reviewed and studied. It has also been translated into many languages, posted in book reviews, and taught at university level by various academics.[13] Students doing research have chosen it to write their theses in the humanities and other interdisciplinary programs in Arabic, English, French, Spanish, Danish and other foreign languages. Academic conferences and research grants have been established in the name of Kanafani after his martyrdom, thanks to Anni Hover[14], his Danish wife and widow, who made a great effort to collect, compile, and publicize Ghassan Kanafani the man-artist, the journalist, the freedom fighter, and the storyteller. The tale was also filmed[15] in 1972. In short, Kanafani's *Men in the Sun* has succeeded in motivating national and international scholars, text reviewers, critics, and student researchers to further study his other novels and literary works[16]. This is an indicator that his readership was growing broadly, and with it the image of Palestine and the Palestinians was no longer in gray areas or in the backseats, and their voice was no longer a shout in the wilderness.

[12]See Ibrahim A. El-Hussari, *Men in the Sun: The Triumph of Art over the Curse of Cheap Death*, Beirut: Model House, 1993.

[13]I was the first to introduce Kanafani's *Men in the Sun* into the Literature syllabus at The Lebanese University in the 1980 and The Lebanese American University in 1986.

[14]Anni Hover was very much active after Ghassan Kanafani's martyrdom in 1972. It was she who worked hard on publicizing Kanafani's heritage in different languages.

[15]*The Deceived* is the film based on Kanafani's *Men in the Sun*. It was produced by the Egyptian film Director Tawfiq Saleh in black & white in 1973.

[16]Some of Kanafani's novels that keep inviting discussion & literary research are "All That's Left to You", "Returnee to Haifa", and "Um Sa'ad".

Emile Habibi

The Pessoptimist

It was Ghassan Kanafani, the journalist and editor-in-chief of *Al-Hadaf*[17], who introduced Emile Habibi as a young Palestinian storyteller, together with other promising Palestinian literary names[18] who started to voice themselves as remaining Arab Palestinian minority living under occupation and military rule[19]. Unlike Kanafani who grew up in exile and published stories about ordinary Palestinians in the remaining parts of their land and in exile, Emile Habibi stayed in his city Haifa after the 1948 *Nakba* and, as a journalist, started to publish tales featuring ordinary Palestinians from inside occupied Palestine, which was afterwards renamed State of Israel. Habibi's masterpiece *The Secret Life of Saeed, the Ill-Fated Pessoptimis*t, for short *al-Mutashael*[20] (henceforth *The Pessoptimist*) was published in 1974. The story revolves around Saeed, a multi-dimensional character, whose struggle for self-realization is real but whose attempts to resolve that struggle are futile and thus they are ironically viewed, not as a shout in the prairies as some critics have assumed, but as a hoarse shriek for salvation and emancipation.

The Pessoptimist is a new type of Palestinian storytelling. It can be classified as an offshoot of the national Palestinian Carnivalesque. It comprises a series of tragicomic episodes, reported in the epistolary style of narration and addressed by the protagonist Saeed, the pessoptimist, who is mounting the back of an outer space creature, to someone on earth for publicity. The events unfolded cover a span of almost twenty years (1948-1967) in the life of a middle-aged Palestinian man who returns to his city, Haifa, soon after discovering with thousands of other Palestinians forced to flee their homes that they would become refugees forever in the neighboring countries. Having successfully infiltrated back into his own birthplace, Saeed chooses to collaborate with the occupation forces for his personal safety. However, he gradually works against all the odds to transform himself from a mean informer for the Zionist state into a simple man who only needs to survive. His story (feeding on fact and fantasy) uncovers the contradictions deriving from the dynamics of the various situations he finds himself in as he unwillingly fills the distance between the armed Zionist settlers claiming to establish a homeland in Palestine for the "homeless Jews", and the Palestinian people fighting back in different ways to restore their national identity as well as their visibility. Having failed to redeem himself or pay it some homage, despite the two heroic situations, which might have elevated him (namely the heroic deaths of his wife and son, and his imprisonment as enemy of the state), Saeed also fails to

[17]*Al-Hadaf* is the Palestinian weekly magazine and the voice Kanof the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). The first issue came out from Beirut in 1969. It was both a political and cultural magazine edited by Ghassan Kanafani (1969-1972).

[18]Kanafani introduced & publicized the works of Emile Habibi as a novelist and storyteller. He also did the same with young and promising Palestinian poets, such as Mahmoud Darwish, Tawfiq Zayyad, and Samih El-Qasim.

[19]The new Israeli government which expelled 750,000 Palestinian natives and renamed Palestine "Israel" imposed military rule upon the remaining 150,000 Palestinian until 1968.

[20]An Arabic word coined by Habibi by merging two separate words Pessimist and optimist.

belong or fit anywhere. Unable to restore his former despicable role as collaborator or join the struggle for a greater national cause, Saeed is caught in the trap of his own impotency. Only then does he choose to escape into the miraculous and the fantastic, hoping to find some way out, which he does not find in real life. Sitting on a symbolic stake, and not responding to the calls of various people (including the apologetic Israeli secret police officer – the Big Man), Saeed would only wait for a miracle that might put an end to his dilemma.

> "My master!" I shouted, "chief of all those of outer space, I have no one but you!"
> "I know that" he replied.
> "You came just in time."
> "I only come to you just in the nick of time."
> "Save me, reverend," I pleaded.
> "I just wanted to say to you: this is the way you always are. When you can bear the misery of your reality no longer but will not pay the price necessary to change it, only then you come to me…" (159).

By using an outer space creature, supposedly a supernatural deliverer, Habibi seems to be parodying the Greek and Roman playwrights who used *deus ex machina*[21] as a theatrical device to save the tale from reaching an inevitable deadlock. His use of this supernatural agency is in no way a matter of begging deliverance. The frequent reference to the Savior, using terms such as the Christ or Al-Mahdi (the long-awaited) is highly ironical. As the story opens and ends with the outer space creature commenting on Saeed's edgy situation, its world, as a dark comedy, allows the protagonist to disclose the sordid reality engulfing the life of the Palestinian ordinary man. It seems that for the Palestinian people to voice themselves in a maddening world devoid of mercy and justice, they need the job to be done by some "***divine intervention***" -- to use the title of the Palestinian Elia Suleiman's film (2002), which is also a black comedy. However, Saeed is in no way a defeatist personality or an indolent hero. Like Voltaire's protagonist in *Candide*, Saeed uncovers much for us to discover more about what it means to be a Palestinian exiled in his own country by an oppressor whose main concern is masked behind the claim of "national security". If Saeed does not measure up for a hero in the traditional sense of the term, the tale succeeds to hint to some of his heroic nuances, among which the derision of tolerance as an absurd human value vis-à-vis occupation as well as the exposing of Israel as an apartheid regime and false democracy in the Middle East.

In *The Pessoptimist*, Habibi's vision is exclusively focused on Saeed, a prototype for a passive fictional character, who, despite all the concessions he keeps making to the Israeli security police, fails to adapt to the new realities conditioned by the creation of the state of Israel. In an interview with Professor Radwa Ashour, Habibi says, "I've chosen for my story a character with many defects which I need to expose in the first place" (Ashour qtd. in *Filistin a-Thawra,* 1978). Among those defects of Saeed's are cowardice, meanness,

[21]Literally a Latin term meaning (a god from machine), but in literature, especially drama & novel, it is used as an unexpected power saving a seemingly hopeless situation.

opportunism, and collaboration with the enemy, to mention only a few. For instance, upon deciding to visit his own family house which has been recently occupied by the new European Jewish settlers, Saeed says:

> When I reached the front of our house and saw laundry hanging out, my courage deserted me, and I pretended to be taking a stroll along the seashore (47).

Tolerating the de facto situation that could have never been any better, the Panglossian side of Saeed's character compels him to admit that "*Anyone who marries my mother becomes my stepfather*" (49). Unable to harbor any clear plan of his, Saeed's opportunistic attitude shows him as an insect on the wing, ready to land anywhere as he straddles the borderline between what is and what could be:

> I was impressed by the Jewish workers' ignorance of Hebrew that I decided that this state [Israel] was not fated to survive. Why should I not therefore protect my line of retreat?" (50).

It is in Habibi's smart use of irony, which multiplies at crucial moments, that the story goes beyond Saeed as a fictional character to embrace the national cause of the Palestinian people. Habibi borrows Saeed's penetrating eyesight, which excludes no detail, to scratch beneath the surface of reality and uncover all the sordid events in the life of his people. The journey taken by Saeed from the very outset of the tale is a search for salvation. The harsher reality slaps him in the face, the further Saeed goes in that seemingly hopeless search.

> She raised her head to the sky and pointed to us [Saeed and the outer space creature], and I heard her say, "When this cloud passes, the sun will shine once more!" (160).

In the final scene of the tale titled "The Glorious Finale", Saeed is seen climbing on the back of an outer space creature, beneath him down on earth "the sound of joyful ululation" (159). Among others, there is the born-in-exile Yuaad (Arabic for returnee) whose visit permit to see her next of kin is now cancelled, for she has been deported -- thanks to the Israeli military rule -- for attempting to infiltrate back to her own village. Palestinian civilians who were forced by the Jewish military gangs to run for their lives are not allowed to return home. It was Yuaad the sober Palestinian refugee, not Saeed the cowardly Arab Israeli citizen now, who should end the tale as a piece of narrative art. The new Palestinian generation is now more entrusted than the old runaway generation to carry on the struggle against occupation. The tale implies that there is a historic role in search of a hero. By doing so, Habibi is scoring a technical progress in the development of the Palestinian novel.

If there is any message Habibi plans to transmit in the final episode, it could be anything within the satirical mode of narration. Habibi seems to have created this superstitious creature, which Saeed implores for salvation, as a campaign flyer to attract public attention to the issue of belonging (see Bernard 2014). However, he does this only to refute its religious or mythical connotation. In fact, the outer space creature, assumingly Saeed's would-be savior, does not exist except in the

minds of those who feign foolery, like Saeed. In the epilogue closing the tale, Saeed seats himself on a sharp-tipped stake and chooses not to respond to those who beg him to get down. His odd behavior, as reported by the State Medical Advisor, leads him to the mad house where he finally dies, but the noble cause he used to secretly endorse keeps reverberating through Yuaad who stands for the new Palestinian generation who will continue the march, carry the banner of the liberation of Palestine, and restore the place of Palestine on the World Atlas.

Great writers of literature, such as Shakespeare, Swift, Voltaire, Cervantes, Gogol, and others, use humor gloved with lunacy but not mad characters, as a medium to pass their own views which say something significant about the hard life their characters face. Emile Habibi is no exception. He has deliberately chosen Saeed as the main character of his tale to pass a message. In common parlance, literature does not deal with madness or mad people as the subject matter of a tale. In this connection, Habibi's *The Pessoptimist* does not portray lunacy and extreme idiocy as an end. All the elements of fiction used by Habibi in this novel serve the line of narration carrying Saeed's human experience through the comic apprehension of power relations in the context of identity politics. This assumption in narrative art is not easy to tackle and produce by a writer whose existential experience is true. His protagonist, Saeed, mimics the same situation. He lives in a rapidly changing world and hardly touches the shades of freedom of speech under military rule. Accordingly, Saeed feigns lunacy and escapes like a buffoon into the superstitious to sidestep reality. However, as a piece of narrative art, *The Pessoptimist* can be read as a serious quest for identity. As such, the tale is likely to invite comparison with great works of political satire shelved under world literature[22]. Viewed from this critical vantage point, *The Pessoptimist* scores a technical advancement in the development of the modern Palestinian novel.

Jabra Ibrahim Jabra

In Search of Walid Masoud

As a Palestinian novelist, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra adds another brick to the narrative structure and narrative technique of the modern Palestinian novel. Like Ghassan Kanafani and Emile Habibi who have advanced the Palestinian art of storytelling in theme, in form, and in narrative method, Jabra has enriched this narrative art by skillfully using a different mode of storytelling – polyphony[23].

Jabra was a distinguished scholar, an art critic, a novelist, a translator, a painter, a poet, and a university professor whose academic expertise in Arabic, English and French literatures has broadened the scope of his literary repertoire, especially his novels. Influenced by British and American great novelists, namely Joseph Conrad and William Faulkner, Jabra wrote in both Arabic and English novels that provoke both the reader and the critic alike as regards subject matter,

[22]Reference is made to Voltaire's *Candide*, Cervantes' Don Quixote, Swift's *Gulliver Travels*, and Shakespeare's *Henry IV*.

[23]Polyphony is a narrative technique introduced by Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), a Russian philosopher of language, a literary theorist, and a scholar. In literature, polyphony is a feature of narrative which includes a diversity of points of view and voices.

theme, form, and narrative technique. His novel, *In Search of Walid Masoud*, is a case in point.

In this novel, the central event that triggers off a chain of subsidiary events is the mysterious disappearance of Walid Masoud. The title of the novel and its opening lines seem to insist that this is the key issue. However, the focal point of the story is somewhere else. On the audiotape, found in Walid's deserted car after his disappearance, Walid's close friends listen to an unfinished story in his own voice. As this story begins to unfold, the search for Walid diminishes in favour of more intricate and complex issues. Walid's friends gradually get more involved in the impact of that mysterious disappearance as they find themselves switch from listeners to participants. Instead of trying to resolve the mystery of Walid's disappearance, they find themselves caught in their own personal and socio-cultural worlds. Within this framework of a seemingly endless search, Jabra sketches a double journey into the memories of Walid and the other characters. It is the audiotape left in the deserted car that sets off a lot of things in motion, compelling Walid's friends to give their own accounts of the protagonist, each account inaccessible to the others. That is why, all those accounts remain fragmentary for they are subjectively rendered. Accordingly, it is the reader's irksome role to piece all these fragments together for the approximation of a fuller sense of the novel.

If Walid's voice, as a monologue recorded onto his car audiotape, should say anything at all, that thing would be filtered through the memories recalled by the voices of the other characters. Walid's tape delivers rampant, disconnected shreds of his life, but all these shreds are mediated by the other narrators, albeit from different perspectives. With each of the narrators recalling one part or more of Walid's life-story, the reader is compelled to dive with a waver into those memories to retrieve who and what Walid was. Hence the broad scope of the polyphonic nature of the narrative.

Novels that use memory as a key element of the narrative structure are not rare in literature[24]. In Jabra's tale *In Search of Walid Masoud*, memory plays the focal role in the whole narrative. The search, assumingly the central event of the tale, is soon eschewed in favor of character delineation and the dramatic role of memory replete with intricate personal and socio-cultural relationships. It is Walid's memory and the memories of the rest of the characters doing the narration that really make the novel the complex text it is.

The opening lines of the story are poetic and suggestive. They initiate a move towards the redemptive power of writing through Walid's wish to bring memories back to life.

> If only there were an elixir for the memory, something that could bring events back in the order they happened, one by one, then turn them into words that would cascade out into paper!
>
> (*In Search of Walid Masoud*, 17)

However, the closing note embedded in the following lines that keep recurring here and there in the novel betrays signs of another possible reading that

[24]See Marcel Proust's seven-volume novel *In Search of Lost Time*, 1908-1922.

Walid's personal vision is still blurring out and his wish to write it up is still going unfulfilled.

> … no no no that's not what I wanted to say even though I did want to say some of it when everything I've already said is merely marginal and the main text is missing so let me try again … (18)

According to Walid's blurring vision of reality and his unfinished audiotaped story, it is rather necessary to consult the voices of the other characters who willingly and consciously partake in the polyphonic process of narrating the same story, let alone the lapses of individual recollections. Artistically, polyphony tends to show that the world of the whole text is greater than the worlds constituted by its parts. In Jabra's *In Search of Walid Masoud*, there is no effort on the part of the author to reconcile and conflate the various versions into a single, definitive one. None of the characters, alone, holds the absolute "truth" about Walid Masoud, the protagonist, even though each may, implicitly or explicitly, claim it. Within the novel, the recurring events achieve a plurality of meaning through their representation by simultaneous, distinct consciousnesses which are polyphonically contrasted in the text. In this sense, Jabra must have made an innovative, academic achievement within the parameters of the modern and contemporary Palestinian novel during the 1960s and 1970s by replacing the omniscient voice of the author/narrator with multiple voices doing the narration. Dialogue mobilizes the course of transition from the fragmentary pieces of the jigsaw puzzle to the holistic image these pieces represent to form an ensemble. In this connection, the interactive reader can be part of this game to recreate and, in so doing, renew the text.

Anton Shammas

Arabesques

The Palestinian yarn keeps spinning at the hands of Anton Shammas[25] who uses his academic background and narrative skills to advance the modern Palestinian novel in many ways. Using Hebrew as the language of his acclaimed novel, *Arabesques*, Shammas chooses to venture telling a tale where both bi-cultural setting and intercultural dialogue feature as a medium of controversy over tough and seemingly unresolvable issues, like identity and history. Choosing a dialogic language to replace the monologic speech is likely to ease the misunderstanding between Arab and Jewish Israeli intellectuals who, in the second part of the tale, happen to participate and exchange views in the same cultural event overseas.

[25]Anton Shammas is an Arab Palestinian professor, poet, translator, and novelist born in Fassuta (a Christian Arab village in North Galilee) in 1950, that is two years after the creation of the state of Israel in Palestine. He studied English literature and art history at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Since 1997, he has been affiliated with The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, USA, as a professor of Comparative Literature.

Arabesques is a classic, complex novel of identity, memory, and history in the unstable Middle East. It is a semi-autobiographical novel in two parts: 'The Tale' and 'The Teller'. The first part is a recollection of Anton Shammas's boyhood memories as an Arab Palestinian whose Christian upbringing, village traditions, and warm family ties seem to have left indelible marks in the making of his personality as a character featuring in the second part of the novel. The second part is a redefinition and, most likely, an acceptance of his own identity as a non-Jewish Arab Israeli citizen.

Soon after its publication in both Hebrew (1986) and English (1988), *Arabesques* was viewed as a controversial novel. Received in the academic world as an Arabic tale in Hebrew letters, it was, in almost no time, translated and published in eight international languages and prescribed by a considerable number of university professors as part of their course syllabi in the scholarly world. It has also been reviewed by several Arab and Jewish intellectuals and met with a mixed shower of reactions for different reasons, thanks to the challenging nature of the narrative. To quote a few reactions, "*Arabesques* is a Palestinian tale in Hebrew letters" (Amit 73), and "It is a text written in the language of the conquerors" (Feldman 1999: 176). Addressed to the Hebrew-speaking readers in the first place, the tale places Israeli liberal doves in an uneasy position, for it "questions their cultural assumptions and expectations" (Feldman 1999: 176). The tale also "offers an artistically and politically ambitious response to the expectation that Palestinian and Israeli writers will narrate the nation" (Bernard 2014). In Lebanon, professor and novelist Elias Khoury sees the tale as an unprecedented piece of narrative art, for "it enters a zone where no Palestinian or Israeli writer has gone before—the zone of the intersection with the Other" (Khoury 1988).

Where does the Character/narrator Stand?

Defining his position as narrator of and character in *Arabesques*, Shammas harbors no clear plans as to who he really is. He seems to be maneuvering when he describes his identity as a hybrid product of a de facto complex situation. In other words, he perceives that his allegiance is wavering between a personal memory recollected from oral tales about his origin and ancestry as an Arab Palestinian (The Tale), and a futuristic vision he is trying to crystallize as a non-Jewish Israeli citizen (The Teller). The delicate issue of identity in *Arabesques* is dramatized by Shammas as the by-product of his own wishful thinking to belong, for the narrator hardly leaves the gray zone while in conflict with the various Jewish Israeli characters.

Reception and Readership

In the wake of its publication, the novel was severely criticized by his Arab and Jewish reviewers alike (see Eid 1988; Darwish 1990; Oz 1982; Grossman 1993; Brenner 2003). In an interview with Daliyah Amit, and perhaps in response to the Israeli critic and novelist, A. B. Yehoshua, who advises him to "*to pick up his belongings and move a hundred meters east, to the becoming Palestinian nation where he could realize his Palestinian identity fully*" (Davar 9), Shammas says, "*What I'm trying to do is to* ***un-Jew the Hebrew language*** *… to bring it back*

to its semantic origins, back to its place" (Amit 1988: 75) [emphasis mine]. Un-Jewing the Hebrew language would simply mean breaking one leg of the tripod upon which the Zionist project rests. As laid down by Herzl and other Jewish leaders, Zionist nationalism interlocks identity, homeland, and language.

Arabesques invited much criticism in Israel, not only by Jewish Israeli critics who laced into the novel as a non-Jewish narrative undermining their claimed national assumptions, but also by other Jewish Israeli writers who feature in the novel as characters debating with Shammas about his trespassing the sanctity of the Hebrew language and using it to write a non-Hebrew tale. Surprisingly, perhaps, two moderate liberal Israeli writers, Amos Oz and David Grossman, made two unusual responses:

> I think of it [the publication] as a triumph … not for the Israeli society, but for the Hebrew language. If the Hebrew language is becoming attractive for a non-Jewish Israeli to write in, then we have arrived! (***Hebrew*** 48).
> … invited into the language, the guest [Shammas] already begins the process of conquering (Grossman 194).

Even in the eyes of some Jewish Israeli characters in the novel, Shammas is no more than a "sample Arab". Yehoshua Bar-On, an Israeli writer and character in the second part of the story, offers [his Arab] Shammas salvation through the Hebrew language which he refers to as a sanctified territory that cannot be transgressed.

> My Arab [Shammas] will build his confused tower on my space, in the language of grace. That is his only possible salvation.
>
> (Shammas 82-83). [Emphasis mine.]

The Story

Deriving its name and structure from the term 'arabesque', an elaborate and fanciful design of twisted shapes, geometrical figures, and so forth, the novel is a tedious search for identity in two parts, each of which informs a little about the other. The first part 'The Tale' recalls the author's family memories is history retrieved for honesty of record. It recollects fantasy and magical realism signaled most obviously by the mythical rooster, *Ar-Rasad*, which guards the village's gold-filled cave. As the novel progresses, and due to unspeakable violence committed by the militant Jewish settlers against the Arab Palestinian villagers, the rooster gradually sheds its tail. This part of the story begins to lose its fantastic touch and quality and coalesce into "hard political history" (Feldmann, 1999: 382).

The second part 'The teller' recording the author's academic journey to the United States is speculation about his present ambivalent identity through debate with his fellow Jewish participants in the Iowa Writing Workshop. However, Shammas does not continue to speculate about identity in this part of *Arabesques*. Instead, he seems to be dissolving it into the animation of the story of others. For Shammas, the Hebrew language, as a cultural space, should not exclude or discriminate against its non-Jewish users. Trying to compromise his position vis-à-vis the question of identity, however, Shammas does not seem to have garnered

enough support for using the Hebrew language as a vehicle of the minority discourse. Renouncing his Arab Palestinian identity and hoping to liberate his Israeli identity from its Jewishness, Shammas seems to be standing in no man's land.

> Once again, I find myself standing at the entrance of the big gate. My life followed the path of a winding arabesque that has led me to the very same place where I began my journey (Shammas 203).

By fragmenting the narrative and alternating events from the two parts, Shammas succeeds to present an absurd situation in search of a rational solution of identity. This narrative impetus to reconnect the fragments of the tale, together with the position of the narrator-character through debate, can be read as a fictional expression of the desire for inclusion. If identity is socially constructed, under occupation it becomes either a non-negotiable national right through resistance in many ways, or an ambivalent status across the divide-line between self and other. Hence the advanced position of the character-narrator in the dialogue he holds with the rest of the other characters in *Arabesques*.

As regards narratology, *Arabesques* succeeds to score another advancement in the history of the modern Palestinian novel. As the tale comes to a halt, not to a resolution about identity, the author's narrative discourse sounds compelling enough for the Hebrew readers of his novel to question their own version of the self-narrated history and accept to negotiate the issue of identity and citizenship away from myths and power relations.

Salient Signs of Development in the Palestinian Novel

This literary study of the five narratives selected from the modern Palestinian literature shows that the Palestinian storytellers have succeeded to resuscitate their physical, historical, and cultural visibility in a rapidly changing world and in an endless battle over identity politics. In other words, these narratives have relatively succeeded to keep readjusting the focal vision of others on the Palestinian national Cause despite all efforts made to the contrary. If the places from which those storytellers wrote their tales vary in geographical location, and if various critical reviews of their works have often polarized their messages, the salient signs shared by these tales focus on the visibility of Palestine as a national Cause and the Palestinian voice as a transmitter of that Cause. The shift from alienation to initiation as an issue permeating most of those narratives seems to have created a strong sense of the self. It is the Palestinian authentic voice that is more audible now than phrases like "the Arab of the interior", "the Arab Israeli", "the Jew of the Jews", or "the refugee" which until recently have been the most common labels used to identify the Palestinian. As tellers of their own narratives, the Palestinians have invariably voiced themselves on the platform of the Middle East featuring an tough battle of discourses over identity politics. Space alone is not enough for the Palestinians to regain their historical reality; space and time are. Since the creation of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1964, and more particularly in the aftermath of the Arab humiliating military defeat of June War 1967, the

Palestinians have tried hard to break loose from the hollow Arab patronage. They have become visible enough not only as victims of the Israeli occupation atrocities and racial discrimination but also as freedom-fighters and activists in various areas of expression across the world, literature being one of them. Thanks to all those storytellers, Palestine has re-entered history to stay in geography for good.

The most salient signs of narrative development featuring in the five Palestinian tales tackled above go hand in hand with the technical devices used to carry their national Caause to the world. All these signs, to varied degrees of emphasis, endorse the Palestinian national identity and distinct voice, be it in Palestine or in exile. The following list clarifies this point.

A. The use of fable as an allegorical and symbolic narrative form to tell a story, as is the case with El Husseini's *Memoirs of a Mother Hen*, cannot be a circumstantial option. As a matter of fact, Isaac El Husseiny tries to respond to the historical and dramatic events challenging the national identity of his people. The fable was published in 1943, that is during World War II and on the eve of creating the Jewish state in Palestine. If the fable, by definition, can be set anywhere, El Husseiny makes Palestine (under the British Mandate) the setting of his fable to spread the word about the Palestinian national Cause, shared history, and cultural values. In this sense, he is more than a fabulist or a moralist edifying an audience; he is a harbinger foreshadowing the death toll hanging over Palestine, the Arab region, and beyond. Viewed from this perspective, *Memoirs of a Mother Hen* lays the foundation of a Palestinian type of popular storytelling and children's literature that attracts not only the local bedtime home audience but also other audiences worldwide. However, the way the fable is delivered is peculiar. Choosing the folkloric manner of grandparents to tell the tale to a narrow family audience lulling them to bed, Mother Hen does all that in a low voice so that she does not irritate the slumber of the snoring monstrous intruders outdoors. Mother Hen discourages her fledging chicks from rebelling against the monstrous intruders who are a threat to all the birds living on the farm. Instead, she pleads and prays for a peaceful solution. Using fable as the form of his tale, El-Husseini seems to concede the self-defense right in response to the historical realities conditioned by power relations. Hence the voice of the Palestine as filtered through this allegorical story is hardly audible. Nevertheless, El-Husseiny's fable can be still viewed as a whistle blowing tool that cannot be dismissed from the criteria shaping the Palestinian narrative voice.

B. The use of symbolism as a literary device to communicate messages beyond the face value of representation is yet another sign in the development of the Palestinian art of fiction. Ghassan Kanafani's *Men in the Sun* uses a narrative language whose mainstay is the symbol which imbues a wider perception of terms or images beyond their literal level of meaning. In this tale, almost every element of fiction is cast into the symbolic. The road (between Basra and Kuwait) which the three characters mistake for a safe way leading to their destination is symbolic; the three characters who represent three Palestinian generations are symbolic; the water-carrying cistern inside of which the three characters perish silently is also a symbol; the scene of the three dead bodies undressed and thrown on a garbage heap in the Kuwaiti desert as nameless and anonymous is a symbol. However, Kanafani does not end up his tale with this tragic scene of cheap death. By implication and a densified use of irony, a shrill shriek of remorse and outrage is sent out by the castrated water-cistern driver (also a symbol of the Palestinian defeated generation before *Nakba*), blaming it all on the three victims. *"Why didn't you knock on the sides of the tank? Why didn't you say*

anything? Why? Why?" The desert suddenly began to send back the echo (p.56). The sound wave of the shriek begins to travel across the desert so that it might wake up the dormant world who should see the ongoing tragedy of the people of Palestine. Kanafani does not moralize or edify in *Men in the Sun*. The central message underlying his tale is transmitted through the apologetic driver, Abul Khaizuran (see Said & Hitchen 2001). By using evasion to send this annoying message to the world, Kanafani has undoubtedly given Palestine the voice which the three suffocating victims inside the tank failed to send out for help. In this tale, Kanafani has scored an advance over his predecessors of Palestinian storytellers.

C. Another narrative device used in advancing the Palestinian novel in plot and action is the dramatic significance of the supernatural element introduced into the tale. In his tragi-comic novel *The Pessoptimist*, Emile Habibi borrows from Greek literature the dramatic device *deus ex machina*[26] and converts it into a flying supernatural creature invoked in the nick of time to resolve the impasse of his hero, Sa'eed, at the end of the tale. Habibi makes this divine intervention part and parcel of the symbolic narrative structure of the tale. When all human institutions, including the United Nations Security Council, fail to settle the seemingly irresolvable Question of Palestine, there is an incessant need for such a divine force to interfere. The last scene attracts crowds of pedestrians, and of course the Israeli police force chasing the protagonist Sa'eed, who is suspected to be a potential threat to the security of the state. Although Sa'eed feigns madness to escape indictment, he is forced by the Israeli police to wear a strait jacket and stay in a mad house where he dies shortly afterwards. Nonetheless, *The Pessoptimist* seems to have succeeded in adjusting the focus of vision on the visibility of the Palestinian whose shrill voice in this tale requests that it is about time that the "indifferent" world roaring outside listen to his version of the story and do justice to his Cause.

D. With the academic expertise of Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, the modern Palestinian novel has yet to reach another level of development and achieve a new feat. In terms of form and narrative structure, Jabra's novel *In Search of Walid Masoud* is written after the manner of William Faulkner[27] whose novels, especially *The Sound and the Fury*, are recognized for their syntactical ambiguity and multiple focus of narration. In the same vein, the complexity of *In Search of Walid Masoud* owes much of its meaning to its narrative structure, interactive dialogic language, and foci of narration. The title of Jabra's novel entails a search, and that search is carried out by Walid's narrow circle of friends who only find themselves involved in an ambiguous jigsaw puzzle whose central point is memory, which is triggered by the audiotape on which Walid Masoud, on the eve of leaving his exile in Iraq, has recorded his last words recalling his child memories in Palestine. If the novel is dubbed polyphonic[28], it is because the other characters involved in the search narrate different versions of the central event, the missing of Walid Masoud. Hence the un-orchestrated opus

[26]Latin phrase which literally means 'god from machine'. Derived from ancient Greek drama, this technical phrase was popularized by the Greek playwright Euripides in the 5th century BCE. This dramatic device was recalled in time of distress to solve irresolvable issues standing in the way of settling conflict and restoring order into the work of art.

[27]William Faulkner is an American novelist whose novel *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) was widely received and studied in the world of academia as an innovative piece of prose fiction. Jabra translated this novel into Arabic in 1961.

[28]Reference is made to the term polyphony used by the C20th Russian linguist and philologist, Mikhail Bakhtin, who stresses the significance of plurality of independent and unmerged voices while approaching literary narratives.

produced by the author of the tale. However, if characters voice themselves in distinct ways of expression, there remains one salient voice whose owner is the missing Palestinian Walid Masoud, whose search for identity is aborted but whose presence as a key character fills the narrative space of the other versions of the tale.

E. Anton Shammas[29] is another Palestinian man of letters who has also furthered the modern Palestinian novel. His academic expertise, as a professor of comparative literature and researcher in the humanities, must have enriched and broadened his literary vision which clearly features in his published books. His novel, *Arabesques*, is a compelling semi-autobiographical Arabic tale written in Hebrew. Chosen by *The New York Times* as one of the best books of 1988, *Arabesques* is a luminous novel that engages history and politics not as propaganda but as literature (see also Asokan 2023). Addressing the Hebrew-speaking readers in the first place, Shammas designs this tale to reposition himself as both narrator of his family saga and character in his own right. Assuming this position of character-narrator, Shammas feels privileged to eyewitness the horrible demise of his own Arab Palestinian identity and the emergence of quite another imposed on him by the newly established Jewish settlers' state. Seeking a way out of this ambivalent national allegiance, he gets involved in various situational conversations with several Jewish Israeli intellectuals, some of whom feature as characters in the tale. Using Hebrew as the language of this novel, Shammas admits that he is trying to de-territorialize and un-Jew that language and bring it back to its semantic origins. For him, the Hebrew language which dominates the cultural space in Israel today can in no wise keep discriminating against its non-Jewish, Arab Palestinian natives who also use Hebrew as one of the two official languages of the State (see Connolly 2005). The novel thus raises the following question as regards identity: Does Shammas's narrative discourse and voice compel his Hebrew readers to question their own version of the self-narrated history and accept to negotiate the issue of identity and citizenship?

Concluding Remarks

For the past hundred years, the Palestinian people under occupation and the Palestinian communities in exile have been telling stories about who they were and are in space and time. Although their narratives are distinct in scope, subject matter, and the themes attempted, it should be noted that the narratives produced have undergone remarkable technical developments in theme, form, and other tools of telling a modern literary tale. The stories examined in this paper show that there has been a slow but considerable shift taking place from telling a fable based on oral tradition and narrow family audience to telling a complex tale with a broader scope and the skillful interplay of the elements of fiction that meet the parameters of the novel as that produced in world literature. Besides, this paper shows that the Palestinian modern narrative has also made a shift from the local to the universal as regards reception and readership. This has all found place at local, regional, and universal levels of sharing. Most of these activities would take academic or cultural forms as in international academic conferences and seminars,

[29]Anton Shammas is an Arab Palestinian Christian. He was born in the Arab village of Fassuta in the Upper Galilee in 1950, that is two years after the creation of Israel in Palestine. He is now a professor of Comparative Literature and Arabic language at the University of Michigan, USA.

book review platforms and sites, college courses in the humanities, translations, theater performance, and filmmaking.

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