

Political Animals in Palestine-Israel

Uri S. Cohen

Manar H. Makhoul

Tel Aviv University

ABSTRACT: Animals in the 1948 War carry secrets hidden in plain sight. In this essay we employ a shift that is related to ecocriticism and animal studies to examine stories of the 1948 War, seeking the language and imaginings of, and about, animals of Palestine for untold aspects of its story. We ask how the depiction of animals in Palestinian and Israeli literatures helps us understand other dimensions of space, life, and death in Palestine/Israel and their narratives of 1948. Reading in works by S. Yizhar, Emile Habiby, and Anton Shammas, it appears animals hold a humanistic message for all living things, a message that continues to be passed on from generation to generation, even if only in whispers.

ANIMALS CARRY SECRETS JUST AS STATES DO, hidden in plain sight. We know they do, and we even have a pretty good idea of what they are as we observe them and wonder what remains hidden on the outskirts of language. They are like us, perhaps the first comparative figure that comes to human mind in prehistoric caves. We think we know them, but through the very language that thinks of them, we do not.¹ That is to say, in any frame, and more so when discussing animals in war, we are bound by anthropomorphism and its prejudices from which there can only be reprieve but not exception.² There are meaningful discussions to be had about the degrees that separate humans and animals—how we struggle to see, read, and speak of them as anything other than reflections of human stories, even as we attempt to let them tell a story of their own.³

¹ Louise Westling, *The Logos of the Living World: Merleau-Ponty, Animals, and Language* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 101–34.

² This is not without the problems of “deep ecology.” See Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993), 165–189.

³ Ryan Hediger, ed., *Animals and War: Studies of Europe and North America* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2013).

Considering this inevitable linguistic gap, would not the least anthropomorphic way to think of animals be not as lacking of language, but as having one we cannot decipher? Would the Aesopian tale then become not a representation of things human spoken by animals, but rather human imaginings of a common language with animals, richer and more meaningful than the one practiced in the toils of everyday? In this essay we employ a shift that is related to ecocriticism and animal studies because “ecology is profoundly about coexistence.”⁴ We therefore look at stories of 1948 seeking the language and imaginings of and about animals of Palestine and their sides of its story, otherwise ignored.⁵ Of course, it is not a different story than the one known, but by regarding the equal value of all life, human and animal, some rich notes appear out of a story told and retold many times. It is part of the struggle to lend an ear to the past and approach the secrets of Palestine and its destruction, written into our literatures.

The language of animals, if we could hear it, would break our hearts, and this is one reason we chose to accompany *Comparing the Literatures* with comparing animals in the context of Palestine becoming Israel in 1948.⁶ This reflection grew out of two seminars. The first was dedicated to *Comparing the Literatures*; the other we named Double Vision, where we read the fundamental texts of the conflict in three languages and discussed them in English at Tel Aviv University. We found the detachment of English helpful in fostering the discussion that followed readings that became more painful as the semester progressed. Not to be outdone by history, reality caught up with the seminar in May 2021, as a sense of imminent civil war came to the streets. We continued our discussions, hidden from sight.

However, this article is not about animals and ecosystems in Palestine/Israel per se. It is about how the depiction of animals in Palestinian and Israeli literatures helps us understand other dimensions of life in Palestine/Israel and their narratives of 1948. If we could dismiss the people, then animals would force us to see that the space of Palestine/Israel is not smooth and what happened in 1948 did not occur in a landscape that only changed inhabitants. In the following, we will review the works of S. Yizhar, Emile Habiby, and Anton Shammas. Yizhar's *Khirbet Khizaa*, published in 1949, marks an initial, critical milestone in Hebrew-Israeli literature regarding the events of the 1948 war. The depiction of the displacement of a Palestinian village has been at the center of literary and critical debate for decades. Emile Habiby's *The Pessoptimist* (1974) is considered to be the first Palestinian post-colonial novel. Habiby's novel, too, has been the focus for extensive research regarding its depiction of Palestinian identity and discourse in Israel. Finally, Anton Shammas's *Arabesques* (1986) is a Palestinian novel written in Hebrew. As such, this linguistic choice received considerable attention from scholars of Hebrew/Israeli literature, while relatively sidelined within the field of Palestinian literature. Nevertheless, in this article we will read *Arabesques* as a *Palestinian* novel, giving particular attention to the ways 1948 and its animals reflect novel ways of thinking of Palestinian identity and discourse. These two novels

⁴ Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 1–19; Paul Waldau, *Animal Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 247–59.

⁵ Waldau, *Animal Studies*, 247–59.

⁶ David Damrosch, *Comparing the Literatures: Literary Studies in a Global Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020); Re'uvén Shoham, *Ha-Mar'eh V'eha-Kolot: Keri'ah Kashuvah Bi-"Feridah Meha-Darom" Le-Abba Kovner. Po'etikah U-Vikoret* [The sight and sounds: A close reading of “Farewell to the South” by Abba Kovner] (Tel-Aviv, Sifriyat po'alim, 1994), 37–95. Shoham surveys the hymns of battle units; all of them speak of the land as space, but only the Palmah's speaks of its animal life, giving some credence to the claim that its author, Zrubavel Gilad, is also a pioneer of Hebrew eco-poetics.

in particular tackle questions of Palestinian identity in Israel directly and offer, in Arabic and in Hebrew, a counter-perspective to that presented by Yizhar. *Arabesques* revisits the occupation of a Palestinian village, but this time from the Palestinian side. While Yizhar's novella focuses on the occupation event of a fictional village itself, Anton Shammas pans out to encompass two centuries of Palestinian history. Moreover, rather than depict Palestinians and 1948 uniformly as defeated, Shammas portrays a more complex picture, where resistance, betrayal, and fear coexist. The secrets of animals hold narratives that cannot be told, a something that escapes and exceeds the allegorical function of animals in literature. Thinking of their lives as equally worthy and wasted is then itself an aspect of 1948.

As civil society buckles, the line between humans and animals becomes of renewed importance, as it tends to be in times of conflict.⁷ Indeed, Hebrew literature in the early twentieth century employed figures of animals to discuss dimensions of power and conflict with the Palestinians in a way that was an open secret, though not in the open. Animals are a perfect vehicle for such figurative tactics, representing the adversary while supposedly being in natural power relations that are indifferent to human matters.⁸ This changed with the Great Arab Revolt (1916–18) and the Second World War, as the power struggle was no longer hidden, and the aftermath of the Holocaust made clear that the human/animal divide had collapsed.⁹ Animals, it had become clear, were better than the humans who brought on a world where animals were treated more humanely than humans. We know from the works of Aharon Apelfeld, Ida Fink, and other authors of the Holocaust that war — especially the kind that annihilates an entire ecosystem — redefines the liminal spaces between human and animal, as only the latter is permitted to live while the human is hunted. When the very habitat of the Jew/Palestinian is lost, they become other than animals that are left alone. They are the excreted remains of a collapsed ecosystem. There are degrees of life to be found there as well, and they often are measured in relation to animals in terms of “bare life.”¹⁰

KHIRBET KHIZAA

Reading from this perspective sees 1948 as the collapse of an ecosystem, which it truly was — the entire web of being that was Palestine gone with its inhabitants. Some of the flora and fauna obviously remained, but, torn from their natural context, they have slowly disappeared under the new state.¹¹ One thing is obvious: animals in Hebrew/Israeli 1948 literature are certainly not there to represent the humans who are being deported and whose fate is clear. Perhaps the animals are there to remind us not to think of Palestine as an uninterrupted space, a landscape that only changed inhabitants, but rather as an extinguished ecosystem. Yizhar's seminal story, *Khirbet Khizaa*, published in 1949, tells of the taking and vacating of an eponymous fictional Arab village

⁷ See Raymond Corbey, “‘Race’ and Species in the Post-World War II United Nations Discourse on Human Rights,” in *The Politics of Species*, ed. Raymond Corbey and Annette Lanjouw (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 67–73.

⁸ Uri S. Cohen, “Ha-haya Ha-zionit: mehk'arei,” *Yerushala'im be'sifrut ivrit* [The Zionist Animal] 19 (2003): 167–217.

⁹ Naomi Sokoloff, “The Nazi Beast at the Warsaw Zoo: Animal Studies, the Holocaust, The Zookeeper's Wife, and See Under: Love,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Holocaust Literature and Culture*, ed. Victoria Aarons and Phyllis Lassner (London: Palgrave, 2020), 91–109.

¹⁰ Boria Sax, *Animals in the Third Reich: Pets, Scapegoats, and the Holocaust* (New York: Continuum, 2000); Samuel Weber, “Bare Life and Life in General,” *Grey Room* 46 (2012): 7–24.

¹¹ Hella Bloom Cohen, “Poetry, Palestine and Posthumanism,” *Postcolonial Studies* 25, no. 3 (2021): 1–19.

and seeks to capture the substance of this collapse. The story has been the subject of many readings, to which we wish to add here one briefly focused on its ecosystem.¹²

Clearly part of the disdain that Yizhar's narrator feels for the entire operation regards the un-ideological realization that "conquest" also means the destruction of his own habitat, regardless of the future. Animals are constantly there to tell of this tragedy. They certainly do not "symbolize" anything as there is no need for it: the fate of the Palestinian and Palestine is clear enough—they have nothing to add in that respect. As the secret of Jewish power is being revealed, animals no longer function in this symbolic system and it breaks down with its world.

Animals and places, more than humans, are subject to the bored cruelty of the young soldiers, which both shields and exposes the kind of wanton cruelty that characterizes this part of the war. The second part of the story begins then with donkeys. Obviously, they are immediately taken to symbolize Palestinians as the soldiers speak, though they are also just that, donkeys:

"Yesterday I pumped three bullets into one and it didn't die."

"Where'd you hit it?"

"One here in the neck. Another here in the head just beneath the ear and the third next to the eye."

"And?"

"It didn't die, it just went on walking."

"Come off it. That's impossible."

"I swear! Yesterday, right by the camp. I'd just gone to check the equipment. I saw it wandering around by the fence. I blasted it right away."

"At what range?"

"Up close. No more than ten yards or so."

"And it didn't die?"

"No way! It just went on walking. Then it dropped."

"Aha!"¹³

The soldiers are discussing a donkey and there is something uncanny in the way it is symbolic and yet is not at all. Zionist faith, of which all these soldiers have some, obscures the gaze by attributing many facets to reality. One can, like the commander in the story, gloss over the destruction of life and property taking place with a vision of a future, however justified. Donkeys participate to some extent as they are closely associated with Palestinian life, and as such they disclose the terrifying degree of cruelty and the horrifying intentions of it:

"When it got hit in the neck, it lifted its head up and looked. Blood was already spurting out of it like a faucet. So what does this donkey do, it goes on munching grass. I got it below the ear, and it gave a start but went on standing there, looking. That was too much already. I shot

¹² It is a small addition to a large body of works, a cogent summary, in Anita Shapira, "Hirbet Hizah: Between Remembrance and Forgetting," *Jewish Social Studies* 7, no. 1 (2000): 1–62; see also Amit Assis, "His Ancestors Were Calling Him Back to His Origins": Zionism and the Poetics of Space in the Early Work of S. Yizhar," *Prooftexts* 36, no. 3 (2018): 383–412.

¹³ Smilansky Yizhar, *Khirbet Khizeh* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014, originally published 1949), 15–16.

it in the eye at closer range and it took a few steps farther in the grass, and then, really slowly, lazily, it dropped and sprawled over. What incredible vitality!”¹⁴

The shockingly detailed cruelty is certainly a figure of what will happen to the village and its inhabitants. The “humane” treatment they receive compared to the “animal” treatment inserts a perverse dimension to it all. The animals and their treatment tell the truth, and Yizhar is telling the truth about a fate worse than death. This is necessary because the war is fought on the Jewish side within this frame of mind, that there is a fate worse than death — defeat — and it is precisely the one they are inflicting, though to their post-Holocaust minds it does not seem so, as life is spared. Still, the shame is there in the dying eye of the donkey, an intolerable gaze that must be extinguished. The vitality of the donkey is remarkable as the soldier says — eating, even while dying. Once all life has worth, once the humane gesture of letting live is just that, the true nature of the violence is laid bare and this praise of donkey vitality solicits a discussion on comparative killing:

“A bullet from an English rifle would have finished it on the spot, no problem. It’s the bones they have — like iron.”

“But at such close range!”

“Once I shot a donkey from behind and it dropped right away. This great balloon came out of its behind, and it pushed its head into the sand and fell over.”

“It’s amazing,” a third person joined in the conversation. “With a camel it’s just one-two and it drops. It turns its head around and, bingo, it falls. So how come with a donkey it’s different?”¹⁵

An English rifle surely appears here to remind us that what is happening follows the thirty-year British rule of Palestine. Yizhar did not need to actually read George Orwell’s “To Shoot an Elephant” to intimately know it.¹⁶ Animals die in different ways that are all the same. In this case, the camel with all of its orientalist charm — emblem of the desert and most enduring of animals — dies gracefully and swiftly. Because the animals do not symbolize but are, they attest less to how they die and more to the nature of the killing. At the end of cruelties, a fundamental unanswered question about the difference of the donkey remains.

As the day progresses, the narrator and soldiers encounter other animals — mainly, an elderly man fleeing with a donkey and a camel laden with his belongings. Encountering the soldiers, he turns to plead his case, but something opposite of hearing happens. The man is faced with a blunt decision by Moishe, the commander:

“Hai na’am, ya khawaja, Allah ya’atik, ya khawaja.” The old man, sensing a turn for the better, became submissive and yielding, hoping and praying and ready for anything.

“Choose for yourself,” said Moishe. “Your life or the camel.”

“Khawaja,” said the old man in alarm.

¹⁴ Ibid., 6.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ The essay was published in *New Writing* in 1936. See also Ahmad Ghaforian and Ahmad Gholi, “A Postcolonial Reading of George Orwell’s *Shooting an Elephant* with Special Reference to Edward Said’s Orientalism and Binary of the Self and the Other,” *Theory and Practice in Language Studies* 5, no. 7 (2015): 1361–67; and Sami Hossain Chisty, “Revisiting Orwell’s ‘Shooting an Elephant’ through the Lens of Post-Colonial Ecocriticism,” *Litinfinitive Journal* 3, no. 2 (2021): 42–50.

“Ya nafsak ya jamal,” Moishe insisted, drawing out his syllables and frowning his brow:
 “Just be happy we’re not killing you.”¹⁷

The Hebrew and the Arabic mix, but language is lost. The soldiers not only do not hear, they actively force upon him, for no reason, not even greed, a horrible choice between life and possession, or rather life and life. It is a cruel mishearing of the plea, of supplication, and it forces the man to choose his own life and by his own hand sever it from what was life and is now possessions left behind. The point that is being made is also an answer to the donkey’s difference: a donkey may be allowed to stay behind.

The one living being that is truly lent an ear, where a language is struggling to establish itself, appears when the soldiers encounter a beautiful colt. Shmulik is captivated, reaching out to this noble animal of war, so deeply established in all warrior cultures and as unassociated with Jewish culture as it is an object of Zionist fascination and mimicry of both Europeans and Arabs.¹⁸

The kind of attention given to the horse stands against the callous cruelty of all that is happening, but it does not establish a moral high ground. It is a continuation of the hunt in other terms, those of the prize:

Shmulik bent down and plucked a handful of barley so as to tempt the creature, if not with the quality of the food, which was available in abundance all around, then by the style of his presentation, his attentiveness embellished with chirping sounds, paying no regard to how all the while his heavy boots were befouling the patch of green and leaving behind him a dirty furrow that revealed the mud.

“Come on, there, come on, there!” Shmulik entreated.¹⁹

The colt almost begs symbolization pointed to a future, a representation of a rebellious spirit unleashed by the war, as it is in Michel Khleifi’s *Wedding in Galilee* (1987).²⁰ The film tells the story of a Palestinian wedding under military occupation. The *mukhtar’s* (mayor’s) son is allowed to break curfew in return for inviting the military ruler. The wedding does not go well, but the film’s claustrophobic atmosphere breaks in the end into sweeping, liberating shots of a black colt escaping through the wheat fields. Taken as it is, the young horse is not a symbol. Rather, it is connected to a way of life and an entire world of meaning pertaining to cultures of heroism, one that these newly branded heroes try out:

Triumphantly Shmulik approached the colt, patting its silky neck and quivering belly, its reddish gazelle-like hocks, and speaking soft, soothing words of affection.

“Good boy, good boy. There, there. That’s good,” Shmulik said. And immediately he knelt down and drew his knife to cut through the hobble on the animal’s forelegs. He thrust his head and most of his body between the four legs of the attentive colt.

“You’d better not stick your head down there,” said Gaby excitedly, and took one step forward. At that very moment the horse started and gave a great leap, spreading its tail like a peacock,

¹⁷ Yizhar, *Khirbet Khizeh*, 42.

¹⁸ Daniel Boyarin, “The Colonial Drag: Zionism, Gender, and Mimicry,” in *The Pre-occupation of Postcolonial Studies*, ed. Fawzia Afzal-Khan and Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

¹⁹ Yizhar, *Khirbet Khizeh*, 63.

²⁰ Tim Kennedy, “Wedding in Galilee (Urs al-Jalil),” *Film Quarterly* 59, no. 4 (2006): 40–46.

its mane waving wildly. It gave another leap forward and with head extended broke into a mighty gallop, jumped the low hedge (with a bit of rope dangling from one of its forelegs), and appeared one last time at the end of the plowed field before vanishing from sight.²¹

Of all the encounters in the story, this is by far the most “humane,” even as a knife is unsheathed. Care and effort to communicate are displayed in a manner that is nowhere to be found anywhere else. Underlining the loss of language, of that kind of language, is one aspect; another seems to be about the difference between a colt and a donkey. In Arabic tradition, the horse is an animal of pride while the humble donkey is of labor. Among the worlds being lost that day is the one that existed for millennia, that of Jewish weakness, of “unheroic conduct,” lost in that day, that village, and all the rest.²² The colt, freed of its hobble and severed from its living context, cannot be tamed and escapes, rejecting in practice and in allegory this new warrior class.

Khirbet Khizaa tells a terrible tale about the end of Palestine—it is the poetic scope of the novella. Even without engaging the debates on ecocriticism, there is much to be read just by treating all life as equally meaningful. One cannot undo the separation from humans written into this description of the collapse. The soldiers are mostly operating with a vision akin to that of the state, where maps take precedence over lived and material reality.²³ Animals, almost by nature, contradict that gaze. Through them, Yizhar delivers much of the necessary details about the death, or rather the execution, of Palestine, details that otherwise easily escape the Hebrew readers.

The Palestinians who are being loaded onto trucks are free to retain their lives, though at the condition of leaving behind everything which made them. For the Jews, this difference matters, separating them from Nazis. For the refugees it matters not. No experience can be conceived of that is closer to death. The animals are allowed to stay—in fact, they expose the fact that Palestinians have become animals, insofar that their words have no meaning. When they supplicate the soldiers, it’s as if they didn’t speak. The very possibility of a language of shared human fate is lost in that day. But they are not (even) animals, that might be allowed to stay. They are literally alive, but their entire world and way of living is dead, and the story ends with their literal excretion from the state that clads the landscape, as a deathly silence settles on the land.

PALESTINIAN ANIMATE HISTORY

Published originally in three parts in the Haifa daily *Al-Jadid* between 1972 and 1974, Habibi’s *The Pessimist* is obviously written in Arabic to a very different audience than Yizhar’s. Yet that narrative, or that kind of narrative with its figurative practices, is present, and they tell a story of 1948 and its aftermath. Fortunately, Habibi is also available to his readers in Hebrew, through the masterful translation of Anton Shammas.²⁴ Emile Habibi seems well aware of these language-traversing dynamics of representation as he begins his masterpiece with a donkey, his own personal 1948:

²¹ Yizhar, *Khirbet Khizeh*, 66.

²² Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997).

²³ James C. Scott, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999).

²⁴ Imil Habibi, *Ha-Optimist: Ha-Kronikah Ha-Mufla’ah Shel He’almut Sa’id Abu al-Nahs al-Mutashā’il* (Jerusalem: Mifras, 1984).

Let's start at the beginning. My whole life has been strange, and a strange life can only end strangely. When I asked my extraterrestrial friend why he took me in, he merely replied, "What alternative did you have?"

So when did it all begin?

When I was born again, thanks to an ass.

During the fighting in 1948 they waylaid us and opened fire, shooting my father, may he rest in peace. I escaped because a stray donkey came into the line of fire and they shot it, so it died in place of me. My subsequent life in Israel, then, was really a gift from that unfortunate beast. What value then, honored sir, should we assign to this life of mine?²⁵

Clearly Habibi is referring to the same fundamental questions we have been looking at. What is a life that needs to be saved by a donkey, what indeed is its worth within a collapsed ecosystem which has only restricted places for either donkey or Said? The irony of an anthropomorphic tradition of heroes saved by animals further drives home this impossible relationship of savior and saved. The beauty of it all being framed by the presence of the extraterrestrial friend is exhilarating as we must confront the question about life on earth and the wars over slight differences, as they must seem to a cosmic "outsider."

The donkey saving Said's life is not wholly a symbol—it is the way it happened. Said's life in Israel is a result of a collaboration between an unwilling animal and the arbitrary nature of power, and it is much like Said's own farcical tale of collaboration with the new state. The donkey is then not a figure, but a reality; Said is left to live like a donkey that therefore has to die for Said to be what he is in the new state. As expected, it's not great, but it undeniably is a story of 1948 that also continues in time and space to 1967 and beyond. Such movement then requires other donkeys and a chapter that is also a footnote:

SAEED TAKES REFUGE IN A FOOTNOTE

Footnote: Sometime recently, the world having in the meantime revolved completely on its axis, I read in your newspapers about an official request submitted by Hebron dignitaries to the military governor seeking permission to import asses from the East Bank. When asked where their asses had gone, the Hebron officials laughed and replied that Tel Aviv butchers had used them all to make sausages. You used to assure us, honored sir, that history, when repeating itself, does not reproduce itself precisely. If the first occurrence were tragedy, the second would be a farce.

So I ask you, which in this case is the tragedy and which the farce? Is there tragedy in the asses of the Valley of Nasnas, from so many destroyed villages, remaining free from chains and the burdens of women, with no one benefiting from their rich meat except the late Kiork? Or is there farce in all those delicious sausages being made in Tel Aviv?

I well know, my honored sir, how tenacious you are of the conclusions you deduce. But is it not true that whenever people leave their homes the asses remain, and whenever people stay the butchers find nothing to make into sausages except the meat of asses? Take this maxim from me: Many are the nations saved from a butcher's knife by an animal!²⁶

²⁵ Emile Habibi (Imil Ḥabībi), *The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessoptimist* (Brooklyn, NY: Interlink Books, 2002), 6.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

Said was saved by a donkey, only to share its fate; being allowed to remain by one, he pretty much ends up a sausage, which in both Hebrew and Arabic is one of the most derogatory ways to say one has been fleeced in all senses. The footnote then moves on to make an acidic comment on the improved Palestinian fate in the 1967 war, exulting in the progression from Israelis paying nothing to paying one lira for the wedding dishes. But this fate of Palestine's donkeys in sausages is both funny and horrible. It turns out that not much saving has happened, and farm animals of burden being marketed as high-quality fare in Tel Aviv is in a way the same fate of all Palestinian possessions. This is arguably a perfect follow-up and contrast to Yizhar's scene discussed above. While Yizhar's novel pauses at the Jewish-Israeli power to decide the fate of both animals and humans, Habiby emphasizes the tragedy, from the point of view of both Palestinians and animals, of the powerlessness and arbitrariness of life and death during the war and after. In other words, moral dilemmas — whether they existed or not — matter very little to those who have to endure the verdict. Animals in Yizhar's novel, then, come to highlight the tragic dilemma of life spared and lost. In the Palestinian novel, animals are a footnote and a refuge at the same time. Their part in the story is marginal, yet it could be life-saving and crucial:

You've no doubt read of dogs lapping up poisoned water and dying to warn their masters and save their lives. And of horses, too, racing the wind bearing their wounded riders to safety, only to die of exhaustion themselves.²⁷

What we don't know, from this last excerpt, is whether animals did these things intentionally to save the lives of their masters or because they were merely acting on their own survival instincts. Nevertheless, in the grand scheme of human history it could be used as an anecdotal footnote on animal loyalty as well as an acidic comment on the pretensions of those whom fortune has favored by an inch.

So, what is the worth of a human life saved — probably unintentionally — by an animal? This is the question with which Habiby begins the novel. Said considers himself to be “quite remarkable” for being saved “by a mulish donkey,”²⁸ which is the beginning of his story — and the focus of the novel as a whole — on the life of Palestinians in Israel. The answer to that question is, however, not much — as it pans out throughout the text. But what redeems this life is a story, a secret, and a treasure to be hidden and kept away from prying eyes. Secrets are to be passed through generations in whispers and silence:

Baqiya's secret having become mine as well, I became caution personified on two feet. When I realized that true caution demands walking on four feet, I began to do that too.²⁹

For a Palestinian to survive under Israeli rule demands, therefore, animal-like qualities of submissiveness, silence, and elusiveness. And in the case of Baqiya, the secret was about her family's underwater cave in which they hid gold and ammunition in 1948. Animals will forever remain unfathomable to humans, their intentions hidden behind an eternal linguistic gap — they are living in a secret cave.

Secrets and caves are not unrelated. Semantically, a crypt, means “cave, cavern, or grotto,” but also “being dark, deep, or hidden,” according to the Oxford English Dictionary. Quoting

²⁷ Ibid., 6.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 97.

Schelling, the “uncanny is what one calls everything that was meant to remain secret and hidden and has come into the open.”³⁰ Moreover, “when the word *segrada/secretus* first appeared in writing, in the Middle Ages around the twelfth century, it described the separation of a harvest’s good grain from the bad and, by extension, all forms of setting aside: restroom facilities, concealed drawers, missives. From there, these parts of hidden life became whatever part of the body is hidden, eroticized. [...] But equally, the secret is spiritualized. It designates the divine and, moreover, the vow and the sacred that contribute to its primacy though [sic] language.”³¹ For D. A. Miller, “It becomes clear that the social function of secrecy — isomorphic with its novelistic functions — is not to conceal knowledge, so much as to conceal the knowledge of the knowledge.”³² This final point relates to the discrepancy between Habiby’s overt and covert messages in the novel.

The political message in *The Pessoptimist* is quite clear: it calls for Palestinian restraint and perseverance in Israel, and clutching to the impalement stake seems to Said the best solution for Palestinian life under Israeli rule. Nevertheless, in *The Pessoptimist*, Habiby embarks on a project of epistemic and cultural resistance that aims to reclaim the Palestinian ecosystem and history in the face of Jewish-Israeli erasure.³³ While the plot takes place in Israel, the depiction of space in it is unquestionably Palestinian. Habiby stresses the Palestinianness of the space through two complementary forms, namely, repetition and indigenosity (using indigenous Palestinian toponyms). By writing so many Palestinian names, Habiby wants to keep Palestinian time alive by resisting physical and epistemic erasure. This duality in Habiby’s discourse reflects the many contradictions of identity among Palestinian citizens in Israel in the 1970s and 1980s.³⁴

Anton Shammas’s *Arabesques* (1986) is a Palestinian tale written in Hebrew. It grapples with the same questions that Habiby did more than a decade earlier. In some respects, moreover, it could be considered a sequel to Habiby’s work. The names of the protagonists and other characters in both novels continue over generations. Anton Shammas, the protagonist in *Arabesques*, bears the name of another child whose fate is unknown. Baqiya and Said in *The Pessoptimist* are the names of the parents as well as their children. Unchanging names over generations resemble the categorical reference to animals: donkeys, horses, and cats. They are timeless and unchanging. Secondly, the plots of both novels revolve around a central axis of a family secret that is passed through the generations (also through perpetual names). The family secrets are elusive and hard to grasp, but they contain the family’s identity, conveyed as a hidden treasure related to 1948. Thirdly, family secrets in both novels involve caves and underground or underwater caverns.³⁵ In the words of Lital Levy, the “novels use the cave not as a marker of Palestinian autochthony, which they hardly need to prove, but as a multidimensional spatiality that is at

³⁰ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 132 (originally published 1919).

³¹ Anne Dufourmantelle, *In Defense of Secrets*, trans. Lindsay Turner (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021), 10.

³² D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 206.

³³ Maha Nassar, *Brothers Apart: Palestinian Citizens of Israel and the Arab World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017).

³⁴ For example, in comparison to mentioning only six Jewish-Israeli locales, he mentions the names of more than one hundred Palestinian villages, cities, neighborhoods, and sites. For a detailed discussion on this, see Manar H. Makhoul, *Palestinian Citizens in Israel: A History Through Fiction, 1948–2010* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 120–24.

³⁵ Other side stories in *The Pessoptimist* also involve Palestinian treasures hidden and buried in walls and caves.

once psychological, political, and historical in nature.³⁶ Indeed, the cave in both the *Pessoptimist* and *Arabesques* is a place that harbors a hope for survival, because the promise of continuity is in knowing the past. In *Arabesques*, the identity of the protagonist, Anton Shammas, is directly linked to a cave located at the center of the village and guarded by a magical rooster. The search for his lost cousin (bearing the same name) is bound to finding the torn half of an amulet that opens the treasure cave.

The two Saids and Ya'ads in *The Pessoptimist*, as well as the two Anton Shammases in *Arabesques*, are literary “doubles” that highlight continuity and survival. The double as a literary device allows the author, according to Freud, a greater freedom to describe unnatural events and occurrences.³⁷ Freud refers to the work of O. Rank, who “explores the connections that link the double with mirror-images, shadows, guardian spirits, the doctrine of the soul and the fear of death [...] The double was originally as insurance against the extinction of the self.”³⁸ Uncanny secrets and caves always have interiority and exteriority to them: the known and the unknown, the self and the other. Caves-secrets hold something from the past and harbor hope for the future. The promise of continuity is in the knowledge of the past.³⁹

Nevertheless, the wealth of animal and insect portrayal in *Arabesques* exceeds both Habiby's and Yizhar's, works. Reminiscent of Habiby's rich reliance on Arabic and other classical literatures, Shammas suggests that the novel is “a salute to *Ibn al-muqaffa* the [translator] of *Kalila wa-dimna*.”⁴⁰ But Shammas does not “use” animals to tell any story, allegorical or otherwise. Animals in *Arabesques* are part and parcel of other obvious representations, constantly evading representative certainty. Animals are an integral, indeed organic, part of the Palestinian ecosystem made up of the personal, familial, and collective histories, memories, superstitions, and shamanistic powers in Palestine.

Furthermore, the relationship between humans and animals throughout the text is delicate and elusive. In comparison to Habiby's rather “passive” and “instinctive” depiction of animals, Shammas's presentation preserves animal autonomy. Animals are part of daily life and are written as such. They interject, interfere, and attempt to gain influence. Their attempts may be tolerated sometimes but dismissed and suppressed at others, just like the moth in the opening scene of the novel. During this somber scene of the narrator's grandmother on her deathbed, a little moth intrudes into the room:

A moth was circling above a dying body [...] It was a miniature white moth, one of those attracted to electric light on summer nights in Haifa. At another time my mother would have called it a *bashoor*, an omen-moth, for good or ill. [...] As the priest's hand flicked at the moth, his chant was thrown off its track [...] as if the moth, which had intruded itself so delicately, had tipped the balance, and the whole scene would collapse upon one's awakening.⁴¹

³⁶ Lital Levy, “Nation, Village, Cave: A Spatial Reading of 1948 in Three Novels of Anton Shammas, Emile Habiby, and Elias Khoury,” *Jewish Social Studies* 18, no. 3 (2012).

³⁷ Freud, *The Uncanny*, 157.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 142.

³⁹ Manar H. Makhoul, “Dispossession and Discontinuity: The Impact of the 1967 War on Palestinian Thought,” *Critical Inquiry* 48, no. 3 (2022).

⁴⁰ Muhammad Siddiq and Anton Shammas, “On Composing Hebraic Arabesque: Introduction and Dialogue with Anton Shammas,” *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, no. 20 (2000): 165, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/521962>.

⁴¹ Anton Shammas, *Arabesques* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 4.

The miniature size of the moth, receiving greater attention from the author than some of the humans present, contrasts with the enormity of the moment. Probably originating from the Christian Annunciation, *bashora* in colloquial Arabic derives from the root *bashar*, meaning “a message.” Also, the word *bashar* derives from the same root, meaning “humans.” Humans, that is, are bearers of a message. The moth here, as well as other animals in *Arabesques*, seems to hold inaccessible messages. That is to say, they are the living embodiments of secret-caves. But animals also have a dimension of illusiveness and ambiguity that caves do not, a distinctive quality that is crucial for their survival.

Animals in the novel are not artifacts that adorn the text. They are an integral part of the scene, yet always in the background — just like Palestinian citizens in Israel: present-absentees. Animals in *Arabesques*, in other words, reflect and project Shammas’s linguistic career with Hebrew and his efforts to de-Judaize Hebrew language and literature as a liminal Palestinian. Shammas aimed to de-Judaize Hebrew literature by telling a Palestinian tale within Israeli Hebrew contours and engaging intertextually with Hebrew literature.⁴² In the words of Shammas:

It is better, for the tale [*hikaya*] and the teller [*hakawati*], that it is told to people who are trying to ignore it, in best cases, if not suppress it [*tamsaha*] and absentify it [*taghribaha*].⁴³

The “tale” (and teller) that Shammas refers to in this quote is a playful way to refer to the tale plotline in *Arabesques*. However, his precise use of “the tale” means that there is one *particular* tale to be told. This “Freudian slip” may be intentional or not, but it highlights how obviously Shammas perceives the telling of the Palestinian story. Moreover, the whole quote seems to justify writing the novel in Hebrew. Writing in this liminality, Shammas tells Jewish-Israelis about their destruction and erasure of Palestine — to be dismissed away like a “bashora moth.” The tragedy, however, is that while humans and moths don’t share a language, Palestinians and Jewish-Israelis do.

WHAT DOES THE ANIMAL TALE SAY ABOUT 1948?

Animals bring us back to basic, unsophisticated, and un-ideologized human emotions and perceptions, and they allow us to tell a story that cannot be told or could not be heard. They can do so because they bypass human biases and in their differences allude to shared human values. While readers of Yizhar’s *Khirbet Khizaa* could not sympathize with the Palestinian displacement and catastrophe in 1948, more than what is apparent is delivered via the depiction of humans and animals. In other words, it is also a form of self-imposed censorship. Some of what an author cannot tell openly, perhaps not even to himself, is encoded in animal narratives. The tragedy depicted in *Khirbet Khizaa*, therefore, is twofold: the Palestinian tragedy that unfolds in 1948, completely destroying a community and an ecosystem, on the one hand; and the tragedy of human blindness and obliviousness to such a tragedy on the other. It leaves a trace of both.

The Palestinian narratives in Habiby and Shammas’s works are multilayered in their depiction of Palestinian life before and after 1948. Both aim to tell about political oppression and dehumanization in a way that is also part of a national epistemic preservation. Habiby and Shammas, in other words, combine in their animal stories an allegorical (and obvious) allusion to the

⁴² Anton Shammas quoted in Shai Ginsburg, “‘The Rock of Our Very Existence’: Anton Shammas’s *Arabesques* and the Rhetoric of Hebrew Literature,” *Comparative Literature* 58, no. 3 (2006): 188.

⁴³ Siddiq and Shammas, “On Composing Hebraic Arabesque,” 163.

political (very much like Yizhar), as well as an active documenting and archiving project that aims to un-erase Palestinian and Arab history and culture.

While Yizhar's animals address the moral values among his Jewish-Israeli readers, Shammas's and Habiby's animals bear political significance for the past and the future by documenting loss and preserving a survivalist hope. The secret that Shammas's *Arabesques* and Habiby's *Pessoptimist* harbor is a universal humanistic message of a complete, rich Palestinian life that will persist, no matter what, and of Palestinian hopes and dreams that will continue to be passed on from generation to generation, even if only in whispers. A