

## Yitzhak Shami: Ethnicity as an Unresolved Conflict\*

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Yitzhak Shami (1889–1949) wrote fiction in Eretz-Israel, but from an unusual perspective for the times—the Mizrahi perspective. He chooses for himself a complex speaking position—a speaking site located in the space between two cultural options. One is Hebrew Jewish literary writing, the norm of which is perceiving the Arab as an enemy endangering the materialization of the Zionist project. But at one and the same time his stories expose a profound commitment to give voice in Hebrew to Arab culture, and a strong fascination for it. This dual position comes to its solution through the portrayal of the major protagonists. His systematic mode of resisting the West and avoiding its rule over Arab culture, expressed especially in his novella “Fathers’ Revenge,” is by placing in the center of his stories, instead of an autonomous, independent subject typical to the national literature, characters who turn out to be fragmented and decentered, and who finally fall apart.

“Yitzhak Shami is one of the buds of reviving Mizrahi<sup>1</sup> Judaism in Eretz Israel, a worthy mate to Yehuda Burla (long may he live). He was born in Hebron (in 1889) and educated at the Ezra Teachers’ College in Jerusalem. Suffused with Mizrahi expressions of nature and life, with traditions and customs both Hebrew and Arabic, and possessed of an excellent national and general education. Taught in

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<sup>1</sup>The word *mizrahi* (literally eastern) is used in Hebrew to denote Jewish immigrants from Arab countries and their descendants, as well as those descended from the expelled Jewry of Spain. The term *sephardi* (Spanish) is often used as its synonym, though the two terms are not identical.

the settlements of Judah and Damascus. Spent several years working in Hebrew education and revival in Bulgaria, and at the end of World War One returned to his homeland and to educational work in Hebron and more recently in Haifa, where he died, at the age of 60, on March 3, 1949.”

So wrote editor and author Asher Barash in his preface to a collection of Yitzhak Shami's work that was published by the Newman press in 1951.<sup>2</sup> His words neatly capture the gist of Shami's reputation in Eretz-Israeli literature and culture; indeed, the author's absolute identification with the “buds of reviving Mizrahi Judaism in Eretz Israel” was a persistent feature of his career. Shami's work was habitually perceived as an expression of the Mizrahi Jews in Hebrew culture. Also noted, however, was his profound involvement in the life of the Arabs. This dual identification was so powerful that Gershon Shaked even called Shami a “Jewish-Arab author who wrote Hebrew.”<sup>3</sup> And indeed, Shami's stories offer the readers of Hebrew literature an unusual, perhaps unique experience. Shami created a complex authorial position of intermediacy. Even as he wrote Jewish-Hebrew prose that viewed Arabs as an enemy, a threat to the Zionist enterprise, Shami also seemed deeply committed to giving Arab culture a Hebrew voice.

Yitzhak Shami's work is therefore located within a particularly complex politics of identity. On the one hand, it was written for the Hebrew literary canon and accepted the norms of Hebrew-language Jewish writing. Shami's fiction obeyed the same code that governed all Hebrew writing as the national Jewish literature. This code was articulated, for example, by Second Aliyah writer and critic Yosef Chaim Brenner, who occupied a position of unequalled influence during the early years of Shami's career. In his essay “Ha-genre ha-eretz-israeli va'avizraihu” (“The Eretz-Israeli genre and its implements”), which appeared on August 10, 1911, Brenner attacked what he called “the stories of the Eretz-Israeli genre,” and in doing so formulated the norm of the Hebrew canon:

When I hear one writer among our friends say to another, “Your new work, is it of the life of Eretz Israel?,” I am filled with a kind of derision: as though writing were some external thing, as though one wrote “of the life of the Jews of Lodz,” of the life of Galicians, “of the life of the Kara'ites,” “of the life of the

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<sup>2</sup>In Yitzhak Shami, *Sipurey Ytzhak Shami* (Tel Aviv: Newman 1951), pp. 7–8.

<sup>3</sup>Gershon Shaked, “Mavo” (Introduction) in Yitzhak Shami, *Nikmat Ha'avot* (The vengeance of the fathers) (Tel Aviv: Yahdav Publishing, 1975), p. 5.

Sephardim," "of life in Eretz Israel," of life in Petah Tikva . . . and not an internal thing, a manifestation of the inner life and of its essence within the relations and hues of a known time and a known environment.<sup>4</sup>

Brenner crisply outlines the appropriate relationship between the Hebrew literary text and its surroundings. He proposes and imposes a universalistic scheme, while strongly rejecting the representation of the local in literary writing. Shami, in all likelihood, accepted Brenner's position as a general and binding norm. He also met Brenner, and the encounter apparently affected him greatly.<sup>5</sup> Incidentally, Shami's story "The Barren Wife" appeared in the periodical *Ha-Omer* in 1907 under the heading "Of the Life of the Sephardim"; it was probably among the targets of Brenner's critique, published four years later.

Universalistic fictional representation, Brenner believed, had to serve as a clear mediator between the specific local life and its literary expression. In other words, rather than cling to the details of a depicted reality, the author should maintain his distance from it by linking this reality to what Brenner called the "internal thing," that "manifestation of the inner life and of its essence." The private case of living within a particular context had to be depicted as a profound expression of the human. Concrete, specific details therefore had to be subjected to a universalistic scheme embracing all of humanity.

One way of achieving this was through psychology. Psychological fiction depicts not what happens, but what is *likely* to happen. This probability is not subordinated to the actual unfolding of a particular case, but rather to how matters *might* have developed, so long as the chain of events is probable and persuasive according to some essentialist logic, like that of psychology. But this, Brenner emphasizes, must take place "within the relations and hues of a known time and a known environment"—in other words, while maintaining a fixed tension between universalistic representation and its concrete, specific contents.

Brenner's universalism is the key to proper national writing—in this case, to Zionist writing, which must subject the particular case to universalistic, all-human representation. One consequence of this norm is that literary voices representing local, rather than universalistic trends are subordinated, suppressed, and even excluded from the canon. Brenner's universalism leaves no room for ethnicity as an independent voice, whether it speaks "of the life of the

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<sup>4</sup>Yoseph Haim Brenner, *Works*, Vol. III (Tel Aviv: Hakibuz HaMeuhad, [1911]. 1975), p. 569. (Emphasis in original.)

<sup>5</sup>Zephira Ogen, *Yitzhak Shami—Hasofer vi'ytzirato* ("Yitzhak Shami—The author and his work") (Unpublished seminar paper, Tel Aviv University, 1972), p. 4.

Galician Jews” or “of the life of the Sephardim.” Instead, the ethnic must subject itself to essentialist, universalistic representation. Nationality and ethnicity therefore exist in a state of mutual alienation and even conflict.<sup>6</sup> As a result, authors seeking to produce ethnic writing are banished from the dominant canon.

Brenner’s words had a powerful influence on the norms of Hebrew writing, and their impact has arguably endured to the 1980s. The ethnic and the local are still perceived in Hebrew literature as inferior and unworthy and are therefore permanently banished to its margins. The literary hegemony makes it impossible for them ever to assume a central position within the Hebrew canon. An essential principle of this canon’s formation is its focus on an autonomous subject with an internal, psychological world. This subject faces conflicts and, even when he cannot resolve them, constructs himself through and against the conflicts as a person of firm beliefs and stable identity. It is through this dynamic that the subject is able to process the materials of his immediate reality, be it Eastern Europe or Eretz Israel.

That is the basic structure of the literary arena within which Shami, as a Hebrew writer, had to operate. On the one hand, his writing strives to construct an Arab voice and a Mizrahi voice, allowing both to speak and even speaking on their behalf. At the same time, however, Shami’s work also seeks to express national identity, as an intrinsic part of the Hebrew canon. But the ability of Shami to write a nationalistic literature as part of the rising hegemonic literature of the Second Aliyah—which was committed to universalism—was limited. In this period the Sephardic were excluded from the Zionist cultural center and were perceived as diasporic. In a series of articles that Yehuda Burla published during 1913 in *HaHachdut*, he expressed his agony about the fact that the Sephardic have never taken a real part in the national project of the Second Aliyah.<sup>7</sup>

Yitzhak Shami therefore created what Stuart Hall has called a “cover story,” meant to smooth over the typical contradictions of the national narrative, because, as Hall puts it, “Identity, far from the simple thing that we think it is (ourselves always in the same place), understood properly is always a structure that is split: it always has ambivalence within it. The story of identity is a cover

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<sup>6</sup>R. Radhakrishnan, *Diasporic Mediation, Between Home and Location* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 90.

<sup>7</sup>Yehoshua Kaniel, “Anshey HaAliyah HaShnia Uvney HaEda HaSpharadit” (The people of the Second Aliyah and the Sephardic Community,” in Ysrael Bartal, ed., *HaAlyash HaShnia, Mebkarim* (The Second Aliyah: Studies) (Jerusalem: Yad Ben Zvi, 1998), pp. 308–309.

story. A cover story for making you think you stayed in the same place, though with another bit of your mind you do know that you've moved on."<sup>8</sup> In other words, the "cover story" conceals and minimizes the internal contradictions of the national narrative by subjecting them to an organizing meta-narrative.

One side of the concealing narrative's inner contradiction becomes apparent in the praise Shami received for his psychological insight. A clear example of this can be seen in Gershon Shaked's comments on Shami's novella *The Vengeance of the Fathers*. Shaked finds in the novella a synthetic expression of the two conflicting poles, i.e., particular existence and universalistic sensitivity. The text, he claims, reveals "the talent of this author, who remained faithful to the reality he shaped without shackling himself in fetters of reality. Yet he delved into human depths, without leaving the solid ground of a genuine human existence." Shaked elaborates on this point, describing the psychological depth of Shami's work with Orientalist condescension:

This Mizrahi storyteller, who grew up in this country and did not receive a Western education (unlike other members of the Second and Third Aliyah), penetrated the human psyche and descended into its depths without ever receiving instruction from Freud or the others of his school. A profound insight into the particular reality he wished to craft—the Arab reality—led him to one of the farthest regions of the human soul: the aggressive impulse and its link to the meaningless.<sup>9</sup>

Haim Pesah, by contrast, emphasizes the other pole of the conflict by claiming that Shami's work does not depict an individual in the Western sense of the term.<sup>10</sup> In a letter he wrote to Shami's friend David Avisar (May 22, 1924), Yehuda Burla describes Shami's writing as combining these two trends, the local-ethnographic and the universalistic-artistic:

In this work one may see his capacity for writing—his *talent*. The ethnographic element is surely sufficient and satisfying, but one can also encounter an internal grasp of people. And Shami is a son of Hebron, where the Arab life is exposed to view, intermixed with the Jewish street like nowhere else in Eretz Israel—he can provide layers of life from the Arab existence like a man scooping up a handful of whey or cream. The Arab language, customs, way of life, all the

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<sup>8</sup>Stuart Hall, "Ethnicity: Identity and Difference," in G. Eley and R. G. Suny, eds., *Becoming National: A Reader* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 344.

<sup>9</sup>Shaked, "Introduction," pp. 18–19, 20.

<sup>10</sup>Haim Pesah, "Yitzhak Shami: Ker'ia aheret" (Yitzhak Shami: A different reading), *Haaretz*, 16 Jan. 1976.

features of folk literature, are as evident and palpable to the hand as they are in Hebron itself.<sup>11</sup>

But Shami is interested in neither the Western side nor the Arab one; his main concern is the conflict between these two positions. Wrestling with them, he tries to resolve the clash by creating a “cover story”—that is, a meta-narrative intended to unify them. That narrative, however, ultimately crumbles and collapses. The representation and attempted resolution of the conflict through a “cover story” is a central feature of Shami’s work, even though—and perhaps because—it was criticized in the course of his acceptance to the national canon. For example, while he does acknowledge Shami’s combination of the particular and the universal, Shaked nevertheless finds fault with the psychological reasoning of *The Vengeance of the Fathers* and identifies an alternative reasoning in Shami’s crafted reality, i.e., in what he terms the world of the Arab mentality.<sup>12</sup> In other words, Shaked argues that the logic of the story is found in the kind of writing that Brenner scorned for its focus “on the life of . . .”—that is, writing that clings to the represented world and does not use a universalist psychology as a buffer between it and the reader.

In the very opening of *The Vengeance of the Fathers*, Shami’s most important work (first published as a book by Mitzpeh in 1928, with the sub-title “A Tale of the Arab Life”), the reader immediately encounters a narrator who all but declares his Arab identity. Having described the springtime pilgrimage to the tomb of Nabi Moussa, he adds a remark that an Arab could make:

The winter labors are done and the grain is now green and tall and can grow by itself, nourished only by the gentle spring breeze. *May Nabi Moussa, whose season this is, protect it from hail or hamsin.*<sup>13</sup>

And further:

But all this work is not pressing and can be postponed, the last rain will be soon enough, and Nabi Youssef who is buried in Nablus—the peace of Allah be with him—presides over the last rain and its fertility and blessing. It will be worthwhile to visit his tomb, light a candle, and chant the Friday prayers in his mosque when his holy flag is carried out to be taken to the *Moussam*. (117, emphasis added)

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<sup>11</sup>Quoted in Ogen, *Yitzhak Shami*, p. 11. Emphasis in original.

<sup>12</sup>Shaked, “Introduction,” p. 9.

<sup>13</sup>Yitzhak Shami, “The Vengeance of the Fathers,” translated by Richard Flanz, in *Hebron Stories*, edited by Moshe Lazar and Joseph Zernik (Lancaster, CA: Labyrinthos, 2000), p. 117, emphasis added. Page numbers in parentheses in the text refer to this work.

Later he speaks as an Arab about the Jews as “others”: “the young renegades who live in the *sabil*, near the Jewish settlements, where they work as hired hands—only they have begun to reject the old tradition and to scoff at the sanctity of this pilgrimage” (p. 117).

The desire to be “national” while also producing ethnic writing placed Shami in a serious bind. But his particular predicament was even more complex. Shami, after all, was not writing about the lives of the Jews in Galicia, or any other part of Eastern Europe; nor was he writing “of life in Eretz Israel” from the perspective of its Zionist Jewish inhabitants. Shami chose to write about Arabs and Mizrahi Jews. Needless to say, the status of Arabs as objects of representation is problematic in the extreme. To the Zionist writer, the Arab is the ultimate enemy. To write of him is therefore to assume a position of resistance and rejection:

Their womenfolk bring curds, whey, sour cream, eggs, and vegetables to town, sell the spring blessings at a good price, and return home with heavy bundles of coins in their sleeves and bodices. The men pick up the *dinars* by the handful, stuff them into jars, and bury them deep in the earth. When they have stored away enough, they open them all, pay another wife, divorce one wife and marry another, or even kill an enemy and pay out the blood-money. And finally they also make the pilgrimage to the grave of the Prophet in Mecca, drink the holy and purifying Zamzam water, don a broad white shawl, and return home, each a perfect *hajj* who has purchased his world for ever. (p. 118)

The lust for murder and blood is described as an essential Arab trait:

After all, is it to be expected that such a large host of armed men, many of them young and hot-blooded, could travel together such a long way without stick being raised or dagger being drawn almost of their own accord, out of sheer habit? (pp. 119–20)

Meanwhile, the Arabs themselves are compared to both animals and insects:<sup>14</sup>

Now it [the valley] was filled with many-colored *kaffiyehs*, headbands, and *abayahs*, as masses of heads mingled and separated, covering the ground like swarms of mosquitoes over a river. Their noise and din, their snorting camels, whinnying horses, braying donkeys, and screaming children, filled the air of the valley with a prolonged cacophony. (p. 132)

Wherever he looked he saw heads crawling and creeping forward like vast masses of insects: Allah! Allah Who has created men like locusts! Like locusts they

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<sup>14</sup>See also Shaked, “Introduction,” p. 17.

covered the fences and the fields and the path, and like locusts they emitted an incessant bustling sound. (p. 157)

An issue unto itself is the oppressive treatment of women, which the story presents in all its horror. For example, when the march to Nabi Moussa begins,

The only ones who were silent and angry were the young women. On this day they had allowed themselves some laxity with the precepts about covering the face and not raising the voice. The celebration had finished so quickly; the spectacle was over, and they again felt their enslavement. Ahead of them stretched a long line of gray, monotonous working days, with no spark of joy or consolation to illumine them. Again they would have to close themselves up in their homes and continue bearing the yoke; again they would have to suffer in silence at the hands of their rivals and mothers-in-law, to submit to having their every movement watched and used as a pretext for hints and slanderous remarks against them to their husbands, who severely punished any wrong move or error, and beat them for the slightest motion of their eyelids, or for any superfluous dallying by a window or a door. (pp. 144–45)

This critical picture of Arab life is presented from a universalistic-Zionist position, which condemns them according to a universalistic set of values. But this critical portrayal is conveyed from within: “Even when he takes a critical stance, it is the criticism of an insider, not of a stranger.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the story makes no mention of the Jewish perspective. The presence of the Jewish gaze is evident, of course, in the Hebrew language of narration, but it is otherwise only subtly implied, such as when Shami covertly alludes to Bialik’s poem “Me-tei Midbar” (The Dead of the Desert) in his description of the Nablusites settling down to rest after their first clash with the people of Hebron (p. 149).

In the story, these two groups clash because the Hebronites, led by Abu Faris, are disrespectful towards the people of Nablus. The cruel narrative builds up slowly to its bloody climax, passing through such incidents as Abu al-Shawarib’s brutal slaying of a stray dog (pp. 130–31) and then his series of intensifying clashes with Abu Faris. Shami’s handling of the conflict is highly reductive, rooting it in an irrational, demonic lust for respect and vengeance:

The Devil had driven his nose-ring through their nostrils and now led them as he willed, using them as tools for the perpetrations of his schemes to profane the pilgrimage and the pilgrims. His chief agents, disastrously for themselves, were Abu Faris and Abu al-Shawarib.

After the Mufti and his entourage had left these two, they lost all their self-control, revealing to all present their true faces, which were full of hatred and cold calculation. The passion for honor and revenge burning inside them

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<sup>15</sup>Shaked, “Introduction,” p. 13.

darkened the light of their reason, dragging and driving them from error to error, to insane and inconsistent actions. (p. 167)

But all this is portrayed as a purely internal Arab clash. Like the narrated events, the narrator's perspective is Arabic and internal, directed, it seems, at an external addressee unfamiliar with the ways of the Arabs. This is why, for example, the narrator explains certain concepts and customs, and why he sometimes begins his chapters with an ethnographic lecture intended for an outside observer. In doing this, Shami completely adopts the Arab point of view. This perspective is the only one presented, however critically; no other, external point of view exists. And if this were not enough, Shami observes anything outside this perspective as alien, like someone—a Jew, perhaps—who needs to have this criticized world explained to him. This is how the people of Nablus speak of the Hebronites:

“Abu al-Shawarib must get us out of this mess. We have placed our trust in him and now we've missed out, we're too late! He's responsible, and he's the one who must make this good. And if he doesn't, we'll take what's coming to us by ourselves! By force! We'll run them out like dogs, we'll cut them apart with our swords!” (p. 128)

Shami chose to navigate the hardest possible path under these circumstances: his writing seeks to portray the Arabs from the inside, while penetrating deep into their world. As a Mizrahi Jew, he clung to his Arabism, to his identity as an Arab Jew, a native son of the land. But his desire to write about the Arabs clashed with his need to do so from a Jewish, Zionist, primarily Ashkenazi position. He was similarly torn between the need to speak from an ethnic Arab (Jewish) position and the national canon's universalistic dictates.

A reflection of this intricate position can be found in a column published by Ezra HaMenachem immediately after Shami's death. HaMenachem attributed Shami's low literary output and, in fact, his decline as a writer<sup>16</sup> not only to personal reasons, but to the field of Hebrew literature itself:

I believe therefore that this writer's premature decline, the silence that overcame his work—that these were not only his fault, the writer's fault. We, the Hebrew readers and authors, bear much of the blame. The dismal life of Yitzhak Shami the author was strewn not only with flutters of creation, but also with hesitation, with bitter doubts about his very strength and abilities. The lack of

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<sup>16</sup>Shami's last published story, “Jum'ah the Simpleton” was written in 1936, 13 years before his death, and appeared in *Mozna'im* in 1937.

certainty that his work had value, that it was necessary and vital to the Hebrew reader—that is what inflicted drought on the land of his soul, where his art grew. He was *lonely* in his uncertainty, withdrew deliberately to an isolated corner, forgot himself and his work and even managed to make us forget them.<sup>17</sup>

Shami himself described his anguish in a letter (March 7, 1926) to Asher Barash, his editor at Mitzpeh publishing, who was then waiting for the manuscript of *The Vengeance of the Fathers*:

What shall I say and how shall I explain myself, and the obstacle of my silence lies before me always. My failure to fulfill my promise was not caused by a lack of will, but rather by a lack of ability. After all the troubles I have faced at the end of this autumn I am so tired, so helpless and unable to attach myself for a few days to my writing desk, that all my efforts towards this goal seem to me stale and futile. I erase and write and erase again, and I imagine that the words are tasteless and cannot exhaust the valley of grief hidden inside me.

And yet I shall try to return to life and art, do not wake or rouse me. The time will come, and sooner than you think.<sup>18</sup>

Shami was grappling with his dual position. On the one hand, as a Mizrahi Zionist, he was oppressed by the Ashkenazi literary hegemony (for example, in his story “Flight,” old *Hakham* Bechor feels compelled to deny that the Ashkenazi Jews do not let their Mizrahi brethren join them in prayer<sup>19</sup>). On the other hand, his treatment of the Arabs as an author was itself oppressive. As a Mizrahi writer, he could not penetrate the heart of the canon. Indeed, in a letter to Yehuda Burla (Dec. 21, 1928), Shami writes:

More power to you! And may your source be blessed! Today you removed from us the shame of the supposedly backwards Sephardim and Mizrahim. The sources of our art have not been depleted, and you shall someday become an example to be pointed out.<sup>20</sup>

Shami, then, wanted to keep writing the story of his existence and experience from within the reality he inhabited. But his desire to enter the Hebrew-Jewish canon made this option problematic or even impossible. To win respect as a Jewish writer, Shami, the Mizrahi, had to write Hebrew literature that

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<sup>17</sup>Ezra HaMenachem, “Ne’edarim” (Missing Persons), *Gilyonot*, Vol. 23, No. 1–2 (1949): 46–47. Emphasis in original.

<sup>18</sup>*Genazim* 6995/2; part of it was quoted in Zephira Ogen, “Yitzhak Shami—Haesh vi’ytzirato” (Yitzhak Shami—The man and his work), *Bikoret Uparshanut*, Vol. 21 (1986): 41.

<sup>19</sup>Yitzhak Shami, “Flight,” a translation of “Bricha” by Yael Lotan, in *Hebron Stories*, p. 85.

<sup>20</sup>*Genazim*, 16684; in Ogen, “Yitzhak Shami—Haesh vi’ytzirato,” p. 51.

somehow turned its back on the Arab world, treated it with hostility and represented it as oppressed. In a letter to *Mozna'im* editor Jacob Fichmann (Dec. 14, 1936) about the publication of his story "Jum'ah the Simpleton," Shami revealed his ambivalence about the representation of Arabs in Jewish literature:

I have in my heart hesitations about them [i.e., a cycle of stories called "Shepherds" (*Ro'im*), of which only "Jum'ah the Simpleton" would be published – H.H]. At some moments I think that [at] this time of rage and horror between us and our neighbors (the material is taken from the life of the Arabs), perhaps it is not proper to take an interest in them and in their lives. But I have answered my heart [that] art transcends all. No more need be said.<sup>21</sup>

Shami's solution was a particularly radical one. On the one hand, he did not abandon his Arabism: the stories he wrote not only dealt with the Arab world, but, in some cases, placed a speaking Arab subject at their center. Certain of his stories do not feature a single Jewish character. On the other hand, Shami took a highly critical view of Arabs and Arabism in his writing. His critique is universalistic in nature—i.e., it judges Arab life according to a universal set of values and by this standard denounces the lust for honor that leads to murderous violence.

This dual position found its resolution in Shami's unconventional construction of his heroes, abandoning the complete and autonomous subject usually placed at the heart of the national literature. Shami systematically created characters that, while central to the story, were ultimately revealed as unstable, disintegrating figures, whose attempts to face conflicts led to their own dissolution. The Arab that Shami brought to Hebrew literature is, on the one hand, what identifies his work as Jewish-Arab writing. On the other hand, it also rejects Arabism as a canonical norm of full and autonomous subjectivity. Shami, then, solved his own acute conflict by constructing a disintegrating subject.

The deadly encounter in which Abu al-Shawarib murders Abu Faris is described as the clash between "two animals of different breeds" (p. 177). The climactic moment of the murder brings to its fulfillment the irrational, murderous aggression that Shami views so critically. At this moment, Abu al-Shawarib fulfills the essence of his personality, and Shami's construction of his subjectivity as that of a bloodthirsty beast reaches its peak.

From this point onwards, however, the hovering threat of vengeance sends Abu al-Shawarib hurtling down a long slope of flight from the avengers. His immediate reaction is already one of panic and inner disengagement:

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<sup>21</sup>*Genazim*, 17824; in Ogen, "Yitzhak Shami—Haeesh vi'ytzirato," p. 47.

"*Hikmat Allah!*" he muttered over and over between compressed lips, in an attempt to overcome his weakness and distress, and to grasp the torturing thought which kept fluttering through all the other dark visions of chaos that flew about in his brain like withered leaves on a stormy day. The words, however, neither penetrated to his heart nor restored his strength. He struggled to exorcise the thought and free himself of it, but he could sense it roaming through his soul, hovering above him and burning his forehead. He closed his eyes and tried to catch it, and sank into a kind of idea for which there is no concept. (p. 178)

Abu al-Shawarib promptly comes to his senses, returning to his self-respecting subjectivity. He despises himself for fleeing but, says the narrator, "The natural instinct which guides creatures that are in danger spurred Abu al-Shawarib to be cautious" (p. 179). Instead of a human subject with dignity and values, Shami's protagonist functions like an animal bereft of all subjectivity. What he hears from Nimmer, the *suss* vendor, leads him to understand that he is now all alone, hunted not only by the Hebronites: "You have been shamed in the eyes of all the camps. Even the Nablusites will not shelter you" (p. 181). Unlike canonical characters who make solitude into the basis of self-creation (e.g., in the work of Brenner and Micha Josef Berdyczewski), Abu al-Shawarib embarks on a journey of dissolution and disintegration. He becomes a nomad, roaming anxiously through the land and relying on the generosity of Bedouins, who do not inquire about his identity or the circumstances of his flight. Having escaped to Cairo, he falls into a state of helplessness and ceases to be an active subject altogether:

And even though Nimmer Abu al-Shawarib knew well that only now, after his ship had been wrecked on the high sea, his real struggle with the stormy mean waves threatening to swallow him was about to begin, and that he had to prepare himself and devise stratagems to get out of the trouble he was in. He was in no hurry to begin any decisive action, and made no real effort to prepare the ground for negotiations with his enemies. Tired, full of doubts and remorse and hopelessness, absolutely certain that everything that had happened and would happen was predetermined and necessary, he saw no point in forcing things and stirring fortune's constellations with a heavy hand. In addition, his secret fear that his last hopes might be disappointed weakened and terrified him. This terror grew stronger even than his torments of doubt and his suffering. He could find no way of ridding himself of this terror other than by fleeing it into vain illusions, and postponing by every means possible the day when he would have to meet it face-to-face. (pp. 188–189)

Even when he finally musters up the courage to take action and escape his fate, Abu al-Shawarib relapses into despair. He regrets having put faith in his own actions (p. 192) and finds his consolation in *hashish* (p. 197). His money gone, he decides to trade in soap but cannot persevere in this enterprise

for long. He continues to sink into delirium and despair and eventually falls ill. His excessive drug use causes his body as well as his soul to fall apart. The hallucinatory appearance of “the three fathers” who come to avenge Abu Faris’s murder brings about the final loss of his self:

This weakness also overcame his other senses, agitated his imagination, and confused his memory. Things merged and fused, and, like the colors at the rim of the western sky at sunset which combine and change to fade and melt away until they are one single hue, so all the various fragments of thought in his head combined until they turned into a single nothingness. (p. 211)

The vendetta is finally carried out as a result of Abu al-Shawarib’s mental disintegration. When all efforts to settle the blood feud have failed, he turns to Sheikh al-Azhar. Abu al-Shawarib’s journey to Hebron, advocated by the sheikh, is essentially an act of suicide, but for him it is the last resort. Abu al-Shawarib indeed dies as a man who has lost his grip on both the world and his own soul.

“My God! My God!” his lips muttered, and he thrust out his thin hairy arm. The next minute he collapsed, falling on his side with a hoarse snort that escaped from the opening of his frothing mouth. All his limbs began to tremble and contract in convulsions, his eyes bulged out of their sockets, and his mouth writhed in a terrible manner. His thin fingers quivered and shook, and grasped at empty space as if trying to touch the secret unknown. Then they clenched in a spasm. His eyes became covered with a murky whiteness like smoked glass, and turned to the ground to which his body was now attached forever. (p. 226)

The plot’s second climax, located towards the end, is therefore not a moment of crisis that creates a coping—if desperate—subject, but rather the collapse of the autonomous subject altogether. This is how Shami negotiates the ethnic conflict in which he is caught. He creates the subject, but it cannot survive the universalistic imperative for autonomy and therefore falls apart. Navigating between the conflicting norms of local-ethnic writing and universalistic-national writing, Shami fashions a collective subject who cannot survive the conflict and therefore ultimately disintegrates into elements that rob him of his agency and autonomy. So far-reaching is his collapse that not even ethnic identity survives. Ethnicity itself plays a transient, insubstantial, and conflicted role in Shami’s stories. The same kind of construction can be found in Shami’s story “Hamamah: A Tale of the Arabian Desert.” Mansur the Bedouin is faced with a conflict that he cannot resolve without also losing his agency. After Mansur refuses to sell him his mare, the loveliest and finest of all mares, Sheikh Jáafar sends his Negro slave to steal it. When Mansur discovers the plot, he lets the slave attempt the robbery, in order to maintain his own dignity as a man who does not fear these intentions. The mare is stolen, and

Mansur sets out after it; in the course of the long chase, however, he realizes that catching the slave will dishonor the mare. He considers the dignity of the beast more important than his own (indeed, Mansur repeatedly declares that he would rather give up his daughter than his mare). The conflict—a clash between his honor and the horse's—prevents him from taking action. He chooses the mare's honor, but the cost is the loss of his personality as an active subject, and he returns to his tribe "sad and disconsolate."<sup>22</sup>

The hero of "Jum'ah the Simpleton" is weak-minded and incompetent. Though he appears at moments to be building himself into a useful and valuable man, these attempts come to nothing. Having tried in vain to demonstrate his powers of healing by curing a mule, he lapses into utter helplessness:

He felt the rapid beating of his heart in his chest, at the tips of his fingers and in his skull. It seemed as though some wild bird was knocking at his temples with its beak, and he felt something large and round rise up from his heart and catch him in the throat. A great and growing fear enveloped him, striking terror to his soul; a strange feeling of loss and absence seized him. His hands clutched the rock for a moment, and he lifted himself a little, his face contorted in pain and supplication; but his strength gave out at once, and he slumped down once more, coughing harshly, his life-force ebbing away. He lay beside the rock, motionless and quiet as a mouse, his mouth open like that of a fish seeking a drop of life-giving air. Silent and unmoving, he gazed wide-eyed at the eternal night and world of shadows into whose borders he was now crossing.<sup>23</sup>

A similar strategy can be found in Shami's crafting of Mizrahi characters. The Jewish context does not resolve the conflict; in fact, it only exacerbates it. The representation of the Mizrahi as an Arab Jew also reaches its dead end in the characterization of the main protagonists. The clash between ethnic and national writing emerges in all its acuteness in these stories. Little wonder, then, that they were disparaged by Ya'akov Rabinowitz, one of the founders of the Eretz-Israeli Hebrew canon. According to Rabinowitz, what can be done when writing about Arabs is unacceptable in a tale about Jews:

Yitzhak Shami, a Sephardi from Hebron, has elevated our Arab story in his *The Vengeance of the Fathers* to a pictorial wholeness and a verity of content above all his predecessors, while also giving it depth. At times you imagine that an Arab-born artist could not have presented the life of his nation more truthfully. There

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<sup>22</sup>Yitzhak Shami, "Hamamah: A Tale of the Arabian Desert," a translation of "Bein holot hayeshimon" by Israel Schen, in *Hebron Stories*, p. 17.

<sup>23</sup>Yitzhak Shami, "Jum'ah the Simpleton," a translation of "Jum'ah el'ahabal" by Aubrey Hodes, in *Hebron Stories*, pp. 51–52.

is no hint in this story of Jews and Judaism, not even a bare trace. By contrast in his stories from the life of Israel Shami remains a writer of little value.<sup>24</sup>

The Mizrahi subject that Shami constructs in his stories also slips towards destruction, losing both his identity and his existence. In “Father and Daughters,” the Jewish father returns to his native city, Damascus, only to discover that his daughters have strayed, radically changing their appearance and working as belly-dancers and prostitutes. Struggling with this bitter revelation, he turns to the Hebrew Bible, recalling, for example, the phrase “And the daughter of any priest, if she profane herself by playing the whore, she profaneth her father” (77; Leviticus 21.9). He does not, however, remember the ending of the Biblical line—“she shall be burnt with fire”; its harsh pronouncement is still too difficult for him to digest.

The intensifying conflict reaches its climax when the father bursts into the club where his two daughters are performing and attacks them. But the ending of the story, in Shami’s typical fashion, brings the subject to utter disintegration. Torn between two conflicting codes of morality and conduct, the raging father collapses and goes mad. From an autonomous agent of morality he becomes a wreck of a man: “*Hakham Zvi* did not know who tore him from his prey and threw him down the stairs. With the last remaining glimmer of his dying wit he crept towards the river, which gleamed and twinkled at him.”<sup>25</sup> Similarly, *Hakham* Bechor in Shami’s “Flight” is taken to a nursing home by a young relative who wishes to be rid of him. Discovering that the place is filthy, the old man decides to flee. He indeed escapes, but his actions ultimately prove futile, leaving him helplessly sobbing. This is how Shaked describes the crumbling of his selfhood:

The hero’s suffering is not depicted in glowing colors, but rather in hues of slime and filth; reality reveals itself bit by bit, with each body organ standing independently (humanizing synecdoches); this disintegration of organic life is also among the marks of the grotesque. Later on [the story] stresses the conflation of the comic and the pathetic; the circumstances of the fall—the sewage slit, the congealed pit—trivialize the act and dilute its emotional charge. From this point on there are phenomena attesting to loss (so typical of the grotesque), as

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<sup>24</sup>Ya’akov Rabinowitz, *Maslulei sifrut* (Routes of Literature), Vol. I (Tel Aviv: M. Neumann Publishing, Agudat Hasofrim, 1971), pp. 59–60, emphasis in original.

<sup>25</sup>Yitzhak Shami, “Fathers and Daughters,” a translation of “Av u-benotav” by Yael Lotan, in *Hebron Stories*, p. 79.

the hero is “startled by his own voice,” loses contact with his body and succumbs to his senses.<sup>26</sup>

Representative examples of this include “The Barren Wife,” where Flor, whose infertility has led her husband to take a second wife, grapples ineffectively with the humiliating new situation. The custom of marrying again deems her, and Shami points a critical, universalistic finger at the oppression of women in Mizrahi society. But Flor’s struggle is futile. She lapses back into childhood, appealing to her dead mother for help but knowing that there is no way out: “Mother, mother, mother!”—her hot lips murmur. “Where is my mother? Let me embrace her knees, bury my head in her lap and drench it with my tears. Where is my mother who would sing me a lullaby, full of sadness and pity for me, for a lost soul cast out of life, without hope, without a name, without offspring?”<sup>27</sup> In “Ransom,” a hapless character named Mercado finds himself in grave trouble: trying to be a *mohel* [circumciser], he accidentally does damage to the infant he circumcises. He then seeks to make amends and comes to the baby’s house with a doctor, an act that Shami strongly ironizes by having his narrator define it as “ransom.” Here, too, the action taken to resolve the conflict is ultimately stripped of all significance.<sup>28</sup>

In creating such representative narratives, Shami found himself at the hub of the ethnic storm that characterized Hebrew literature. Reluctant to give up either the more prestigious option or its alleged inferior, he traveled instead a difficult path. The result of his efforts is highly impressive. Precisely by refusing to abandon either of the two poles, Shami produced complex and fascinating texts. At the same time, this endeavor undoubtedly placed severe restrictions on his development within Hebrew Eretz-Israeli literature. His meager creative output may very well be a distinct consequence of this great difficulty.

This article was translated by Yael Shapira.

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<sup>26</sup>Gershon Shaked, *HaSiporet HaIvrit 1880–1980* [The Hebrew Fiction], vol. II, *BaAretz UBatfuta* [In Israel and in the Diaspora] (Tel Aviv and Jerusalem: Keter and HaKibutz HaMeuhad, 1983), p. 74.

<sup>27</sup>Yitzhak Shami, “The Barren Wife,” a translation of “Akara” by Yael Lotan, in *Hebron Stories*, p. 104.

<sup>28</sup>Yitzhak Shami, “Ransom,” a translation of “Kofer nefesh” by Yael Lotan, in *Hebron Stories*, pp. 107–113.