**Arab Maids and Cleaners in Hebrew Literature**

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**Abstract**

Our research addresses the depiction of Arab cleaning women in Hebrew literature. This exhausting work structured in a position of servitude necessarily entails close interaction with the employers. The women who perform this work are often susceptible to exploitation and work caprices. In this paper, we will focus on literary works that portray Arab cleaning women. We will examine how the confluence of nationality, gender, and status are expressed in the various texts. Carefully observing the Arab cleaning women enables us to expose the complexity of the nationalist power relations. The treatment of the Arab cleaning woman reflects authoritarianism, superiority, and even worse - total disregard. Literary criticism also generally ignores this character, such that the image of the Arab cleaning woman becomes doubly transparent.

We will demonstrate that hostility between the nationalities in the relationship between the Jewish employer and the Arab cleaning woman, who is perceived as an *a priori* enemy, thereby creating complex power relations, exists from the outset. We will try to understand how the foreign, threatening woman enters a close relationship with the employers. Is it the national inferiority of the cleaning woman in the Jewish space that creates the space for comfortable subjugation? According to Karl Schmidt, otherness discharges employers from legal obligations, such as granting social benefits. Is it the ease of exploitation that enables employers to overcome their nationalistic fears? Is bringing an Arab cleaning woman into a Jewish home a means of symbolizing and deepening the occupation?

We will see how some of the texts blur the nationality confrontation, but it still rears its head and erupts in various ways in the literary text indicating the presence of foreignness. Also, the description of the encounters between the cleaning women and their employers echoes the historical reality and reveals a complex mosaic of relationships with the national past and in connection to the geographic and the home space. We will present examples from the following texts:*Untitled text*, byElisheva**;** *Possessions*, by A.B. Yehoshua; *Early in the Summer of 1970*, by A.B. Yehoshua; *Arabesque*, by Edna Shemesh; *Portrait of a Cleaning Woman #1*, by Yonit Naaman and *Iya*, by Shimon Ballas.

**Arab House Maids and Cleaners in Hebrew Literature**

The past two decades have seen many studies on the different literary representations of domestic workers and house maids (Yates 1991; Martin Fugier 2003; Jansen 2011; Casas 2016). Mostly consigned to obscurity in the real world, servanthood acquires a new visibility with literary representation. In previous centuries, people’s place in Western society was determined by a strict class hierarchy. Noblemen, blue blood flowing through their veins, formed the incontestable top of the hierarchy. European literature introduced many lower-class characters who were subordinate to their noble landlords.[[1]](#endnote-1) Unlike European literature, Hebrew literature reflects a class hierarchy based on nationality and ethnicity rather than an imagined blood type. This article looks into representations of Arab maids in Hebrew literature across different genres – prose, poetry, theater, and opinion journalism – in order to illuminate patterns of imagery along with the different roles they play in constructing the class-social and national fabric of pre-state and present-day Israel.

Let us first stress that then, as now, domestic work was assigned along gender lines. Women have always been the ones responsible for housework, as prescribed by the division of labor of gendered societies. A number of feminist scholars identified household labor as a central factor in women’s oppression and domination, regardless of race or class. Some argued that the common experience of housework indeed served to unite women, as this burden was perceived by many feminists as “the first obstacle to liberation” (Romero 1992, 97). Romero states that “domestic service reveals the contradiction in a feminism that pushed for women’s involvement outside the home, yet failed to make men take responsibility for household labor” (Romero 1992, 98). Women were able to hand over the “dirty” work to someone less privileged than themselves, thus perpetuating the idea of dominance, this time amongst women. We would like to demonstrate that with regard to Arab women in Israel, the issue of domination is intensified and acquires additional layers beyond gender.

Following Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (Said, 1978), we posit that the identification of maids with Arab women is the product of a dominating culture that aspires to white, Western social values. The dominating culture disseminates images of those maids, highlighting their otherness and forcefully excluding them as part of a lower social class. It appears that repetitive images of the Arab maid generate an orientalist, pseudo-scientific knowledge, which consigns Arab women to the role of the servant while confining Arabness as a whole to the margins of society.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Our discussion of Arab housemaids describes the relationships between four categories that affect social discrimination in Israeli society: gender, ethnicity, class, and nationality. Gender emerges as the primary category. “gender structures the fundamental division between paid ‘productive’ labor and unpaid ‘reproductive’ and household labor, assigning women primary responsibility for the latter” (Fraser 1997, 19). Fraser thereby stresses the tight link shared by gender on the one hand and economy and class on the other. Moreover, she argues, “In fact, gender is not only a political-economic differentiation but a cultural-valuational differentiation as well” (Ibid, 20). She further posits that race too[[3]](#endnote-3) structures the capitalist division of low-paid and higher-paid work. Low-paid, menial, dirty occupations, like domestic work, are held by people of color, while the higher-paid, professional, managerial occupations are held by “whites.” It follows, therefore, according to Fraser, that “‘race,’ like gender, is not only political-economic.[[4]](#endnote-4) It also has cultural, valuational dimensions, which bring it into the universe of recognition” (Fraser 1997, 22). This, in turn, suggests that the subordinating categories of gender and race, particularly when intersecting, encompass the category of class. Add the category of nationality into this intersection, and a quadruple subordination emerges: gender, race, class, and nationality.

Arab cleaners and housemaids come to epitomize all these subordinations and shed a poignant light on the Israeli reality. It seems that due to ideological bias the Hebrew literary canon contains very few representations of subordinated margins, with even fewer references to Arab housemaids and cleaners. The small number of references is all the more reason for us to trace their marginal representations and offer them a critical reading. We open the discussion with the uniqueness of the Arab housemaid’s and cleaner’s subordination, which is rooted in nationality, exclusion, and enmity.

Israeli society, at least since the state’s inception, has made it its motto, as stated in the Proclamation of Independence, to instate “full social and political equality of all its citizens without distinction of race, creed or sex.” However. In practice, Israeli society instates a hegemonic center, its consciousness rather uniform, which marginalizes those who fail to meet its standards: Haredim (the ultra-orthodox), Mizrahim (oriental Jews) and most of all, Arabs. The Arabs’ marginality stands out relative to other minorities because they are perceived and feared as an enemy. Therefore, their marginalization and the inequality they suffer are all the more glaring. In his treatise Political Theology, Carl Schmitt (2005) explained that the sovereign has the power to declare a state of emergency, i.e., a situation where the state must and can defend against the aggression of its enemies, whether internal or external, by exercising aggression in turn. The state of emergency allows the sovereign to suspend the law and affirms its power as exempt from it, as it is the sovereign who makes the law and can put itself above it. Accordingly, the state of emergency allows exceptions to the rules, and exclude those who are declared as enemies of the sovereign. In fact, the State of Israel, in its 70 years of existence, has been enforcing a sustained state of emergency when it comes to its Arab citizens. The state inherited the British Mandate state of emergency regulations, which sanction the drawn-out anomaly of lawfully suspending the rule of law. The emergency regulations facilitated the martial law enforced on Palestinian citizens of Israel until 1966, while nowadays these regulations allow maintaining security control over this segment of the population. So, the equality upheld by the Proclamation of Independence has never reflected the reality on the ground, as the state’s definition as “Jewish” precedes its definition as “democratic.” This definition draws on a theological rationalization principle (Raz-Krakotzkin 1999) that forms the underpinning of the state. This principle is incompatible with the state’s false claim to democratic conduct, which is supposed to apply equally to Jews and Arabs alike. Christof Schmidt (Schmidt 2005, 13), who wrote the introduction to the Hebrew edition of *Political Theology*, noted that the centrality of the excluded parties’ casts them as demonic. Applying this notion to the Israeli society, we see that the state’s Arab citizens are consigned to the margins, perceived, as enemies with demonic powers.

The Arab housemaid and cleaner is inferior not only as a woman (gender inferiority) or a menial worker (class inferiority) but also, and perhaps predominantly, as an Arab (ethnic and national inferiority). Some of the literary portrayals reviewed here accept the emergency state, with its ensuing exceptions, while others subvert it. Moreover, her Arab nationality casts the housemaid and cleaner as a dangerous enemy. On the one hand, she ranks lowest in the social hierarchy; she is the most subordinated, the most marginalized, the easiest to abuse and exploit; while on the other hand, she is invested with mighty power, perceived as she is to be a menacing enemy. Being Arab, so it seems, means she is a traitor and schemer. Moreover, not only is she subordinated and dangerous, but she also infiltrates the heart of domestic intimacy. Here too, her situation is complex: on the one hand, her national otherness makes her a tempting victim to exploit, as cheap, seemingly inconsequential manpower. On the other hand, however, introducing her into the domestic space means introducing a menacing element, rendered powerful by the very menace invested in it.

**Otherness and notional threat**

One good example of the power relations described above is found in a pre-state opinion piece by author Elisheva Bikhovsky (1888-1949). This text exposes and criticizes the “natural” default hostility against the Arab population. “Elisheva” is the Hebrew pseudonym of non-Jewish, Hebrew-writing poet, writer, and literary critic Elizaveta Ivanovna Zhirkov. Elisheva married Simeon (Shimon) Bikhovsky, her Hebrew teacher, and in 1925 the couple emigrated from Russia to Israel. She enjoyed seven years of prosperity, which saw her publishing several prose and poetry books that became widely popular and were printed in thousands of copies. In 1932 her husband suddenly died, leaving her with no financial support, but most of all, a lonely stranger in a strange land (Miron 2002, 521). It is safe to assume that her Jewish husband had lent her a “kosher seal” that facilitated her connection with the Jewish people, and once said “seal” was dead and gone, she felt the collective back turned on her. Her strangeness made her become a recluse, as she ditched poetry and turned her focus to writing essays and critique. It is against this backdrop that she wrote her essay entitled “On National Education and Human Education.” The piece, which ran at *HaBoker* daily newspaper, 6 Tevet 1936 (sic), is widely cited in the *Davar* article “Notes – on the Character of Our Children,” by an author self-titled as “Ram” (1937). Bikhovsky describes an Arab washerwoman who arrives at her Jewish mistress’s home with her little boy, who is subsequently subjected to abuse and taunting by the mistress’s Jewish son:

A Hebrew boy, about five or six years old, started provoking the little one, taunting him and disrupting his play. He finally grabbed the toy from his hand, and the plundered party naturally broke out in great tears. This could all be expected, when it comes to a mischievous boy of this age, and should not be conceived as a sad, foreboding spectacle, but less to be expected was the reason he promptly thereupon cited to justify his actions. I tried to reprimand him: why must he taunt the little one who had done him no harm, for which the reply was: “Why? It’s an Arab boy.”

Elisheva goes on to write:

Possible explanations and excuses to counter such fact abound. We can cite the particular state of the Jewish people among the world’s nations as the other “Goy,” perennially denied their simple, basic rights, and we can understand and theoretically justify this drop of poison that pervades the public soul, including the nations’ children in their infancy. One can further cite our particular situation among the Arab people in the land. However, the sad fact remains undeniable, and if the drop of bitter poison does exist, it is all the more incumbent upon us to fight it. Surely no one in their sound mind would agree that a healthy, desirable human public could rely on such “moral foundations” in resolving our national question, without compromising its existence.

We want to look at Elisheva’s criticism through the prism of national alienation, which she experienced first-hand. We find that her point of view as an outsider allows her to rebuke the attitudes towards Arabs. Her alienation undermines her affiliation with the nation, allowing to lift the mask of imagined homogeneity (Anderson 1999) while pointing at its cracks and warning against the threat of racism that it belies. On the face of it, her text concerns neither the Arab washerwoman nor her treatment, but instead offers a general criticism of the Jewish public’s treatment of its Arab counterpart. The core of the story is about the Arab washerwoman who is servicing her Jewish neighbor. This piece of information, in itself, epitomizes the hierarchy of class and nationality, which dictates the washerwoman’s subordination and lack of job alternatives. We further presume that she has no choice but to have her son in tow, as the social structure will not allow her a more comfortable livelihood, while the abuse her son encounters reflect her national reality. Indeed, Elisheva notes that squabbling is nothing out of the ordinary among young children, only immediately to cite this incident as a mark of the national relations.

The text does not elaborate on the washerwoman’s feelings or her reaction to the aggression aimed at her son. However, reading between the lines, one can imagine her distress, outrage and even her silence and helplessness. From her point of view, informed by strangeness and loneliness, Elisheva is vicariously outraged on behalf of the Arab washerwoman’s precarious position and this unjust incident. Quoting Elisheva, the writer “Ram” argues: In this respect, our children are but a scaled down reflection of many in the adult crowd.

He then goes on to say:

National education worthy of its name can only be one that upholds humanity, humanism – as its very essence, for no other education is even conceivable. Unless it seeks to lead its pupils premeditatedly in the narrow path of chauvinism, from which it is a short leap to preaching the hate of [other] races, the lust of conquest, war, and fascism.

It is important to note that the text is set in the pre-state period, meaning the Arab washerwoman’s exclusion is yet to be written into law as part of sovereignty, and yet, exclusion rears its ugly head in the national, social and ethnic contexts.

**Invisibility vs. presence**

The washerwoman’s marginal literary presence in Elisheva’s text is no accident. The other literary texts presented here also feature the female domestic worker/cleaner as a marginal character, meaning her presence is minimal and hidden at times. Observations of the Arab maid means are blurry, with merely hints to its contours. However, as Orly Lubin writes (Lubin 2003, 79), “The text forever comprises that which has been excluded from it […] the subversive reading exposes the hegemonic side of the text as well, suggesting that we view it as an ideology-dependent artificial construct.” It is this deficient visibility that speaks to the social invisibility of the character and identifies the latent, repressed and obscure elements of the Israeli reality and the power relations at play between the two nations.

A. B. Yehoshua’s play *Possessions*(1986) clearly demonstrates this argument. The plot is set in Jerusalem, a city that is a quintessential occupation reality, due to the political, geographical, national, social and class divisions that run through it. The Arab maid, tending to the Jewish household, provides a unique point of view on colonizing-colonized relations. The play follows the packing up of a household, ahead of the widowed matriarch’s move to a nursing home. The mother tries to hand her possessions over to her loved ones, only to find there are no takers. The act of packing and the unwanted possessions stand for existential questions that concern the value of life as it draws to its end. The matriarch projects herself onto the unwanted possession: “You are set on getting rid of me” (30). This projection reflects in the personification of objects - for example, the mother’s insistence on “bringing back to life” an old, glued-together paintbrush, which resembles a “shock of human hair” (47). She contends: “it can be brought back to life… stick it in petrol for a couple of days” (47). On the other hand, we see the objectification of humans unfold, reducing them into receptacles of the unnecessary possessions. Najia, the Arab maid, who inhabits the margins of the drama, embodies the culmination of this objectification. The entire family is beset by desolation and loss of purpose, but their struggle for meaningful life assumes human expressions: the mother’s move to a nursing home**,** the daughter’s stepping out of her stifling marriage, the son’s efforts to bring together an academic conference around a new philosophical idea. Najia the maid, on the other hand, does not belong in this realm. Najia only serves a function; she only cleans, she is just the butt of reprimands, a receptacle for undesired possessions. She makes her first appearance in the stage directions of the early second act: “young Arab maid mopping the floor” (41). She is presented as a figure which is taken-for-granted. It seems natural that the person cleaning the floor is a young Arab woman. Later, at the handing-over ceremony orchestrated by the mother, Najia is considered to be the last resort: the son would not take the frying pan, saying it was too old and should be chucked away, immediately suggesting that they hand it down to the cleaner. The mother would not have it: the frying pan, she says, is too precious for the cleaner (15). However, the mother tries to offer Najia a brush that has already been thrown away (48). In other words, Najia sets a value threshold for possessions considered eligible for her and denotes a bottom threshold that is on par with the bin. The play assigns her no aspirations or will, in stark contrast with her fellow characters, but it does leave her the power to say no – Najia will not accept that which fails to meet her standards (48). Moreover, the mother does not trust her, and with a crudeness that verges on bullying, orders her when to clean or change the water: “Don’t forget to clean under the table, and isn’t it time you change the water?” (41); “Come on, pick up the bucket and carry on over there…” (43-44); “Why are you just standing like that?” (44); “Don’t forget to clean under the bed” (45). The mother would not afford Najia her elbowroom, even within Najia’s remit. She is referred to as the “cleaner,” without her first name, reducing her entire person to her occupational function. This effacement is necessary to justify the distrust, allowing moving her around without qualms, like one of the possessions that change hands during the play. All this dovetail with the matriarch’s failure to know basic details of Najia’s life, especially her recent widowhood (48). This human fact fails to resonate with the mother, even though she too must come to terms with her widowhood because her counterpart is an Arab maid**,** whom she therefore objectifies. Najia becomes a flesh and blood possession, which allows the household to carry on as she were not there. This objectification, in turn, betrays the cracks in the entire domestic scheme: her name, the fact that she works in a Jewish home in a town like Jerusalem that is divided and under occupation.

As the maid**,** Najia witnesses the family members’ intimacy and their dark domestic dynamics. She sees the material dirt as well as the family’s “dirty laundry” (43, 47), with their mutual resentment. Interestingly, when it serves their interests, the mother seeks her eye-witness testimony to confirm the plight she endured following the father’s failing condition, before his death (44). On the other hand, when the family finds themselves arguing, the mother is quick to cry: “Not in front of the cleaner!” (47). The mother’s zigzagging manner with Najia, depending on her changing needs, is clear: on the one hand, she needs her, for her validating testimony; on the other hand, she fears lest her gaze put a dent in the picture of domestic harmony.

Importantly, Yehoshua’s play was written in 1986, some 50 years after Elisheva penned her (1936) text; Israel is a state, and the maid’s bullying plays out against the state’s sovereignty and rules. In this sense, Najia’s bullying and subordination are far worse than those discussed by Elisheva. Najia’s marginal presence epitomizes the national conflicts and speaks to the legal and institutional state of affairs that gives rise to the cleaner’s position, a class that faces severely limited livelihood opportunities. The state, with its legal regulation, further compounds the maids’ financial strain, as Rela Mazali contends when discussing the female cleaners’ oppression under sovereignty. Mazali explains that their situation “speaks to a reality that at times, or mostly, forces them into this occupation, while simultaneously […] interrupting it arbitrarily, in an instant. […] It (this reality) is telling of the power, or the ‘rights,’ conferred by origin, citizenship, accent, education, income.” All these criteria converge on Najia, straining her situation as a human being. Najia not only fails to earn her employers’ trust, but it looks like she is unable to put her trust either in them or in the state system at large, which subordinates, disenfranchises and exploits her while citing the law and the state of emergency.

**Closeness and strangeness**

On the other hand, in another play, *Early in the summer of 1970***,** by A.B. Yehoshua (1972), the Arab maid plays a characteristic literary role. It promotes the new order produced by the story, which is set against the 1967-71 War of Attrition. At its heart stands the character of a father, an elderly Bible teacher, who receives news of his son’s death in battle**.** Bereavement bestows high prestige: it spares him from having to retire, it inspires the sympathetic manner of the principal, who has never previously spoken to the father and lands him in the fantasy position of delivering a speech to the school’s alumni. The father sets out on a journey to confirm the identity of his fallen son, only to find out that there’s been an error and the son is alive.

Upon learning the news, the father heads over to his son’s residence to break it to his daughter-in-law and grandson. He arrives there, only to meet the Arab maid, who gets to be the first person to hear the news from him. Her old age, the fact that she is as old as him, forge a shared bond between the two, in a sector-transcending, closeness-inspiring, age-based companionship. Moreover, perhaps her marginality – as an older, Arab, lower-class, service-providing woman, removes all threats, allowing him to confide in her with relative ease and vent the burden of the news. As the cleaner does not speak Hebrew, he must break it to her in broken Arabic. Speaking in a language in which he is not proficient renders the entire event even stranger. In the background, the radio plays heroic Arab songs. The deafening decibels imbue the space with the Arab spirit and may suggest that Arabness gains the upper hand in the national conflict. However, the cleaner’s response is poignantly human. She shows the elderly father compassion and empathy and spreads her wings over him: “And the elderly lady by my side, thinking I cannot be left alone, wishing to help me” (20), “but she’s already attached to me, ever so loyal” (23), “and the old lady, restless, fussing around me, wishing to help and knowing not how, she suddenly starts speaking, as if sobbing” (23).

And so, set against the Arab-Israeli conflict, with the war that stokes it every day, a situation both chaotic and ironic transpires. Amidst the national spite, the Jew seeks and finds empathy with the Arab woman. Her empathy, the fact that she is the person present in the supposedly-dead son’s residence, the way she takes care of the grandson – all these lend her a power that joins in with the powers that seek to disrupt the social order, the friend-foe dichotomy, in Schmitt’s terms, and the reform in the national system of values.[[5]](#endnote-5) Mendelson and Gertz (2005, 145, 151, 159), who addressed the maid’s character, situated her within a system of motifs that stand for the past and generate the conflict between this past and the present. According to them, the cleaner’s character fits in with the ancient landscape of ruins and wells, which peep through the present landscape. The combination of the two represents an ancient Arab world that lies under the veneer of Jewish present (Mendelson and Gertz 2005, 161). Similarly, Mordechai Shalev (Shalev 1972, 15), in his analysis of the book, cited the Arabic language, and its presence in the dealings with the cleaner, as cast in the role of “an archaic Hebrew of sorts.”

However, beyond a symbol or a motif, the Arab maid is an active character in the story. We would like to have a real look at her – body, actions and words – and show that her physical description simultaneously reproduces the subordinating gaze and subverts it. On the one hand, she is “very old of age” (20), nevertheless she performs strenuous physical work, including carpet-beating (19), which must be beyond her feeble body. This action confirms the inherent exploitation of disadvantaged communities as sub proletariat or a degraded underclass (Fraser 1997, 21).

She wears one dress on top of the other and dons a headscarf (20). These clothing items set her apart as the other and place her at the margins of the Israeli hegemony. Her portrayal sustains Israeli culture’s ethnic and national hierarchy in this respect as well. As we are about to show, this stereotypical shaping of physical appearance shall recur in the portrayals of other Arab maids. As shown by Edward Said, the repetitious appearance of these indicators highlights their strong hold over the social system that gave rise to these works (Said 1978). The repetition indicates that the Arab maid’s literary representation strives to achieve neither singularity nor inimitability. On the contrary, it reproduces the hegemonic classification of this character, further cementing its signifiers.

Orly Lubin stresses that as a stereotype, the other is represented as a reality whose representation repeats itself as a set ritual (Lubin 2003, 43, 47). It is foretold, predictable, invisible, and therefore also controllable. Therefore, we shall not explore the factual verity of the stereotype, but rather endeavor to reveal the motive behind the adverse judgment of the maid’sstereotypical portrayal and the power relations for which it holds true. The maid is described as “awaiting orders” as if following them is the very essence of her being. The narrator further describes her, from the father’s point of view, as a “shriveled monkey” (20), thus stripping her of her humanity. Fanon pointed out that the colonist speaks of the native colonized in zoological terms, a demeaning language that dehumanizes its object (Fanon 2006, 49). Her bare-footedness is highlighted in two instances. Shoelessness is considered a symptom of underclass and ethnicity (Alon 2014). On the political level, however, her direct contact with the land may denote the deep tie of ownership. Fanon stresses that for the colonized, the land is the essential value, providing as it does bread and dignity (Fanon 2006, 51). On the other hand, the bare feet, with no buffering footwear, forge the intimacy between the cleaner and the father. Moreover, the father relates how the cleaner “thinks I must not be left alone; she wants to help, to be of service, perhaps waiting for me to stretch on my back, so that she can tuck me in” (20). The cleaner’s manner with him is set against her shock at the news of death. At first, she believes it is the grandson who has died but realizing it is the son, “it hits her sevenfold” (23).

We seek to posit that this closeness shared by the characters produces a subversive statement. Beneath the surface, it seems the Arab maid, despite her subordination, holds great power. She sows disorder in the realistic level of the residence she cleans. The apartment is described as turned upside down – “and stealthily you walk into an apartment upside down for the clean-up, curtains rolled back, chairs up on tables, plants up on armchairs” – 19). As she works, she “moves chairs around, rolling curtains down” and “irredeemably exacerbates the chaos” (20). The upside-down room echoes the disruption of orders constituted by the story in the national system of values. In other words, the presence of the Arab maid represents the domination relations that come with colonization. However, it also casts doubt, defying them, and perhaps even trying, symbolically, to challenge them and introduce a new order. The maid’s character suggests that the Jewish-Arab tangle is far more complicated than its hegemonic version appears to be. Her natural, significant presence in the space at hand asserts Arabness’s deeper roots, while the compassion she extends to the father breaks through the social distinction between Arab women and Jewish men, servant, and master, and pits animosity against sympathy. This aspect joins the central disruption of order constituted by this story in respect to attitudes to the national victim, which has at its center the father’s grotesque representation, with his wish to lap in the benefits of bereavement. Notably, in the 15 intervening years between this story and the play Possessions, Yehoshua has evidently resigned himself to the colonialization/occupation, which means the Arab maid’s version in the play attests to a compromised power to resist the social order, in a tacit acceptance of the occupation.

**Intimacy vs. threat**

At the heart of Edna Shemesh’s story, *Arabesque* (2007), stands Halima, an Arab maid, whose character serves to reflect the occupation with all its tension, violence and self-obliviousness. The story is delivered from a hegemonic Israeli perspective and opens with a semblance of harmony and sisterhood shared by Halima, the cleaner, and Dana, her employer. Both are of similar age, both in the late term of their pregnancies: “my forward-charging tummy, which was only that much larger than Halima’s pregnant tummy” (80). Both women are bearing the next generation. The question presents itself whether this feminine, all-too-similar reality, can bridge over the class and national divides between them. Halima cleans Dana’s home, but also generously, warmly lavishes her with her garden’s produce. Her name means patient, forbearing mild-mannered, forgiving in Arabic (Eilon and Shenar 1947). Befittingly, Halima seems to read the situation and enjoys giving while expecting nothing in return for her troubles. Dana, in turn, pays Halima her due and treats her favorably: “Halima is very generous… I, on my part, pay her generously” (82). However, apart from being an employer and employee, the inequality between the two, stemming from the occupation, is glaring.[[6]](#endnote-6) Dana, by the sheer fact of her being Jewish and belonging to the “colonizing” nation, enjoys financial and educational advantages which the story makes no effort to mask: she hires a woman to clean her home, she places an order for a supermarket delivery, she has a single child, and the privilege of lavishing her with undivided attention. Halima is a woman of no means (“it is not rare for them to go hungry,” 84) who treks to work, come rain or shine, to eke out a living. Presumably, Halima, like her counterpart in Yehoshua’s story, hails from the occupied territories and therefore enjoys none of the rights that come with citizenship. Fanon emphasized the typical gap between the living conditions of the colonist and colonized: “Colonist’s sector is a sector built to last […] It’s a sector of lights and paved roads […] a sated, sluggish sector, its belly is permanently full of good things” (Fanon 2006, 4). The colonized/native’s sector, on the other hand, is “a famished sector, hungry for bread, meat, shoes, coal, and light. […] a sector that crouches and cowers, a sector on its knees, a sector that is prostrate.” (Ibid, 4-5). Fanon’s reading sets the unique power relations of the story within a broader context, not just the Israeli occupation, but the colonialist culture as a whole. This context highlights the conflict that unfolds in the story, as it shows that resolution is not down to any specific solution, but instead involves an overhaul of the entire national system.

Halima’s character reflects the national situation, with all its precariousness and the violence that’s just waiting to be unleashed. As a woman, and an Arab, Halima lives on the lowest social rung, and is the weakest link in the fabric of Israeli society. As always, the weakest link speaks to the strength of the entire chain. Refracted through Halima’s character, the Israeli situation emerges as life on the edge of a seething volcano that stirs constant fears. The culture of power, as the backbone of Hebrew nationality, is unmistakably present in this story, while the army serves as an indicator and ruler that projects on the entire local existence. The signals of the culture of power are carried by the news, keeping Israeli listeners: a soldier shot in Nezarim, a roadside bomb exploded along the Philadelphi Route (82), rounds fired at Gilo (83). The narrator tries to strike a resemblance between victims on both sides, as she notes how *Palesthinaim* (sic)[[7]](#endnote-7) were wounded in the gunfight. The narrator further recounts how the two women remain silent in the face of the escalating hostilities as if they are equally affected: “Halima says nothing. At the moment I remain silent too” (83). We find this symmetry to reflect the narrator’s consciousness, whose perspective is typical of hegemonic Israeliness, with its national panic and sense of victimhood. However, in between the words, it transpires that even the narrator’s position is not symmetrical, but rather a wolf in a sheep’s skin, the beater who fancies himself battered.

For all their sisterhood, the narrator makes sure to set a hierarchy in place. She boasts of her own Western culture, which she holds as a superior trait. Citing Botticelli’s painting (80), for example, she marks her affiliation and affinity to Western culture. In contrast, Halima’s body is described in picturesque, animalistic terms: her back arches like a cat’s, the rag slithers across the floor snake-like, the smell of goats wafts from her dress. Again, as in Yehoshua’s “shriveled monkey” image, these zoological terms demean and dehumanize Halima. The meaning of this picturesque terminology rears its head between the words that describe the women’s mutual sympathy and sisterhood and betrays Halima’s real value in the eyes of the Israeli beholder, who holds the narrative and national power. In other words, the gap between the two women is not down to their civil situations alone, or sovereignty-related issues; rather, it is the occupation as internalized by the narrator and manifested in Halima’s description. Language is recruited to demean the Arab existence in other domains, as the terminology employed to describe the Arabs’ struggle resorts to “riots” (89), which denotes irrational disorder, rather than “fighting” or “uprising,” with their implicit political consciousness-grounded disorder. Another way to patronize Halima is the narrator’s anti-religious attitudes. Dana vehemently turns down the religious women fundraisers knocking on her door (80-81), cites a non-kosher kind of menu and muses about her grandmother’s godlessness. Halima, on the other hand, casts her lot in with God, reciting time and again, “Kullu min Allah” (all is from Allah) (84). This polar analogy suggests that Dana deems Halima’s religious faith naïve and ignorant. Her patronizing of Halima continues with the comparison of their respective pregnancies and with the statement: “Halima has never heard of fetal protein” (88).

Having established her patronizing manner and ascertained her superiority, she exercises supposed generosity, as a means to underplay the glaring gap between them. Unlike Halima, who wholeheartedly offers juicy figs, choice olive oil, freshly-backed or fragrant pittas, Dana lets Halima have second-hand clothes “in good condition” that her daughter no longer needs. Dana, so it seems, views her handouts as being generous, while the opposite is true. Dana’s giving is nothing like Halima’s: the latter offers the best she has to give, the delightful and fresh, while Dana offers second-hand items, which she no longer requires. The effort to strike a semblance of symmetry fails. The subconscious of the situation surfaces to crack it. For us as readers, the crack gaping in the text, concerning Dana’s brand of giving, allows an alternative reading, contrary to the normative scheme that Dana, the narrator, enforces on the story (Lubin 2003, 28). This exposes the glaring gap between the women caught in the stranglehold of the occupation.

The story’s tension culminates with the advent of Omar, Halima’s husband, who is called in to fix a broken piece of glass. His description opens by citing an imperfect physique: “his teeth battered” (84), “his voice rife with nicotine” (86), “his clothes tattered and filthy” (86). As a man, Omar stands for the enemy, manifestly and outright. Unlike Halima, whose femininity collides with her potential threat, Omar is perceived unequivocally. His casting as the enemy culminates when he quotes a disproportionately high price for his services and more so when the repaired glass breaks again. Omar does come back to fix the problem again, but the narrator has made up her mind: he is a crook. In between the lines, the possible link between the deceitful repair and Omar’s nationality is suggested. The narrator wonders whether the exorbitant price was quoted to vindicate the harm sustained by his son (6). Has Omar been deceitful because he is an Arab? Is it because this is the weak man’s weapon? According to Fanon, this may be the case. Fanon describes the look cast by the colonized subject on the colonist as “a look of lust, a look of envy,” adding that “there is not one colonized subject who at least once a day does not dream of taking the place of the colonist.” (Fanon 2006, 5). This insight confirms that Dana has pinpointed Omar’s envy. The story cleverly keeps this issue unresolved, so that the question of the essentialist link between Arabness and danger, which pulses through the Israeli culture, bubbles forth from the fictional situation, but remains open. The next scene sees Rona, the narrator’s young daughter, late to come home. Fears lest something happened to her inevitably dovetail with the national tensions due to the two nations’ struggle over the shared expanse. Dana and the implicit author alike unwittingly sense the inevitability of violence, hence their fear. Dana would not say out loud that she fears Omar has tried to hurt Rona, but this prospect plays out between the lines, out of the spiteful, domineering, sanctimonious foundation that builds up as the plot unfurls. Fanon explains the inevitability of violence in the colonialist context: “The existence of an armed struggle is indicative that the people are determined to put their faith only in violent methods. The very same people who had it constantly drummed into them that the only language they understood was that of force, now decide to express themselves with force” (Fanon 2006, 42). The fear for Rona’s safety stands for Dana’s existential angst and moreover, the angst pervading the Israeli existence, despite the army, despite the power established; because on the other side, there stands an enemy that though subordinated, impoverished and lacking in cultural finesse, has nevertheless an animalistic, irrational streak, and can, therefore, defy the present order and lay bare the precarious nature of peace, while announcing that its days are numbered.

Can the implicit author tell the duplicity of the Israeli situation, which boasts of its rightness and victims? Alternatively, this complex tangle escapes her, as it does the lion’s share of the Israeli public? The invisibility of the occupation and the obliviousness to the danger it poses for both sides can be symbolized in the story’s invisible motifs: the transparent clearness of cleaning water and amniotic water (95), and particularly the transparency of the glass breaking when the story culminates, in a kind of priming for the imminent all-out breaking of vessels. These features show how the relationship shared by the Jewish woman and her Arab cleaner transcends work relations, as well as subordinating and exploiting relations. They mirror the national tangle as unbridgeable, even between two women who are seemingly unconcerned with it. Opening with the sweetness of Halima’s figs offering to Dana, the story concludes with musty, shriveled figs that are destined to rot all through. The fig, associated with knowledge in the Jewish mythology (Bereshit Rabbah, 15:7), symbolizes the failed coexistence and the decay that blights the national reality.

**Hadil’s Deal**

Poet Yonit Naaman (Naaman 2015, 20) penned a cycle of poems, portraits of female cleaners. The first portrait is that of an Arab cleaner. Of all subordinated women portrayed by Naaman, the Arab girl stands out. Her discrimination is the most striking because it is based on her nationality.

**Portrait of a Cleaner #1**

Every day they come to pick her up

Early

It was hard at first

To prise the eyelids and honey apart

To part

To wake up when the driver stops

In the big city

To disembark reluctantly

Every day they pick her up

She takes pittas for her breaks

And drowsily boards the bus

Because womankind gets used to everything:

The long corridors

The hours that all feel the same

The smell of Lysol

The chills of fatigue

The sneering looks

All sanctimonious

(Girl, why are you here

And not at school?)

Her name is Hadil

And by now she is used to it all:

To be an Arab with no name

To the girls in tank tops

To sweating under her mandil

To pray anew to Allah

Every day

That one of them

Will trip on her rag

Outside Hall 144

In the Humanities faculty

Hadil is portrayed differently than the former housemaids. The poet protests the repressive power exerted on Hadil, by reclaiming her out of the mechanism that obliterates her unique essence as a human being and by producing a character of distinct, unparalleled identity, with her name and thoughts of her own, thereby imbuing Hadil with political significance. Her subordination is constructed by means of the passiveness, or submissiveness, invested in her character, in contrast with the forces exerted on her: “they come to pick her up”, “every day they pick her up”: actions in the third-person plural masculine, exerted on a single woman, which does not bode well for her power to resist. These mechanisms, with their sustained routine, are greater than her, objectifying her life and determining its course. They objectify her as an automated resource that works long monotonous hours in desolate and still corridors. So Hadil, the Arab cleaner, becomes a commodity. Naaman will not accept her protagonist’s acceptance of “being an Arab with no name,” and names her defiantly: “her name is Hadil.” Citing her first name, the poet constitutes Hadil’s identity and establishes responsibility and commitment to her. Responsibility is the power to respond to the other’s pain and the harm they suffer, and to acknowledge an obligation to them (Agamben 2007). Naaman breaks Hadil’s situation into the daily practices that make it up, thereby demonstrating and producing the meaning of being an outsider amidst the national state of emergency. The poet taps into the sensations of her protagonist: the emphasis on the early start of her workday, getting off the bus “disembark reluctantly” and “drowsily boarding” it. Particularly, the difficulty of “prizing the eyelids and honey apart.” The difficulty brought about the fatigue caused by backbreaking work. Fatigue that causes chills like a disease. This is also the difficulty of opening one’s eyes to their gloomy reality. The honey metaphor, its concrete meaning denoting the eye secretions, builds sympathy for Hadil who struggles to part with sleep, with the night and with her resistance to subjection. The difficulty to part notwithstanding, Naaman determines that “there is nothing womankind cannot get used to.” The feminine twist of this term produces a gender protest, as subordination comes more easily for women, being as they are more disadvantaged and exploited in the larger social scheme. Even though the poem reveals how Hadil’s situation becomes ever graver, the feat of getting used to stuff is further asserted when stated twice (“There is nothing womankind cannot get used to,” “and by now she is used to it all”). The poem goes on to relate the minutiae of drudgery – the pittas during breaks, to suggest her Arabness; and the smell of Lysol, the aggressive odor that affects breathing. These elements come together to create a vivid, unsettling picture of compound subordination resulting from gender, class, education and above all, national identity. The national exclusion compounds all other subordination. The state of emergency introduced by the country – the suspension of the law – marks Hadil out as a “foe” rather than “friend,” constructing her as automatically inferior. The patronizing, sneering looks she gets epitomize the oppressing force exercised by Israel on its minorities. At the same time, a sanctimonious demand is sounded – “Shouldn’t you be at school, kid?” as if hiring her to do the cleaning has nothing to do with the fact that she doesn’t attend school; as if this inquiry into the youngster’s education, a seemingly well-intended thought, can actually replace the actual, moral action that Hadil’s situation calls for.

As in the case of the previous cleaners/maids, the class gap and national gap are suggested by the sartorial difference: the mandil versus the revealing tank tops. The latter represent those who enjoy the liberty of studying and tread the long corridors cleaned by the girl in the mandil. Compared with the tank tops, the mandil transpires as a sweaty, stifling prison, but most of all, it generates defamiliarization and difference in the landscape: tradition, demureness, religion. At the same time, the mandil marks Hadil out as a “foe” rather than “friend.” Israeliness reserves a binary, virtually automatic reaction to all Arab markers. Fanon explains that entrenched dichotomies are bred by the colonial context, which must remove the world’s heterogeneity by unifying it on the grounds of nation or race (Fanon 2006, 10). Hannan Hever argues that the binary attitude is an outcome of the state of emergency, which is invariably a panic reaction to disintegration and loss of control, and therefore forces those subjected to it and those fighting it to constitute and be constituted as holders of set dichotomous identities (Hever 2015, 73). On the other hand, the mandil’s strangeness stands in stark contrast with its arguable invisibility, as a close look at the mandil may cause inconvenience. Therefore, the mandil generates deviation and defamiliarization, while at the same time becoming invisible, allowing to see it without observing, lingering or taking responsibility. The mandil stands for Hadil, resonating her name and rhyming with it. In the typical Israeli hegemonic eyes, the mandil exempts the beholder from seeing her as the unique, specific Hadil she is, as if the mandil conceals Hadil. This may suggest the easy deal, which relieves from the duty of morality and allows to overlook Hadil herself. Hadil means “cooing,” a name that denotes a soul that teems with life, in contrast to Hadil’s shackling materiality. By stating her name, Naaman constitutes Hadil as a round person, with her wishes and needs. It is Naaman’s poetic practice of going into the nitty-gritty that produces this unsettling effect. It is this practice that calls for the observing gaze and demands a moral reckoning.

There is a glaring irony in the act of setting this scene against the Faculty of Humanities, the supposed bastion of humanism, in an institution that preaches human equality and the right for dignity. This location at the university sphere comes with specific coordinates, “outside Hall 144”, unlike Hadil, who would have had neither a face nor a name without Yonit Naaman’s poetic act. The university, as a purportedly enlightened, progressive institution, emerges as an abusive, bullying employer. However, the poem ends with a liberating chord. The disobedient consciousness strikes root in Hadil, complete with a vengeful vision: “that one such girl trips while she tidies.” Vengeance is the reaction to the violence she endures and satisfies an elementary human response to injustice. Fanon contends that violence plays a cleansing role: “At the individual level, violence is a cleansing force. It rids the colonized of their inferiority complex, of their passive and despairing attitude. It emboldens them and restores their self-confidence (Fanon 2006, 51). Therefore, this vengeance bears hope. The act of shaking free of oppression makes people hold their head up, conferring a glimmer of hope. Perhaps there are, after all, some things womankind will not get used to.

Finally, we would like to cite *Iya*, the titular nanny-maid from Shimon Ballas’s story (Ballas 1992). This story is characteristic of Ballas’s writing, as an author who rose against the de-Arabization exercised by the State of Israel against Jews of Arab countries and even fought it by subverting the dichotomy that equates Arabness with animosity (Hever 2014, 189). Iya, the protagonist, is an Arab woman who serves as a maid and nanny with a Jewish family in Iraq, before the family’s immigration to Israel. Unlike the other works reviewed in this essay, this story does not touch upon the Israeli situation, nor does it discuss Arabness under occupation. Not only is the domestic worker not subordinated due to her national identity, but she is also Arab, part of the ruling nation of Iraq, while her employers, the Jews, are members of the subordinate nation. We nevertheless chose to briefly address this story, to show that Jewish-Arab brotherhood is possible, as reflected in Iya’s character. Arab Iya feels at home in the Jewish culture: “She had also learned to train her tongue into the Jewish jargon, to use their unique idioms and lace her speech with Hebrew words the way they would, to the point where she could not be told apart” (33). She also follows the Jewish calendar (28), knows her way around kosher regulations (32) and generally adjusts herself to the Jewish ways (38). The narrator recounts how her world is turned upside down ahead of the forced separation, with the Jewish family’s immigration to Israel. However, unlike the Israeli case, the fabric of the interpersonal relations between Iya and the Jewish family who won her heart remains impervious to the hostility of the political situation. At the same time, Ballas clings to the prospect of Jewish-Arab camaraderie and brotherhood, which he experienced himself, as a young boy and man in Iraq, and shows, in a utopic vision for the future, the possibility of restored brotherhood between the two nations. Though Iya is employed as a maid, i.e., as the subordinated party, the Arab-Jewish brotherhood removes the strangeness and hostility found in the Arab woman’s character amidst the Israeli expanse. Iya is a service-provider, but Ballas portrays her as a real part of the family: “Worldly convention would have her as a servant […], but for her many acquaintances she is part of the family” (10); “Sarah’s home became her home and her children are like her own sons” (38). In so doing, Ballas removes her subordination. Nationally speaking, and notwithstanding the official difference, no essential gap – of language, customs or sentiments – exists between Iya and her employers. In this sense, Iya represents a real prospect of brotherhood and maybe even redemption.

A few closing remarks. Literature intricately mirrors the overt and covert power mechanisms of Israeli society. The unique prism chosen for this article – representations of Arab maids – reflects a pattern of exploitation and oppression. The inferior status of the female characters examined in the article is generated by a number of oppressive forces. Gender places them from the outset at the bottom of the social hierarchy, “naturally” associating them with cleaning and housework. Their fundamental need to make a living highlights their servitude and enables their exploitation.

The intersectionality of the national prism further exacerbates gender- and class-based oppression. Hebrew nationalism imagines a superior self, from which the justification for oppression and subordination is derived. This notion of superiority also existed in the pre-Yishuv, as shown in Elisheva’s opinion piece, but was empowered and enshrined after the state’s foundation, as can be discerned from Yehoshua’s, Shemesh’s, and Na’aman’s texts. The Arabness of these female characters associates them with danger and enmity, which in turn produces confrontational interactions that exert significant force within the oppressive mechanisms affecting them. Ballas’s story illustrates that this superiority is an act of imagination, dependent on the overarching national structure.

Due to the domestic settings, most of the employers examined in the article are women. It appears that gender fails to facilitate solidarity or kinship amongst women that go beyond face value, as in Shemesh’s story. Other divisions – namely class and nationality – overpower gender in shaping the relationship between maid and employer. Peering into the cultural reflection examined in this article demonstrates that literature, beyond serving as an art form, plays a feminist, social, educational, and political role. We find this reflection vital to the articulation of moral positions, at the heart of which stands the equal worth of all humankind, and womankind – irrespective of class, nationality, or other.

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1. The servant class also numbered men: courtiers, butlers and different housekeepers, but these were more highly rewarded and ranked higher than the women – cleaners, cooks and nursemaids. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Israeli society also marginalizes Ethiopians and Russians, as well as the Ultra-Orthodox community and Mizrahim (Jews of non-European origin). Yet the discrimination against Palestinians is different due to their ethnicity, nationality, and religion, as well as the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. We opt to use “ethnicity” rather than “race,” as the concept of race itself reflects racism. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. In *The Real Help* (2012)*,* Romero demonstrates that domestic workers are still not covered by labor laws, continue to work long hours for low wages, and are frequently cheated out of wages. While these workers are eligible for state minimum wage, there is little oversight or enforcement. They are still denied numerous protections that other workers, including their employers, take for granted – overtime, workers’ compensation, control over the working day, and meal breaks. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. As the story unfolds, a gaping ideological rift emerges between the father and son. The father lives the biblical legacy of his teachings and becomes one with the culture of primordial power that he invests in it. The son, on the other hand, has been drafted to the war on a visit to the country, contrary to his plans. He has started a family in the US and ushers in a new political message – Prophecy & Politics, which runs counter to the father’s biblical ways. When the father learns that the body he is asked to identify is not his son’s, he mutters “I am sorry,” a statement pregnant with irony and meaning. On the face of it, he is sorry for the trouble caused, or perhaps for being demoted from the craven role of the bereaved father. Later, when the son is found, he is seen urinating on the tank’s tracks. The whole situation defies the national order, which rationalizes death in battle, while socially capitalizing on it. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. While both domestic women and their female employers are oppressed and devalued, many upper-class female employers are in privileged situations and therefore have the means to avoid the stigma of this oppression. See Molly Keefe. 2002. *Woman’s Work is Never Done; An Analysis of Domestic work, Race, Class and Gender* (Master’s thesis, American University, Washington DC). Retrieved from <http://www.ethesis.net/domestic/domestic.htm>. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Arab commonly use the term *Palesthinaim*. This spelling is rendered in Hebrew as *Palesthinaim*, after *Pleshet*, Plest. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)