**“Masters of Mopology” - Yemenite Maids and Cleaning Ladies**

**in Hebrew Literature**

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The discussion of Jewish Yemenite house maids and cleaning ladies focuses on a hard-pressed reality, in which class, ethnicity, and gender intersect to expose different dimensions in the lives of those women , most of whom cannot speak for themselves, with only a few that stand up and voice their criticism and dare to blame. We shall explore the intersection of gender, class, and ethnicity and explore how Yemenitness representations in Hebrew literature validate or defy class-social-cultural relations.

The categories of gender, class, and ethnicity can intersect in many ways, depending not just on how those Jewish Yemenite women are represented, but on the author’s identity and the relations between them and the maid or the cleaning lady: is the author a man or a woman? Ashkenazi or Mizrahi Jew? In other words, have women writers offered maids different representations than their men counterparts? Have Ashkenazi and Mizrahi female authors represented them differently? This multi-dimensionality offers many possible focal questions.

A central question we wish to explore is which identity category shall prevail: will the feminine corpus reveal gender-based solidarity with the maids, or shall the ethnic distinction, between Ashkenazi employers and Yemenite maids, overrides and manifests with alienation, arrogance, and exploitation? Conversely, what happens when it is Yemenite men who portray the Yemenite maid? Will the shared ethnic and class identity surpass and underplay the gender-based difference?[[1]](#footnote-2) In the following section, we present and discuss key moments of the literary image of the Yemenite cleaners made in Hebrew literature from the early days of Zionist settlement in the Yishuv in Palestine to the present.

**“Mother of Yemenites”**

The earliest text reviewed here is Nehamah Pukhachewsky’s (1869-1934) **“**Afia’s Misfortune”. Born in Brisk, Lithuania, Pukhachewsky settled in Rishon LeZion in 1889 and became part of the *moshava’s* hegemony. Written in 1925 (and published in *Ha-Shiloah*, 43, 227-233), “Afia’s Misfortune” reflects the author’s close ties with the people of the Yemenite neighborhood. Consigned to solitude, the Yemenite group[[2]](#footnote-3) suffered harsh alienation and struggled to find housing and make a living. One poignant example is offered by the so-called Y.S. (*Hapoel Hatzair*, 11.2.1912; 24 [Hebrew] who describes Yemenites as “docile, content-with-their-lot”. He then continues to describe “a sense of inner, mental objection, repulsion and scorn of the Yemenites as a whole”, making it impossible to mistake the previous statement as a praise for the Yemenite’s frugality. Based on such attitudes, Yemenites were consigned to hard manual labor. If “the Yemenites’ needs are lesser”, as shown above, it follows that Yemenite women are content with their lot, nurse no aspirations and are therefore suitable for hard manual work and servanthood, down there at the bottom rung of the social and class scale.[[3]](#footnote-4). Y.S.’s words highlight how the construction of inferiority produced servanthood, as he stresses: “The early women settlers were those who took the Yemenite women under their wings as servants.” (*Hapoel Hatzair*, 11.2.1912; 25 [Hebrew]) The equation of maids with Yemenite women stems from the hegemonic culture’s construction (Said, 1978, 2000), which perceived itself to be white and western. This construction was generated with the propagation of different images of those maids. It fed into the hegemony’s control over the construction of the female as other through act of force, exclusion, and authority. Patriarchal hegemony established and reinforced itself through the women who subordinated other women. As we are about to see, Pukhachewsky rejected these attitudes, which were belittling and exclusive towards Yemenite women, and as a social activist, she helped the Yemenite group by serving as a liaison to the authorities and was even fondly referred to as “the mother of Yemenites” (Govrin, 1989). In her story, Pukhachewsky offers a third-person portrayal of Afia, a woman who serves as a cleaner in an Ashkenazi household.   
Afia (whose name should be rendered in the initial guttural letter Ain, rather than Aleph) is an Arab name, just like Musa, her husband’s name. The Arabness of the protagonists’ names feeds into their exclusion by hegemonic culture, as in Zionist culture, this Arabness is synonymous with enmity and inferiority. Afia (‘Afia) is a common name among Jewish women in Yemen and means “health”. The health ascribed to the protagonist through her first name shall be examined against the travails and increased burnout produced by her circumstances. Ironically, or perhaps deliberately, Afia is also afflicted by physical frailty, following a stillbirth. However, despite her deprived position, she is indignant and sickened at her social position:

[…] nor was Afia indifferent to the insult addressed to her Musa in the Ashkenazi home where she worked. He walked in to ask her for the key, his face covered with soot, at which the household burst out laughing. Afia, who was busy wiping freshly washed plates, became dumbfounded, her heart pounding and her hands shaking so much that she dropped a plate, which was shattered in turn. She burst out crying, unaware of the shards, her heart shudders at her husband’s dignity, which was so cruelly hurt right in front of her. (Pukhachewsky, 1925, 1994, 89 [Hebrew])**[[4]](#footnote-5)**

The incident described here plays out in the private, supposedly safe space, but it is not Afia’s space. By definition, a private space generates shelter, comfort, and control, but here it is exactly the opposite. It was by accident that the plate fell out of her hand and broke, but this accident precedes the systematic shattering of vessels that Afia is later to perform, by her own choice. Interestingly, it was the jeers at her husband that made Afia burst out in tears, rather than her backbreaking toil. The spirit takes greater offense than the body. Afia may be projecting herself on to her husband, so as to cry out for her own pain. Having cried, she wells with remonstrance and disgruntlement:

So what if a man has returned from his toil at the machine, his face like the edges of a cauldron? Once washed he will be just as handsome as them! Is it the right to burst out laughing and ridicule such man? […]” Her disgruntlement goes on: pauper are lucky to be allowed to live in one of the sheds in the yard. So what if their dignity be trampled to the ground?... No! She should decide once and for all to leave this place. No longer can she take this agony! (Ibid, 89).

Afia’s inner dialogue betrays her pressing financial situation, at the lower rung of the social rank. It reveals that she lives, as a favor rather than rightfully, in one of the sheds at the yard. However, it is actually the sense of insult and poverty, her lowest ebb - that inspires Afia with the power to put an end to their misery. Her husband’s face looks like the “edges of a cauldron”, accentuating his natural swarthiness. The scene suggests blackness’ pining for whiteness (Morrison, 1997 [Hebrew]), as if blackness were an affliction that can be ridden off, as if washing could wipe it clean and allow Afia’s husband to be “just as fine as them”. Mizrahiness that is mired in dirt and requires cleaning shall prove a deep-seated notion. As the story unfolds, the Yemenite maid’s plight transpires to transcend the class and ethnic levels, while playing out mainly in the gender level, in Afia’s relationship with her husband, who bullies her. Afia’s servanthood status plays out within her home too, true to patriarchal tradition:

Different spirit come over her Musa when she arrives early from work, baking him pitas and he finds the hot coffee kettle alongside a cup awaiting him. He is happy and content at once. He enjoys his wash, changes clothes, stocks his tall pipe with the long tube, picks up a book and sits down with much satisfaction, on the straw cushion, which she had laid for him outside, near the thick tree. (Ibid, 90).

The relationship escalates into actual oppression and violence on her husband’s part. Afia’s home is not her own, but her husband’s. She has no sheltered space of her own. Pukhachewsky thereby lays out Afia’s quadruple exclusion: as a woman, a Yemenite, as inhabiting the lowest rung on the social scale, and as a wife exploited and degraded in her domestic setting. The very fact that she is a woman exacerbates and even generates the other subjections; deep inside, Afia rises against her husband’s conviction that a woman is unsuited for Torah studies, but she is unable to confront him:

[…] He elaborates, eager to stress that a woman is unsuited for Torah studies, as sin haunts her and within one hour she is able to spoil all that which the man repair day round in his prayers and teachings. Afia finds this conviction all wrong but does not have the words to argue it. She only utters succinctly: “Torment!” (Ibid, 90)

Afia rejects the inferiority attributed to women (“unsuitable for Torah studies”) but has no real voice of her own to utter it. Her utterance comes down to a single word – “torment”. Pukhachewsky puts words in her mouth, thereby granting her literary presence and voice, but this is a mediated, rather than direct, speech. This dubbing sounds Afia’s silenced voice while emphasizing her muteness. One question that comes to mind in this context concerns the reliability of her representation. Can Pukhachewsky, as part of Rishon LeZion’s elite, faithfully represent Afia, the Yemenite cleaner? Does Pukhachewsky’s power, being part of the Ashkenazi hegemonic class, hold inherent notions of superiority as well as expressing patronizing attitude, similarly to those reflected in the above quotes by Y.S.? Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1995, 51) states unequivocally that “if you are poor, black and female you get it in three ways.” Spivak explains that subaltern women have no voice in western discourse, which is familiar with no option but to talk about such women or on their behalf. We can agree with this statement in principal but would like to place it along a spectrum and posit a variety and degrees of “voice appropriation” when it comes to subaltern women. We wonder whether true sisterhood, which transcends the ethnic and class difference, is actually possible between women of different class and origin. Does Pukhachewsky’s writing reflect actual solidarity? Conversely, is the class and ethnic gap between her protagonist and herself preclude any such prospect?

Following Spivak, Goni Ben-Israel Kasuto (2015, 37 [Hebrew]) posits that Nehamah Pukhachewsky’s Yemenite stories offer “no authentic voice, but rather an attempt by an Ashkenazi farmer to assume a borrowed perspective on the real life.” We emphatically differ. Albeit writing from a privileged position, Pukhachewsky herself, in her own private space, suffered gender-based distress and mental desolation. Her writing taps into hardship, suffering, failures, and disappointments.[[5]](#footnote-6) Clearly, Pukhachewsky’s high-class problems cannot be compared with the trials of physical labor experienced by Afia. Nor are we trying to understate the glaring economic gap between the two women. Nevertheless, considerable sisterhood can be found, in Bell Hooks’ words (Hooks, 1984, 2007), between the privileged woman who writes her oppressed counterpart. Perhaps this solidarity could be traced to Pukhachewsky’s biography, who left the safety of a well-to-do family home, similarly to Afia: “Why did they leave Yemen, her father’s home in Aden – back there? After all, they were masters, owners of homes and lands, and considered among the parish’s rich…” (Ibid, 96). Furthermore, similarly to Afia, who experienced a stillbirth, Pukhachewsky too lost her first two offspring. That is, the identification shared by the author and protagonist draws on her consciousness as well as on a shared life experience. What is more, Pukhachewsky immigrated to the Land of Israel following her family’s exhortations to sever ties with her gentile youthful flame and enter matrimony with a match approved by the family. This compromise marriage failed to satiate her yearning for fulfilment and gratification.[[6]](#footnote-7) The story at hand raised the question of a chosen partner versus forced marriage, with Afia imagining how her future daughter shall choose a bridegroom following her own heart: “In her imagination, she had already raised a daughter who had come of age. She was not going to trade her for money as in the Yemenites’ way! She was going to let the girl choose a fiancée after her own heart.” (Ibid, 96)[[7]](#footnote-8) We find that Pukhachewsky’s gender consciousness and her relevant political activism[[8]](#footnote-9), coupled with her oppression at home, somewhat bridge over the class and ethnic gap between her and her protagonist. Afia offers an extreme case of women’s exclusion and undermining, from which Pukhachewsky herself had suffered. Thus, writing about Afia is a latent outlet to write her own self and about women’s struggles in general. Afia’s otherness and the distance from her own life helps Pukhachewsky write of the wrongs and tribulation she experiences first-hand.[[9]](#footnote-10) Bell Hooks (1984, 2007) argued that sisterhood was more than an empathic acknowledgment of women’s experiences or sympathy with their shared misery, but also the power to fight any form of patriarchal wrong. It seems that beyond her economic status, beyond the ethnic hurdle, a deep sense of sisterhood can be found here. It rises from Pukhachewsky’s story to generate authenticity and evoke empathy for Afia. The Yemenite shaped by Pukhachewsky is a battered wife, consigned to the uttermost margins while suffering violence and humiliation both domestically and from society. Nevertheless, a mutinous, liberated voice rises within her. It is a dual voice of speech and speechlessness, submission and disgruntlement.

**“The Mop is a Yemenite” – the Yemenite maid’s songs**

A few years later, in 1931, (18 Tishrei, 5692, 29.9.1931), author Yitzhak Yatziv, under the pseudonym Y. Roe’e,[[10]](#footnote-11) offers a whole different position:

How good are thy children, Yemen, in thy dwellings, Tel-Aviv. Fine, convenient and affordable. very cheap? How very cheap. The little maids – these are marvelous creatures indeed. Creatures that appease even the conscience of their mistresses, with their exquisite human sensibilities. For how much should one pay a tiny girl, eyes black and face tanned, who at about ten appears to be about seven? For whatever a mistress pays such wretched creature constitutes kind, graceful nobility. And should wages be insisted upon in this case? The tiny girl indeed tends to the floors, running all manner of errands, carries the household’s necessities back from the market, carries food over for the man of the house who works at the office and cannot conveniently make it home for lunch, washes the dishes and if a child be at home, she further plays with him – to their joint delight, the child’s and the child maid’s, which deserves her play too. All these warrant no great wage. A little girl. (Yatziv [Y. Roe’e], 1932).

The unjust treatment of the Yemenite girls is declared here loud and clear, even with a marveling tone. Yitzhak Yatziv, founder and editor of *Davar Leyladim*,[[11]](#footnote-12) Davar’s children supplement – who was supposed to have children and their universe in mind, writes here of the exploitation of Yemenite girls and maids as if it were the right, good order of things. His words lay bare the discrimination and exploitation in a direct, blatant and affronting manner.

About two years later, in 1934, Nathan Alterman who is to be the Canon of Hebrew poetry penned the “Yemenite Women Song”,[[12]](#footnote-13) reinforcing the essentialist perception of Yemenite women. The title is the signifier that generates hierarchy, labels otherness and draws cultural boundaries:

Burning fire in my eyes,

Shivers through my body.

Look not upon me, fellas

That I’m so swarthy!

Not I grace gazelles

Viennas and Berlins [sic];

temperament is with them

I am but Khamsin.

Mop and bucket in my left,

Scrubbing brushes in the right.

My oh my, here’s my labor

Toil away with fervor!

[…]

(Alterman, 1934 [5737], pp. 31-33 [Hebrew])

The song is written in the first person, thereby evoking empathy and trust. However, it is the author’s own voice, imposed on the Yemenite maid, who produces its tune. This presents a bind: it is a third person disguised as first, a false first person. Nevertheless, it may confer a semblance of credibility. The song’s title boasts as the Yemenite women’s own, definitive song. What is this song that the Yemenite women sing? If you ask Alterman, it is the song of subaltern workers, who do not protest their tracking into cleaning, and even rejoice and sing with joy.

The song conflates employment and ethnicity, suggesting that Yemenite women are destined to clean. The essentialism starts with the maid’s body: “My legs like steel/ and the hand of lead”.[[13]](#footnote-14) The narrator is also highly energetic, fervent, hot – “Fire burning in my eyes”, “For me it’s all khamsin” (a dry heatwave).[[14]](#footnote-15) The Yemenite woman, is so far removed from the European culture, the Viennas, the “Berlins” (pralines). You won’t find her without her cleaning paraphernalia, the mop and bucket that define her. You could almost say that something about her genes, her DNA, is making her a prime cleaning material. The link between physical attributes and employment and class speaks to a racist mindset.

Alterman may appear to disapprove of the municipal mechanism’s corruption while singing the praise of the Yemenites who wash away the “dirt”, but no criticism is levelled at the whole correlation between the cleaning work and ethnic origin. Alterman does not slander the lower class, of which the Yemenite women are members, but he does accept the social premise that this is their natural calling, so much so that even the Yemenite mother in his song primes her daughter for a future in cleaning:

When I wake up for work

My mother says to me:

My child, apple of my eye

Pick up the mop.

Only now does one realize that the narrator is a child. Her mother seems to nudge her into the cleaning profession. The whole gist is aesthetically framed, rhymed and metered so that the girl’s work transpires to possess harmony, balance, song, and merriment. At no point does the poet throw in any criticism at the fact that the girl is robbed of her due education, or at her quadruple exploitation: ethnic, gender-based, class-based and age-based – set against the helplessness that attends childhood. We can almost come to the conclusion that the mother and daughter enjoy cleaning other people’s filth. Alterman’s song has a joy to it and even gratitude for the work:

My oh my, here’s my labor

Mess and grime aplenty-

Rise my mop, rise and shine

This place must be tidy!

The sense of merriment and contentment exuded by this song is only skin-deep. It is a façade all too familiar in the Israeli psyche, while the song further entrenches it. It is no more than a veneer that belies a tenuous political reality. A political reading of this song could seek this underlying level and restore the latent political text that peeks through the wrecks and cracks (Fredric Jameson, 2004 [Hebrew]). Alterman reinforces the notional Yemenite satisfaction and contentment with their lot, first by portraying the Yemenite maids as free of grievances. They seem happy enough, don’t they? Furthermore, the song hints at the municipal corruption cesspool, by making the following point: “The mop is Yemenite/ The mud Ashkenazi!” - as if the mechanism’s fault lies in its Ashkenaziness, while it is the Yemeniteness that scrubs it clean. For us, this indeed speaks to some criticism leveled at the institutional corruption, but this criticism overlooks some outrageous premises concerning Yemenite women. Alterman laces the Yemenite cleaners’ frugality, singing, and merriment with his criticism of the municipality, in a manner that leaves the women exploited, at the bottom of the social hierarchy. He humorously suggests that by cleaning the offices, they may also be cleaning off corruption, but in fact, he rationalizes their role as cleaners. Ruth Carton-Bloom would later posit that Alterman is the champion of “Mizrahi indignity” (Carton-Bloom, 2015, p. 137 [Hebrew]).

Alterman is “one of the first authors to portray the world of 1950s newcomers from Muslim countries, while drawing on overwhelming empathy.” (Ibid, p.139) We wish to challenge this overarching pronouncement. Indeed, the Yemenite Women Song was penned earlier, in 1934, during the pre-state days, under different social and national circumstances, and it may be that the state mechanism’s abject treatment of 1950s immigrants from Arab states prompted Alterman’s unique moral statement; but nevertheless, as we have shown here, the Yemenite Women Song is steeped in social attitudes that are incompatible with Alterman’s pronouncement as the poet who championed the indignity suffered by Mizrahi Jews. Alterman criticizes the municipal corruption, for sure, but he goes about it in a manner that betrays ethnic disparity. Alterman’s orientalist stance on Yemenites, so we assume, dovetailed with the mood of that period and in this sense, was commonplace and therefore went almost undetected.

**“You won’t get them off their seat without a rod and a belt”: Yemenite maids in children’s literature**

The significant identification of Yemenite women with cleaning work emerges accordingly in literature for children and young adults. This literature, designed for the younger readership, is all the more enlisted to serve socialization processes. The seemingly naïve stance that this genre assumes is all the more telling of prevalent assumptions concerning social positions and roles.

Levin Kipnis’s story, *“Rumia”* (Kipnis, Levin, date unknown, 7-42), which was probably written during the 1930s, then republished in 1981 reflects the same kind of subordination:

This little **Yemenite** is better than an **Ashkenazi** girl; working much and eating little. Above all, you need to know how to handle her ilk. You won’t get them off their seat without a rod and a belt. (Kipnis, p. 10, emphasis in original [Hebrew]).

Rumia works seven days a week and, notably, earns a pittance (“But it might as well be gratis”; “the maid who costs her so little” pp 19-20). As the story unfolds, we see Rumia employed by a mistress who exacts physical punishments: she pulls her plait (p. 28), slaps her (p. 30), while later we are to learn that “she was ruthlessly beaten. The lady herself pulled her hair.” (p. 32) The bullying is described by Kipnis matter-of-factly, blatantly, as if it was the natural order of things. No disapproval or eyebrow raised. The fact that the story was reprinted in 1981 reveals that the publisher, B. Lichtenfeld, did not recoil from the attitudes expressed in it and assumed them to resonate with certain readerships, even decades down the line. It could be that the author’s popularity stood in the way of critical reading.

Bracha Habas’s story, ”At Kerem HaTeimanim”, offers a softer stance. Habas’s story refers to Kerem HaTeimanim (“the Yemenite grove”) neighborhood and describes it as wretched, filthy, off the grid, with no sewerage. As the story draws to an end, the narrator describes the daughters of Yemen:

Would you like to see them, the little Yemenite girls whose childhood days have become their years of toil and anguish? – Head into any path leading from “Kerem HaTeimanim” […] see them – little and small, rushing in droves to their daily work or returning tired and worn. They have spent all day scrubbing and cleaning, the “mistress’s” home from morn till midnight, on weekdays and Saturdays, come winter or summer. With neither rest nor stop. (Habas, 5694 [1934], pp 96-97 [Hebrew]).

Here too, the author, much like Pukhachewsky, extends empathy towards the Yemenite maids. She is enraged at the fact that they work from an early age, instead of attending school. She also inquires on behalf of one of her characters: “Why has fate discriminated them so?” (Ibid, p. 97). Unlike Yatziv, the author identifies the girls’ discrimination. In other words, Habas’s story confirms that the identification of the Yemenite female with polishing and subjection is deep-seated, but she finds it enraging.

*The Mystery of the Black-Blue Eyes* (2014), a novel by Alex Paz-Goldman published 80 years later, also perceives those social perceptions as alive and very much entrenched. On the one hand, the novel is sensitive to marginalization, as its plot follows the kidnapped Yemenite children affair and eventually reveals that the protagonist is one of them. But on the other hand, the cliché portrayal of the novel’s maid very much offsets its sensitivity to marginalization and exclusion, which the plot purports to generate:

Maid Mazal spent most of her time standing by the counter and wiping away the dust […] Mazal was a full-figured woman, draped in big, heavy tent-like dresses. Her face was dark and pretty and she always had her head covered in a scarf. Despite her bulk size, she would move gracefully and enjoyed warbling chants that were not to Mum’s liking (who thought music had stopped with Beethoven). Mazal called Mum Madame S’hori rather Ts’hori. We knew little of her, other than that she lived at the far end of Amidar and would arrive on foot, having no direct bus line to bring her over, and riding two buses would have taken her twice as long. I also knew her husband was much older and that they had seven children […]. Every now and then Mazal would bring her young daughter along […]. The girl would never talk, helping her mother do the cleaning. Scrubbing the floor on all fours, nimbly polishing the windows with newspapers and shining our silverware. […] Mazal and Shula would never eat at our home, although Mum invited them to help themselves on more than one occasion. They preferred the food they’d brought from home: brown bread, tomato, and olives. Dad said they worried our food wasn’t kosher enough. Walking in and out they would kiss the mezuzah automatically, and Mum would grimace in turn. On one occasion I heard her telling Dad she didn’t know what she’d do without Mazal, and it’s a shame they had no kultura like we’d had back in Europe, and it’s also a shame about the girl not going to school and about her having to end up as a maid like her mum. Dad said they needed people like these too.” (Paz-Goldman, 2014, pp 44-45 [Hebrew])

The Yemenite woman’s otherness is signified by her clothes and manners - the mezuzah-kissing and her particular food. Her pronunciation of Hebrew – Madame S’hory rather than Ts’hori (ironically means, pure white) – strikes a strident chord, just like her warbling, which is perceived as disruptive (Mishani, 2004 [Hebrew]) [[15]](#footnote-16). However, the author also mocks the accent of her employer, Madame Ts’hori with her parochial manner, when he observes ironically that she thought “music had ended with Beethoven.” (p. 45 [Hebrew]).

Arguably, this is an attempt to strike a balanced representation of the characters, rather than a premeditated subjection of the Yemenite woman. Nevertheless, the Yemenite maid’s habitus marks her out as the other: her headscarf, her warbling, the mezuzah-kissing. Her portrayal opens with the fact that she’d spend most of her time cleaning. In other words, this is her existential manifestation in this world, in its most basic sense. This outright statement is followed by the judgmental pronouncement – “they have no kultura” (p. 45 [Hebrew]). This assertion is delivered by the protagonist’s mother, but the narrator and implicit author are at no pains to refute it, particularly as the story, geared up for children and young adults, has a naïve kind of reader in mind. Even if we forego the expectation for a critical gaze on the author’s part, even if we contend that Paz-Goldman penned a realistic story true to the pertinent zeitgeist, even if we commend the very step of putting the Yemenite children’s affair on the table, the worldviews suggested by the Yemenite woman’s portrayal transpire as a glaring act of othering.

Here too, as in Yatziv’s text, Habas’s story, and Alterman’s song, the Yemenite maid’s daughter works as a cleaner rather than attending school. As shown by Edward Said (Said, 1978, 2000), the repetitious images of the Yemenite maid produce an orientalist, pseudo-scientific knowledge highlights that subjects Yemenite women to the servanthood niche, while consigning Yemeniteness as a whole to essentialist marginalization. The repetitious featuring of these indicators highlights their deep hold on the social system that gave rise to them.

The stereotypical portrayal of the Yemenite maid is all the more poignant in children’s literature, but it is further replicated in other texts as well. Accordingly, Yehudit Katzir, in her novel *Matisse Has the Sun in His Belly*, describes Naomi, the Yemenite maid, in the following manner:

Naomi knocks on the door at five AM, plants a quick kiss on the mezuzah then lays her many baskets and bundles on the table […] Naomi, pudgy and broad, waddles ahead, dragging her left, weaker leg, and bearing on her head the laundry, bundled in a bed sheet and crushed like a white ball, her sodden limbs covered in layers of long dresses, even during the summer, while her tanned face glistens, with lips thick and brown like pickled eggplant. (Katzir, 1995, pp 31-32 [Hebrew])

Here too, Yehudit Katzir, account highlights elements that recur and thereby emerge as labelling and classifying signifiers. The repetition reveals that the literary portrayal strives to achieve neither uniqueness nor inimitability - on the contrary. It is a portrayal that reproduces the hegemonic classification and entrenches its signifiers. Similar to Paz-Goldman’s descriptions, the maid’s face in this work is dark, her frame broad and her dresses large; once again, the inspecting gaze marks out the mezuzah-kissing as a signifier of a divisive otherness. However, Katzir observes some solidarity between the maid and her employer: both work and dine together (1995, 31-32 [Hebrew). Nevertheless, the apparent solidarity understates the power relations between the subaltern and her employer. The joint washing benefits the employer, rather than the other way around. The solidarity shared by the two women lies, facial foundation-like, over their subordination relationship. Unlike Pukhachewsky, who sets clear power relations between Afia and her employers, Katzir blurs them. The joint laundering, the shared meal, put together by both woman – all these produce a third space of sorts, in Homi Bhabha’s terms (Hever and Shenhav, 2002, 16 [Hebrew]), where subordination and eye-level attitudes live side by side. The closeness shared by the Yemenite washerwoman and her hegemonic employer plays out against the laundering. Laundering emerges from between the text’s lines as the unquestionable preserve of women. We conclude that the gender category underplays the class and ethnic categories, while producing a third space of identities that are not dichotomous, but rather intermingled and blured.

**The backward east must shake itself into hygienic kind of life – cleanliness, and dirt**

Dirt is another characterization associated with Yemeniteness. This emerges poignantly in Habas’s story:

How winding and tangled are the paths at “Kerem HaTeimanim”. How narrow, so very narrow the alleys. How crowded and grim the homes. How so very few sunrays filter through. And how rife, indeed so rife, the grime and waste piling in those alleys. […] and those streets stand in all their grime […] and there, in the grime and waste – girls and boys, lads and lasses, in their gangs. (Habas, 1934 [5694], p. 94 [Hebrew])

Dafna Hirsch has shown how hygiene was seen as a way to distinguish oneself and construct an identity (Hirsch, 2002, pp. 107-120 [Hebrew]). Hygiene was identified with the attributes of the civilized man, like self-control, morality, willpower, and whiteness. According to Hirsch, the hygienic project allowed to rebuild the Jewish identity in the Land of Israel, by striking an identification with a repertoire conceived as “western” and “modern”, vis-à-vis the Arabs and Mizrahi Jews, who were portrayed as the complete opposites of the hygienic “new man”. Accordingly, for example, Dr. Asher Goldstein wrote in a 1935 *Haaretz* piece:

After all, each and every one of us, doctors, can offer evidence as to the extent of the people’s ignorance when fundamental issues of hygiene are concerned […], and should anyone doubt it, the mounds of grime, the uncleanliness, the absence of trees and plants may serve to prove it. And let no one blind our eyes using comparisons with our Arab neighbors, as it is not by them that we live, for **we are here to bring the west,** the finest and most refined which it has to offer, not just for ourselves, but for the entire backward east which must shake itself into a new, hygienic kind of life.

(Hirsch, 2002, p. 13 [Hebrew] Our emphasis, M.H., D.H.)

Unlike the hygienic man, who is active, disciplined with his time and possesses abstract outlook and the power to plan his steps ahead, Mizrahim were portrayed as passive, with a faulty sense of time, and incapable of long-term thinking. If the “hygienic man” was a subject that shaped his life in light of the hygienic teachings, Mizrahim, “by nature”, could not be hygienic subjects, but only the objects of hygiene (Hirsch, 2002, p. 102 [Hebrew]). The western delusion (“we are here to bring the west”) allows Ashkenazim to nurture a sense of ownership and superiority, feeding into the social hierarchy that they enact. The hygiene discourse is one example of the disciplinary discourse, in Foucault’s terms (Foucault, 1975, 2015; 1971, 2005, p. 10 [Hebrew]). The models posed by this discourse marked people out from one another and regulated their activities, just as the Yemenite women’s work as cleaners was regulated. Here we see the clearest expression of an oppression predicated on three factors: gender, ethnicity and class.

In Habas’s story, the realm identified with Yemenites is cordoned off and distinct – Kerem HaTeimanim. It is marked by its wretchedness, deplorable sanitary conditions and its residents’ wallowing in the grime. This realm projects on its dwellers. However, the fact that, paradoxically, it is the dirty women who are recruited for the cleaning work puts a dent in the overarching dirtiness attributed to them. It seems the attribution of dirt is one way of generating hierarchy and class signification. Dafna Hirsch shows that dirt was perceived as a menace, which meant cleanliness was highly important, elevated to an educational value. Dirt entailed disgrace. This disgrace prompted, in turn, a counter-reaction. The Yemenite women internalized the hegemon’s gaze, which identified them with dirt and poor hygiene, until they became the ultimate cleaners.[[16]](#footnote-17)

**“To My Yemenite” - the maids’ sons**

We have so far discussed Yemeniteness as described by the hegemonic gaze. The Yemenite maids were later garnered representations in the poetry of their sons. In this case, the ethnic category seems striking, dictating the poetic agenda. Not only do the sons who write of their maid mothers identify with and offer a faithful representation of their subjection, but they also highlight the significant link between origin on the one hand and class and subjection on the other. Moreover, by writing about the maid mother, the sons talk of themselves and the subjection that pervades their own identity. For the first time[[17]](#footnote-18), the history of the Yemenite maids breaks away from the elites’ perspective, to be written bottom-up and reconstruct the personal, authentic story of the past. However, the indirect representation leaves the mother voiceless, as if the sons speak on their behalf. In this sense, the representation of a Yemenite maid by her son detracts from their gender representation. But unlike Spivak, who determines that the subalterns cannot speak, we view the sons’ writing of their mothers as a progressive stage in the process of putting together the subaltern’s voice. Indeed, the subaltern’s voice is mediated, but the mediators are the sons that issued forth from their bodies, their own flesh and blood. Nevertheless, it would take a bit more poise for a Yemenite maid to speak for herself.

In his poem “To My Yemenite” (1964), Tuvia Sulami writes of his mother, a Yemenite maid. The poem was first published in his first book, *Tefila la-Golim be-‘Olamam*, (“Prayer for Exiles in their own World”, (1974, Hebrew). This poem is informed by abject poverty. The criticism of the social situation draws on the memory of the hungry body, dressed in tatters, and on the languishing soul that envies the son of the “mistress”, who was lucky enough to have two mums, one of whom the poet’s own mother, at the poet’s expense. The narrator mans a twofold position, at once the wanting child and the adult who had the upper hand on poverty – material, mental, social – and now considers dressing his wounds in consolation. Interestingly, the mother is addressed using the hegemon’s terminology – “My Yemenite”. But this reference is double-edged. On the one hand, it labels her as lesser - the maid, menial worker or servant; at the same time, it counters this labeling with the first-person possessive pronoun. The possessive Me comes to signify intimacy and endearment, and maybe thereby reclaims the mother from the Ashkenazi sphere, back to the poet.

**To My Yemenite**

Return thee, Mum, from the slavery house

Stroke me, merciful, like other kids

Call me to quench my hunger

Empty though may be the larder

Inquire what says the teacher

Recalling your insubordinate son.

Cry not mother as I ditch the school

The grave is our sole inheritance to rule

Until then –

In the Maker’s class, groping in fear

A bench I will seek at the teacher’s feet.

Wear your coif stand upright

Become officers in the same brigade

Whose rags are its uniforms.

Tatters shall ornate us like gems

For ahead of science we defeated hunger

Troubling it with soup of mallow and grasshopper.

Why do you say, do love, son of mine

Let go of hatred, abhorrence decry

As your mistress’s son has one mum and another,

While I am bereft, deprived of my mother?

(Sulami, 2015 [5775], p. 102 [Hebrew])

The poem offers a glimpse of deprived childhood. It suggests the want of food, no attention paid to schooling and the dearth of clothing. Military service rectified inequality, at least in part, thanks to the uniforms. The triumph over adversity can serve to inspire the mother’s upright standing or even her ultimate liberation from the “house of slavery”. The poem offers the mother a different place than the one she inhabited in reality, as she is condensed to become a rounded character, rather than a mere “maid”.

In a personal letter from 31.3.2016, Sulami writes:

My mother was a maid, as were my grandmother and older sisters, and so was the case for most Mizrahi homes, certainly in Yemenite homes. […] it is the maid that drove a revolution in the family by becoming a provider too, which changed her domestic status. The Yemenite mother, the maid, is the only person from the [poorer] neighborhoods to set foot in the Ashkenazi household and in north Tel Aviv, where they got to know her and her culture, if only to some degree. On the other hand, the Yemenite father never set foot in the Ashkenazi home and they only knew him as this figure that’s out there… itIt was the Yemenite maid who bridged the worlds and sped up the new socialization of the Mizrahi, by allowing to embrace new technologies, new attitudes, all the while fighting the conservatism of the Mizrahi himself. We would often get an old garment or bag or book that the Ashkenazim could spare, and we’d often squabble over what Mum had brought from the Ashkenazi household… this meant heavy chips on the child’s shoulder, the maid’s son. Some mistresses weren’t that nice while others would patronize and insult and humiliate, and some mothers would share it back home, which at times stirred resentment in the younger generation’s heart. With us, in most cases, maids were treated reasonably, while the mistress shared our happiness and sorrow […]. When we started our forays outside the neighborhood and into Tel Aviv, west of the Ayalon River, the “Musrara”, things could become tricky. For instance, when I was in high school I had this classmate and my sister was their maid… and when I arrived at military recruit training he was a tent mate… it was against this background that I wrote the poem “My Yemenite”.

Sulami views his mother’s work as a maid as a key to progress. According to him, the maids bridged between the different worlds. After all, men had no access to the well-to-do, mostly Ashkenazi, homes. Women entered them as subalterns and in this sense even reinforced the hierarchy between Ashkenazi women and the cleaners and entrenched the class gap. But at the same time, these women formed a bridge between the different cultures and embraced the positive sides they found in the homes they cleaned, so as to allow their children to acquire values that may improve their standing in society. This stance makes us uncomfortable, though we can understand it as an effort to tame fear and deficiency; it is cognitive dissonance, if you will, at the glaring poverty and corruption. The other voice is that of the innocent child, who still experiences that squabble with his siblings over the “old garment the Ashkenazi could spare”. The third voice is that of resentment over the patronizing and exclusion in the realm that stretches beyond Wadi Musrara (see: Sulami, 1978, pp 43-44 [Hebrew]).

So far we have seen that the daughters follow in their mothers’ cleaning footsteps, rather than attending school. The son, on the other hand, goes to school. The gap transpires as gender-based, though also time-based, as the Israel Compulsory Education Act only came into force in 1949. The works that feature girls who do not attend school takes place in the pre-act period. Here, although the boy in question is supposed to be at school, he fails to find his place in the education system and yearns for his mother to take interest in his schooling. The lack of education transpires as a shortcoming and is associated with emptiness, desertion, burial, hunger. The poem presents an act of overcoming the forces of adversity and absence and concludes with a dual stance. On the one hand, it features the voice identified with the mother, “Hate thou not my son, enough”. The mother’s stance can have a double meaning: holding on to the positive and noble on the one hand, and resignation to subordination on the other. The mother may bequeath the renunciation of protest, but the son won’t accept the degrading reality, as he shouts out the void that he still nurses within: “When your mistress’s son has one mum and another/ While I am bereft, deprived of my mother?”

Sulami’s poem is underpinned by personal experience and as such is bound by actual, biographical reality. As Frantz Fanon said, defiance entails striping oneself naked: “The native intellectual who takes up arms to defend his nation's legitimacy and who wants to bring proofs to bear out that legitimacy, who is willing to strip himself naked to study the history of his body, is obliged to dissect the heart of his people” (Fanon, 1991, p. 211). Sulami shares an actual, personal experience as his evidence, so as to make a difference in reality. This stance can be found in all the following texts. Shlomi Hatukka too, in his poem “Cleaning”, speaks of his mother, the cleaning lady. The very revelation – my mother is a maid – is liberating, or “cleansing”. The poem resists the inferior labelling while reinforcing the upright poise:

**Cleaning**

My mother cleans the dirt

Lurking in the corners,

She wipes the floor clear of marks and stains,

Eliminating fingerprints

From the doors’ handles,

Polishing even the plastic joints

In their stranglehold of the lamps’ necks,

Removing dust from the piano and books

And levelling the crooked pictures,

Sharpening the tongs on the forks and knives

And placing them in rows and columns

In the pull-out drawers,

Draping the windows in curtains

So that you can no longer see a thing inside

With only the sun

Reflecting in them.

When it’s all neat and tidy,

She takes a shower,

Puts on her clothes,

And rushes back home

To warn her children away.

(Hatukka, 2015, p. 18 [Hebrew])

Hatukka describes his mother’s menial work, cleaning other people’s homes. The subordination is built up with the intensive nature of the verbs that describe the gruelling physical labour: cleaning, wiping, eliminating, polishing, removing, levelling, sharpening. These verbs reflect the exertion of physical work – a subordination that is first and foremost physical is the context that lies at the heart of its poetic fist. The poem “Family Tree (Family Tree School Assignment)”, where Hatukka introduces himself, opens as follows:

On my mother’s side

I am a third-generation in a line of maids

Who’d scrub the stairs for Ashkenazim

And polish their mirrors

(Hatukka, 2015, p. 15 [Hebrew])

His mother’s work as maid features at the top of the family tree. This experience runs deep, shaping his identity in the present. The classist and ethnic subordination forms Hatukka’s social consciousness, etched into his inner identity. The ethnic consciousness takes a heart-rending form when he describes his internal conflict regarding his skin colour in “Two Masks”:

How many years does it take to tear away the shame

Turned-mask,

Which pitted the body against itself as in war,

Which made the eyes hate the skin,

The ears hate the music

Played by the tongue,

The lips would blame the throat

For the accent,

The body rejected the hug,

The tongue rejected the flavor,

The nostrils the scent

Of the chambers, closets, and clothes,

Imagination stemmed the resurrection of memories

And the inheritance of stories,

The heart knew not its own self.

But such is your fate as a man:

Even when you’re yourself again

Having torn the mask away,

You’ll find you still have to tear it

Piece by piece

From the world.  
(Hatukka, 2015, p. 17 [Hebrew])

Colour pervades all senses: vision, taste, smell, the touch of one’s skin. The ethnic origin defines the senses and with them, the experience as a whole - identity, class, and consciousness. The mother is busy spying the dirt lurking in corners and levelling crooked pictures. Of particular irony is the polishing of mirrors. On the one hand, the mirror allows landlords a narcissist contemplation; but the mirror also allows the mother to look at herself, pinpoint the danger and “warn her children away”. It is a warning against subordination, labelling, from the prison of identities, the social hierarchy that left the mother no option but to make a living cleaning houses, a job that no one wanted to do. The poet holds on to his anger so as to translate it into a protest poem that sets out to “clean” the social state of affairs. As though the poetic act was a cleaning action, riding the social mechanisms of their dirt - ethnic labelling, the exploitation of women in financial straits.

So far, we have seen that when hegemonic men write the Yemenite maid, two categories are strikingly present-- gender and ethnicity. On the other hand, the relevant writing of hegemonic women understates the ethnic and class categories, while the gender category takes precedence in the Yemenite maid’s representation. Now, with Sulami and Hatukka, the maids’ sons, oppression is mainly observed through the prism of class and ethnicity, seared into their identity, at the expense of the gender category.

**“Expert Mopologist” – the direct-speaking maid**

As we shall now show, when the Yemenite maids write themselves, the categories of gender and ethnicity emerge with intensity. As we shall see, the Yemenite maids’ self-writings demonstrate refusal to give precedence or understate any of the categories.

In Bracha Serri’s “The Maid”, a chorus of labelled women is sounded, featuring the maid’s voice:

I went to the movies

A “mistress” I met

“Come work for me,

Be my maid.”

I was out with my child

They called me his “nanny”

For pretty is the child,

Unlike his mommy.

I helped the needy

They thought, “She’s in need”

I volunteered to help

“She’s unemployed indeed”

In the classes I taught

They said I was “training”.

I came as an inspector

And was taken for a visitor.

My home is my fortress

But I was taken for its renter

And when penning my poem

Was mistaken for a printer.

(Serri, 1981, p. 143 [Hebrew])

The poem contests ethnic and classist stereotyping. Serri points out how the Mizrahi, Yemenite woman is cemented in position by her biographical context, within a cage of labels. Ethnicity binds the narrator to an inherent system of disadvantaged images, allowing her no way out (Oppenheimer, 2012, p. 159 [Hebrew]). This seemingly naïve poem defies the stigmatic boundaries determined by the origin and skin. According to the underlying notion revealed here, the narrator does not belong in the cinema. Due to her appearance, she naturally belongs to cleaning and domestic works. Even the other spheres of belonging in this poem, like the mother-son stroll, volunteering, teaching, writing – wouldn’t allow her in. The poem shows how gender-based and ethnic exploitation target Mizrahi-looking women, leaving them no way out. In a striking example of the labelling that associates skin colour with servanthood, Audre Lorde describes an incident from 1967: “I wheel my two-year-old daughter in a shopping cart through a supermarket […] and a little white girl riding past in her mother’s cart calls out excitedly, ‘Oh look, Mommy, a baby maid.’” (Ehrenreich, 2003, p. 91). This account reveals the deep-seated association of skin colour and servanthood, manifested in the “natural” reaction of a young girl. For the white girl, darker skin is synonymous with servanthood, even when it comes to a two-year-old toddler. This identity cage appears in “’ Literate”, another poem by Serri from her first book. The poem puts together a stereotypical character of a subaltern woman whose only specialty is cleaning – or mopology:

I’m yet another ‘literate

Which is a pity.

An expert mopologist.

Doing plenty. […]

They read secrets, all of them

While I am in the dark.

They know the worldly wisdom

While I remain shut out. […]

I’m but a ‘literate

With no luck to my name.

Never got down to study

And that’s a crying shame.

(Serri, 1981, p. 155 [Hebrew])

Bracha Serri consciously misspells “illiterate” as “’literate”, thereby producing a double meaning. You may think the narrator voice is unfamiliar with the word, and therefore misspells it. In fact, this neologism juxtaposes the woman’s literacy and the illiterate manner in which she is perceived. As such, the author has command of the language and can point out the power relations between those who are privy to the “secrets” and those who are in “the dark”. Though not proficient in the eloquent language of those who are privy to the secret, probably in defiance, she manages to lay bare the workings of the power mechanisms, despite and thanks to her illiteracy. Similarly, the scientific suffix attached to “mop”, to create “mopologist”, has a scholarly, critical effect that speaks to a defiance through the means of linguistic command. By objecting the linguistic signifiers, Serri exposes the workings of language in cementing social positions. In another poem, she crosses “primitiveness”, as in “backwardness” with “naturalness”, as in “authenticity”, which begets “priminative” (Serri, 1981, p. 123 [Hebrew]).

Serri’s defiant stance against the oppressive mechanisms is underpinned by a pseudo-popular kind of poetry, rhymed and rhythmical. Ronit Chacham noted how Serri’s poetry is spoken, resembling rap – poetry delivered in spoken verses, which evolved in the black metropolitan suburbs of America (Chacham, 2013, p. 35 [Hebrew]). For Serri too, there is a liberating element in rapping – speaking uninhibitedly while singing verses to a beat. These spoken, rhythmical verses share a similar effect with Alterman’s “Yemenite Women Song”. Both writings attempt to strike a popular tone and address their audience at eye level. Both keep a breezy façade that is set against an unsettling inside. The difference lies in the fact that Alterman casually accepts the ethnic-class hierarchy, while Serri subverts it. Alterman’s melody produces the cementing of social positions and serves the hegemony; Serri presents a different melody, a protest rap melody designed to undo the social structure.[[18]](#footnote-19)

In 2015, Yonit Naaman wrote a three-part series of portraits of cleaning ladies. Interestingly, the poet picks the word “portrait”, borrowed from the classic arts’ field. The portrait calls upon the beholder to see its object as a complex and deep character. This word itself confers a haughtier semblance while defying the exclusion of the portrait at hand from the representation field of hegemonic literature. In the final poem of this cycle, “Portrait of a Cleaner #3”, the circle of oppression is broken, while the maid speaks in her own voice:

**Portrait of a Cleaner #3**

The world requires the thin and deft

To dust it clean,

Rid it of stains,

Scrub ceramic tiles

Of cooking grease –

The world depends on them.

Me, I require the onslaught of asthma

In a refurbished Ben Gurion St. apartment

To betray an imposing legacy

Of Yemenite maids.

Being a third generation

In a line of Zionist domestic slavery

My masculine side extends

Empathy to the world’s needs

Even my inner imagined Ashkenazy

Likes it clean

But my feminine side resents

The idea,

Refusing to give in to the mop

To take orders

To wipe dusty shelves

In furbished Ben Gurion St. apartments

This world could stay dirty

For all I care.

(Naaman, 2015, pp. 24-25 [Hebrew])

The requisite of women who make dirt go away and scrub tiles is posed as axiomatic– “the world depends on them”. But the poet reveals that this is no natural law; it is social conditioning that subordinates Yemenite women.

The narrator slams her fists against the oppression. She, with her “imposing legacy of Yemenite maids”, who defines herself through the cleaning work as “third generation in a line of Zionist household slavery”, won’t “give in to the mop”. Giving in to the mop means subscribing to the dichotomous identity enforced by Israeli nationalism. Naaman draws on her experience in order to rebel, similarly to CRC’s teaching: “We might use our position at the bottom, however, to make a clear leap into revolutionary action. If black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression” (CRC, 1977, p. 19). In order to rebel against her family line, the poet longs for the “onslaught” of asthma.

Her denunciation of the cleaning social role stems from the jumble of identities and the inner conflict between femininity and masculinity, Yemeniteness and Ashkenaziness. Rather than being true to the legacy and keeping silent, the narrator assumes the masculine, powerful Ashkenazi side, which allows her to rebel. In so doing, she breaks the moulds of her upbringing and shows resistance: “This world could stay dirty/ For all I care”

**Some Concluding Thoughts**

The literary representation of Yemenite maids betrays the orientalist ideology applied to them as representatives of a subaltern ethnic group. Their presence across a gamut of genres (poetry, lyricism, prose, short stories, and literature for children and young adults, journalism and personal testimony) feeds into the grim conclusion regarding the class-ethnicity nexus that underpins Israeli society since its very inception. The Yemenite maids’ prevalent public image as having no needs ironically jars with how needed they are. They scrub away the dirt and are also the ultimate others, the “dirty ones” who produce the stratification that is essential for a hegemonic society predicated on ethnic and class hierarchy. Their skin-deep description is reductively uniform, with markings like blackness, dearth and habitus that signifies inferior otherness; however, look deeper and you will find their representations reveal a whole gamut of expressions and possibilities.

There seems to be a gap between the writing of women and men. As we have witnessed, when hegemonic women write about Yemenite maids (see Pukhachewsky, Habas, and Katzir), they extend varying degrees of solidarity or sympathy towards their objects, while hegemonic men (Yatziv, Alterman, Kipnis) highlight their otherness, servanthood and marginality. Paz-Goldman presents a more complex case. On the one hand, the author is conscious of the injustices against the Yemenites and features the Yemenite, Balkan and Mizrahi children kidnapping affair – the greatest injustice of all – at the heart of his work. On the other hand, despite his awareness, and perhaps in his effort to bring a past period to life, the characters’ shaping reproduces and betrays a belittling, disparaging hegemonic notion regarding Yemenites.

Since the mid-1960s, resistance and dissention poetry has been penned, contesting the maid-Yemenite woman equation. The sons who write of their maid mothers identify with them while extending them compassion and protesting their subjection. It is the ethnic-classist oppression - which the sons experience first-hand - that resonates with them. Their main grievance concerns the mother’s Yemeniteness, rather than her womanhood. Here lies the blind spot when it comes to their mother’s gender-based subordination. Due to this literary manoeuvre, the maid’s voice remains indirect. The Yemenite maid herself has yet to speak.

With Bracha Serri’s poetry, in the early 1980s, and all the more so with Yonit Naaman’s writing (alongside Ayelet Tsabari), the subalterns start to speak for themselves. The two poets create an autonomous feminine subject that asserts both their gender identity and their ethnic identity. At this point, the Yemenite maids increasingly shake off the identity and occupational prison hedged around them by hegemony, in literature as well as in life.

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1. The identity distinctions are often not distinct. Social position is highly, though not completely, compatible with origin or class. Accordingly, Hebrew literature has Ashkenazi writers who offer a non-hegemonic position, alongside Mizrahi writers who voice a more hegemonic stance. We shall therefore address the representations discussed here as representing the text at hand, rather than voicing a general, universal statement. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. In a press interview Dvora Tabib recounted how Nehamah Pukhachewsky “devoted herself to the Yemenite girls and it was she who put me through school” (Gil Yudilevitch (Yudilevitch, 1986) “Dvora’s Job on the Side – Attending Haviv Elementary School”. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. In *The Art of Leaving* (Tsabari, 2019), a recent memoir by Israeli-Canadian Ayelet Tsabari, the writer, cites this construction, which she finds particularly painful, being of Yemenite origin:   
   ‘In 1909, an essay in the front page of *Hatzvi* newspaper declared the Yemeni Jew, “A simple, natural laborer… without shame, without philosophy and without poetry. … in a wild, barbaric state.” That sentiment echoed a 1908 memo written by Dr. Jacob Thon, from the Palestine office of the World Zionist Organization who said, “Because they are satisfied with little, these Jews can be compared to the Arabs and in this respect they can even compete with them. . . If we get Yemeni families to settle down in villages, we could also have the women and girls work as cleaners and maids, instead of dealing with the Arab help.” (P. 186) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Translations by Dina Haruvi and Mimi Haskin. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Furthermore, Pukhachewsky struggled to get her works published. Her first book, *In the New Judea*, was out in 1911 (5671), in a period when literary writing was the almost exclusive preserve of men. Yet the pioneering act of female writing garnered neither praise nor wide circulation. Yosef Haim Brenner, for example, editor of *Ha-Achdut*, ran an anonymous piece about Pukhachewsky’s book, stating: “The reader, for some reason, remains dissatisfied. It is not what he had in mind. Something important, essential, is amiss – that which is usually denoted by the word talent.” (*B’Yehuda Ha-Hadasha* [In the New Judea], *Ha-Achdut* 5, 17.11.1911). I would be nearly another twenty years before Pukhachewsky plucked the strength to publish her second book *Ba-Kfar Uba-Avoda* (In the Country and At Work, *Hedim*, 5690-1929). As far as their themes, both collections of stories, alongside the posthumously published novel *Ba-Midron* (Downhill, 2004), reflect a world steeped in hardship and crises. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. In years to come, following her death, author Moshe Smilansky (1954) recounted: “Deep inside her soul, Pukhachewsky harboured a lifelong secret, hidden from sight thing, which stealthily ate away at her… Her life, a life forever steeped in content and enterprise, had its moments of loneliness and gloom. Sitting at twilight and fancying no one could hear, she would quietly hum a Russian tune etched into her heart at youth, a song about a certain youth, of a big, tumultuous, rumbling heart… and her singing chords tremble silent and wistful, with deep, poignant grief.” . Pukhachewsky’s great great-granddaughter confirmed the forbidden youthful romance in a conversation. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. In other words, Pukhachewsky’s story reverberates with actual experiences from her own life. In a talk with poet Ora Asael, Pukhachewsky’s great-granddaughter, we found out about a violent incident with her husband, seven years into their marriage, and about Pukhachewsky’s ensuing departure from the Land of Israel (1896) with their joint child, back to her homeland, Russia. And so, the violence that Afia suffers at the hands of her husband may echo Pukhachewsky’s own experience. We, therefore, trace a high level of sisterhood between the author and the maid portrayed in her story. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Pukhachewsky started Dvora’s association for Hebrew teaching and in 1919 earned the first place in the Moshava’s committee election and became the first woman in Zionist culture to achieve such feat. However, despite her win, she forewent the seat and did not chair the committee. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Goni Ben-Israel Kasuto (2015) argues that Pukhachewsky’s Yemenite stories play up and accentuate women’s plight, against that of their Ashkenazi counterparts. She further posits that “the author, at this stage of her writing, wouldn’t take the licence to level open criticism of men-women relations in her own, Ashkenazi, society, and therefore voiced her protest by portraying the state of affairs in the Yemenite society.” (Ibid, 34 [Hebrew]) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. In 29.5.1955, on the eighth anniversary of Yatziv’s death, daily newspaper *Davar* reprised the original piece, this time disclosing the author’s name. Interestingly, editors were indeed indifferent to the blatantly racist attitude even two decades and more later, and expressed appreciation and boast, as the piece was selected to mark the anniversary of Yatziv’s death. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. *Davar Leyladim* was launched just days after this article, on 2.10.1931, as the “children’s supplement”. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. From Program 34 of Ha-Meta-ate theatre, entitled *Hakol Beseder* (“it’s alright”). Premiered on 18.12.1934. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. There is irony in attributing physical strength to women who are very weak. Those with power and needs have created the weakened Yemenite woman both as strong bearing "legs as steel" and as subject without needs who should "settle for little". It is impossible without her, and at the same time she seemingly does not need anything. The roots of this image are found in Goitein's research on Yemenite Jewry (zinger, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. The supposed hotness of the Yemenite woman is extensively explored in Yonit Naaman’s essay (2006), “Everybody Knows Yemenites Are Great in Bed: The Correlation between the Density of a Woman's Pigment and the Title ‘Bimbo’”. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. The question of proper pronunciation of the Hebrew language occupied Zionist culture as early as 1913. The Council of the Hebrew Language had instructed that Hebrew should be based on Sepharadic pronunciation, but at the same time there was a fear that it was too similar to the Arabic pronunciation. Then the question of pronunciation was included in the framework of genetic science and became a hygienic issue. The so-called scientific explanation was that a guttural pronunciation might damage the soft tissues of the throat and vocal cords. It is ironic that the women who were entrusted with domestic hygiene were caught up in a non-hygienic pronunciation. (Di Giulio, 2016.)

    [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. We would like to thank Prof. Tamar El Or for our correspondence discussion, where this idea took shape. The introduction in Revital Madar’s column, “Indelible Stain: How Zionism turned us, Mizrahi women, into eternal cleaners”. *Haaretz*, 2.4.2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Sara Levi, later Sara Levi-Tanai (1910-2005), published already in the early 1930s stories that touched upon her Yemenite identity (*Nadra Ha-Ktnana* [Little Nadra] *15.9.1933, Davar; Temaniyya* [Yemenite] 28.12.1934. *Davar*). Our focus of the representations of maids is not featured in Levi-Tanai’s stories. Therefore, her writing is not reviewed here. However, her pioneering writing represents a female Yemenite subject who writes herself. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. In the memoir cited before, *The Art of Leaving: A Memoir*, Ayelet Tsabari offers an account of events in her life, while stressing her Yemenite origin and interweaving her livelihood as a cleaner, in what transpires as virtually a default option: “The next day I made a few handwritten ads: A young, energetic housekeeper for hire. I posted them on telephone poles and bulletin boards, my phone number hanging in detachable fringes. I was now, like my mother and grandmother before me, a housekeeper. In Israel’s early days, most housekeepers were Yemeni women, working for Ashkenazi families. Back then the term Yemeni in its female form was synonymous with maid.” (p. 237). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)