
Theme and Coherence in Arabesques by Anton Shammas

Knowing the elements of *Arabesques* (1986), authored by Anton Shammas, clarifies the meaning of the ancient art form as well as enlightens the reader on the significance of the novel. His purpose, technique, and message are intertwined with the theme of *Arabesques*. The punning of arabesque fits the heterogeneous design of the book. First of all, an 'arabesque' is a quilted pattern with forms and shapes which are likened to nature. *Arabesques* trace its origins to Muslim artwork where the temples of worship would be decorated by them. Referring to one of the main characters, Michael Abyad, Shammas likens him to one who "has silently woven himself into my life where the magic thread of Shlomith has come undone and unravels in my hands (Shammas 2001). The fabric of society is woven by Shammas as a skilful knitter putting together apparent disparate pieces of material to form a new, synthesized one.

In this work of literature, *Arabesques* undoubtedly points to the root word Arab with which we culturally associate with Palestine, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab world. Shammas avows that "now I find that what I had imagined to have been only a web woven upon the warp of reality with the woof of fantasy was no longer obedient to his maker" (Shammas 2001). Spirituality and intricate beauty are interwoven in *Arabesques* since its context reflects a religious tradition and ultimately transposes a worldview. Muslims take *arabesques* to mean the infinite God and the diversified complexity of the universe. The *arabesques* designs come replete with repetitions, transitions, and uniqueness which encompass three major fields: Art, Calligraphy, Mathematics, and Religion.

In the microcosm, Shammas paints a picture of the relationship between Israelis and Palestinians through the relationship between Yehoshua Bar-On and a Palestinian. Shammas says that at first "they had commenced on mutual reservations, and progressed to loud arguments more" (Shammas 2001). The hot oil and water relationship is not surprising since both contend for land and espouse dissonant principles and religions. Palestine embraces Islam as the official religion while Israel accepts Judaism. Palestinians want to keep their land while Israel claims that Palestine's land belongs to them. Differences do not provoke a willingness to set them aside, but rather the propensity to highlight them is higher. The Palestine Liberation Organization's (PLO) objective is to fight for the rights of the Palestinians who are attacked by the Israelis and to counterattack where necessary. This martial environment presses upon the reader strong social, and religio-political tensions. The warfare that prevails in the Palestinian nation is witnessed time and again through the speakers relating their woeful stories. Palestine is portrayed as, "a real minefield" (Shammas 2001). Bombs, bullets, death foul the air in Palestine. One Palestinian boy, Boolus, actually unearths in a blackberry patch a box of bullets and a firearm near a quarry (Shammas 2001). This image evokes how natural violence and

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firearms are to Palestine – as naturally-growing as a fruit in the soil. Nature is seen as only a revolting reminder of what goes on in Palestine; for example, when Shammas looks at some red flowers, he does not capture the beauty of the flower. “When spring comes we shall see the anemones flowering at Tal Hahl, as red as the blood which was shed by the fighters for Palestine” (Shammas 2001)219). Nature and the Gothicism of Palestine are inextricable. Shammas chooses to ponder the redness of blood which Palestinians have sacrificed in fighting for their territory.

Anton Shammas depicts a gloomier and more realist view of Palestine than that of the Zionists, especially in his acclaimed book, *Arabesques* (1986). He details the macabre nature of wars, hostility, brokenness, toxicomania, attesting to a nation dizzy in turmoil, mystery, and confusion. One of the characters, Uncle Yusef, participates in an illegal, clandestine, smuggling trade where Palestine barter with Israel tobacco for drugs (Shammas 2001). This novel also bears witness to many disappearances, or suspected kidnappings. More repulsive histories of carnages emerge into the light, as the story is told of the *Sabra and Shatila Massacre* perpetrated by *Phalangists*, a radical Israeli Christian sect who murdered Palestinian refugee civilians between 16-18 September, 1982 in Lebanon. During this carnage, thousands die at these Palestinian refugee camps. Shammas mentions the Sabra and the Shatila massacre in west Beirut. It is widely believed that these deaths were reprisal killings for the assassination of political leader Pierre Gemayel. Another Palestinian group held accountable for bloodshed of several Israelis is the *Palestinian Liberation Organization*. The Palestinian Liberation Organization is a group established because of Israeli aggression. In *Arabesques*, Michael Abyad fights under this organization and works for the Palestinian Center for Research. Schulz, one political analyst states that: “*The PLO was formed in Jerusalem by an Arab League in 1964 ... where Palestine is the homeland of the Arab Palestinian people. It is an indivisible part of the Arab homeland and the Palestinian people are an integral part of the Arab nation*”...the Arab people are seen as an organic whole (Schulz 1999)

Hence one sees that the Palestinian vision is to have a land of their own, where Palestine represents an ineludible goal worth fighting and dying for. Palestinian Liberation Organization appeals to a universal Arab Palestinian nationalism where Palestine is viewed as the Promised Land exclusively for Palestinians. Shammas attempts to answer the question, “Who are the Arab Palestinians?” through his novels. First of all, according to him, they speak a language of confusion. On the other hand, Jews believe that what they spoke was the language of Grace. Another characteristic of Arab Palestinians is that they are and will always be a separate entity from Jews. Relating to the death of a Jew and a Palestinian, Shammas reports that “under the black marble lay the two lost men, each in the darkness of his own tomb: a Jew of time and the Arab of place” (Shammas 2001). Time and place are as different as apples and oranges. They cannot be compared or associated together. Just like the Jews see themselves as victims, the Palestinians also view themselves as being terrorized; for example, Hanneh’s father is shot by

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a stray bullet in a spray of Jewish fire against supposed Palestinian terrorists (Shammas 2001). A new Palestinian identity is forged by the inevitable Israeli repossession and renaming of Palestinian lands. Uncle Yusef refers to a place at one time called *Deir El-Kasi*, which is located in Palestine, but then the time is known as *EIKosh*. This name change speaks volumes as Israelis maintain a view at Palestinian colonization, annexing it to Israel's territory. *EIKosh* is an actual Israeli village which has biblical and political roots in Palestine. *EIKosh* means "God is my bow" however the more Arabic *Deir El-Kasi*. Deir is the Arabic word for monastery and Kasi means strength (otherwise rendered monastery of strength or strong fortress).

Shammas narrates some of the stories of the *Arab Rebellion* 1936-1939 where Palestinian Arabs decided that they wanted to put a check on the flow of Jewish immigrants, the possession of land by Jews, and for a more democratic, representative government. The reader sees Muhammad-Kareem who makes up his mind to enlist in the Palestinian army to fight back for his country. He proselytizes to Islam. Mahmood El-Ibraheem, his war name, ends up dying for his terrorist actions where he is hung by British police. *Arabesques* also references the British army's presence which was positioned to stifle riot and maintain the peace in Palestine. Empowered to carry out the functions of the modern UN Peacekeepers by the Palestine Mandate, the British keeps a close surveillance of activities in Palestine. In any case, they try to stamp out rebellion after rebellion, uprising after uprising. Uncle Yusef tells of Abdallah al-Asbah a prime political figure in Palestine who is at the forefront of the Arab Rebellion in Palestine and in the novel, British authorities are searching for him. Arab rebels and the British Army often clashed violently with the British hanging some of the perpetrators and participants of the Arab Rebellion. This *British Mandate of Palestine* or *Palestinian Mandate* authorized British Colonialism thereby making Palestinians powerless on their own soil. The *British Mandate of Palestine* brought Palestine under British rule from 1917 -1948 when the *United Nations* (then the *League of Nations*), provided for Palestine's government. In addition to being a hero during the Arab Revolt of 1936-1939, Abdallah al-Asbah also took part in the Great Syrian Revolt against French troops in Palestine in 1925. Interspersing the narrative with historic figures add to the credibility of the novel as life in Palestine comes to vivid life.

In *Arabesques*, the Palestinians are hostile toward Europeans and react against them. Their British colonists land with their soldiers on Arab soil and immediately begin to torment the Palestinian Arab people. Due to French occupation in nearby Syria and Lebanon, Palestinians are obligated to welcome the French. Francophone words and French culture pop up in the most unexpected places in *Arabesques*. Shammas catches an American singing "bits of English, rather than songs of rebellion in Arabic. He doesn't belong in this place" (Shammas 2001). Because of the bad blood between the English and Arabic, intoning an English song was cacophonous to the ear of an Arab since that would put into question his nativity and allegiance; therefore, that individual would be denied the sense of belonging in the life of Arab Palestine.

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There is a popular notion that the Arabs of Palestine are uneducated, uncultured, and to a certain extent, not human. This idea comes into being since “My Jew” emphasizes that although he has some Arab blood, he is educated, knows enough Hebrew and French to effectively communicate and get by (Hever). Shammas puts distance between himself and the traditional Arab; nevertheless, desiring to mould an Arab who upholds a well-rounded character, not bitter, human and warm, “he does not gallop on the back of a thorough bred mare as was the custom at the turn of the century, nor is he a prisoner of the IDF (Israeli Defence Force), as was the custom at the turn of the state” (Shammas 2001).

In this narrative, Arabs are classified as wild, savage, itinerant nomads who in earlier times transported themselves on horseback – aiming to conquer the world for Islam by sword. Shammas observes a pure Palestinian whose strength lies in his pure simplicity and lack of cynicism (Shammas 2001). These new expectations which classify the new Arab suggest that the current Arabs who populate Palestine are the total opposite. Arabs are quick-tempered, volatile, cold, simple, and idyllic to the point of being unrealistic. The Arab from Palestine that Shammas envisions also does not hold radical beliefs, such that he has to be arrested as a revolutionary rebel by the Israeli forces. More in favour of a Palestine with pacifist Arabs, Shamma imagines an Arab Palestinian who has reconciled himself to Israeli dominance.

Palestinian movement, on the basis of this evidence, endorses widely divergent perspectives from the Israelis which ultimately arraigns them one against the another. Each group claims the land of Palestine as his own territory; each has the same method to get what it wants: by any means necessary, by trick or treachery, by hook or crook. Both perspectives embellish Palestine as the much yearned-for motherland and both attempt to justify their actions, politically and religiously.

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