

FOOLERY AS A MEANS TO PERSONAL SAFETY: THE COMIC APPREHENSION
OF POWER RELATIONS IN EMILE HABIBI'S *THE PESSOPTIMIST*

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Introduction

In the context of asymmetric power relations, it is the weaker side playing the 'wise fool' that often tends to concede defeat for the sake of an absurd meaning of self-preservation. This is what Emile Habibi, a Palestinian 'Israeli' citizen, shows in his highly acclaimed novel *The Pessoptimist*. This article examines what makes Saeed, the protagonist, a laughing stock and his story a book of humor on a grand scale. It examines how humor takes on the protagonist's greatest fears and turns them into political satire.

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The scenario is wittily transformed into a source of momentary pleasure even in the most sordid and unpleasant situations facing the protagonist. The review of available literature in the field of comic narrative art depicting aspects of human experience shows the significance of the comic as a fictional mode used by writers to produce a historical account. However, the article examines how Habibi's fictional mode, used as a sympathetic medium of narration, reflects not only the Arab Palestinian version of modern and contemporary Middle Eastern history but also simulates identical universal issues. In this regard, the novel portrays an image of a powerless world against which a powerful, mechanized force is seen at work. Endowed with the cunning of the 'wise fool' and a keen instinct for self-preservation, Saeed mirrors Habibi's full awareness of the nature of institutional cruelty and the cultural politics governing the dynamics of power relations between the indigenous community as the underprivileged minority and the immigrant Jewish settlers as the privileged majority in the so-called democratic State of Israel. If comedy tolerates the miraculous, *The Pessoptimist* touches on the fantastic. The comic hero must be saved, for when no exit from the Arab-Israeli complex predicament seems possible, the supernatural will be invoked in the nick of time for a long-awaited intervention to correct the course of history. The article shows that the intervention of the supernatural in the interest of the powerless to settle scores with the powerful is a fictional necessity, for, like tragedy, comedy also has its own catharsis, and the novel can be highly marveled at for its therapeutic flavor that seems to smoke-screen the big political issues underlying the human experience depicted.

With few exceptions, the comic apprehension of human experience in modern Arabic fiction, more particularly in the contemporary Palestinian art of fiction, is rarely featured as a mode of writing in its own right. Modern Arab writers in this field would choose to keep consistent as regards the use of mode and tone in conveying their own perception of human experience. They would favor a serious tone and a direct approach to depicting that experience at a time the Arab world was passing thorough uneasy political and social upheavals and the literary landscape was almost stagnating. There are two possible reasons why the comic mode was delayed to be adopted in modern Arabic fiction. One of those reasons may be attributed to the fact that the novel, as an eighteenth-century European creation in prose, was a new literary genre which was not attempted by those writers until fairly recently. In fact, the novel, as a literary genre, was introduced into the Arab world with Napoleon's [colonial] Expedition into Egypt and Palestine. The European novel did employ a variety of narrative modes including the comic.¹ In classical Arabic literature, it was the poets who demonstrated the vast scope of the comic through satire and sarcasm.² Another reason might be that the art of the comic, if compared to the classical mode of narration, is difficult to accomplish as it needs a deeper insight into the human condition and a more comprehensive knowledge of the philosophy of the absurd and the paradoxical. In fact, it took some creative prose writers some time before they felt confident enough in their art to fall back on classical prose literature and get inspired by its universal and timeless aspects. Some modern Arab novelists who benefited from the invasive literary influence coming from the West have produced, to date, a number of narratives using the comic as a fictional mode carrying both personal and national concerns³. In this context, the Palestinian writers are no exception⁴.

However, when it comes to the Palestinian writers telling their own stories, the human experience depicted in a comic manner assumes yet another dimension. The Palestinian writer here does stand out as unique when compared with other writers employing the comic as a fictional mode. The Palestinian story teller needs to portray an image of their people which has been either distorted or misrepresented in other non-Palestinian narratives. For instance, the image of the Arab in Hebrew literature before and after the establishment of Israel as a State has been envisioned with conflicting sympathies. The Arab personae portrayed range from visions of courageous Bedouins astride their noble horses, to fellow Semites, to a moral problem, to an existential nightmare. Such a conflicting image of the Arab persona still fills the distance between early and late Jewish settlers⁵. The angst expressed in various Hebrew narratives towards the Arab as Other, as the enemy across the border and a suspect within the State, is perhaps due to the internalization of the Arab issue and its stereotypical embodiment. The Arab's presence in those narratives filters into the Israeli Jew as a persistent, troubling menace (Pelg, 2005; Hever, 2002; Ben-Ezer, 1999). The tension created between the Arab perceived as an external threat and the Arab minority at home [*sic.*] characterizes the rhythm of both modern Israeli history and modern Hebrew literature (Ben-Ezer, 1999:183).

Against this blurring image of the Arab in Hebrew literature stands a different image of the Arab produced in modern and contemporary Palestinian fiction. It is the Arab Palestinian writing the self as well as their own version of the story which has been concocted or made up by other story tellers. It is the Palestinian vision of themselves as part of the history of the Middle East and its geopolitical reality. Seen through the lens of

narrative discourse, the Palestinian principle motif in most of the narratives seems to have rotated around the need to rebuild their national identity. By reconstructing their collective national memory, many Palestinian story tellers share a similar apprehension of the human experience irrespective of the fictional mode adopted. Their narratives also introduce the Israeli Jew to the untold side of their own story; that is, the side of the defeated whose tale of suffering, no matter how told and retold, has been deliberately denied and erased from the official annals. It is in the encounter between the Hebrew and the Palestinian narratives that readers from both sides need to negotiate what Walter Benjamin calls “the fullness of the past” (1969:254), that is, the complete history which includes the two sides of the one story. Emile Habibi, a Palestinian Arab by birth, is one of those Arab writers whose narrative discourse would handle with comic gloves a grave issue, like the Palestinian Question, and render it able to go beyond the locale and thus touch the universal. Habibi’s literary achievement in this regard is not restricted to his masterpiece, *The Pessoptimist*, for his narrative art encompasses almost all his written and published work.

Humor in the Literature

Humor is, theoretically, an aesthetic transformation of a situation from unconscious to conscious thought. Sigmund Freud claims that the grandeur of humor lies in “the triumph of narcissism – the victorious assertion of the ego’s invulnerability” (1961:162). According to Freud, the individual ego, threatened by forces that would annihilate it, refuses to let go when compelled to suffer. If this situation sustains, the comic takes the form of dark humor that is likely to make a joke out of powerlessness,

loneliness, ignorance and even death, placing them under control for a moment. Thus the forces that would reduce the individual to a nonentity are transformed into a source of pleasure and an object of laughter. If *The Pessoptimist* is looked at through the lens of comedy alone, then Habibi's representation of the internal musings of the protagonist is more likely to be narcissistic than anything else. The protagonist seems to trifle with all the traumatic situations he passes through, and this allows the reader to sublimate tension and feel superior to those situations. In this regard, as Joseph Meeker has put it, "humor is sometimes a part of the comic experience, [for] comedy is an attitude toward life and the self, and a strategy for dealing with problems and pain" (1997:12). Humor, therefore, could become a subversive power to resist the tragic or victim image presented in literary to mention only a few works. In an interview with Joseph Bruchac, Gerald Vizenor states his position on the comic way. "You can't act in a comic way in isolation. You have to be included. There has to be collective of some kind. You're never striving at anything that is greater than life itself...And it's a positive, compassionate act of survival, it's getting along" (1987:295).

The arts, Freud argues in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, are among the palliative remedies the individual uses "to cope with excessive disillusionment and suffering ... in the form of substitute gratification" (1930:15). Such a virtual remedy, offered by the arts in general and humor in particular, allows for an escape from the pressures of stark reality. The comic provides both "the aesthetic pleasure of the joke and the psychological pleasure of fending off suffering" (Freud, 1930:16). In narrative art where the comic is a tool for discovery, the reader often identifies with the narrator who is in control of the situation more than with the character who is not. Habibi's protagonist is of this type of

narrators. In *The Pessoptimist*, Saeed retains a strong hold on his customary self even when the hostile reality of a certain situation requires a different response. However, if the reader cannot apprehend the relationship between the motives and action of the comic character, then there will be some uncertainty about the meaning of existence. Such an uncertainty is very often at the root of dark humor. It speaks to the modern era's concern with alienation, marginalization, instability, and even nihilism, thus implying a subversive attitude towards the structure of authority.

In modern standards, the comic would mean the absurd, the inexplicable and the irrational, all of which are inherent in the human existence and thus pertain to the human experience. In this regard, comedy becomes the language of the absurd because it deals with contradictions, paradoxes, incongruities and asymmetries which recur every now and then along the seemingly disrupted structure of the narrative, thus causing a "pleasurable repetition" (Bergson, 1956:82). However, one of the primary characteristics of the modern novel is that "it has ceased to recognize the categories of the tragic and the comic ... and sees life as a tragicomedy" (Mann, 1968:240). The series of tragicomic episodes in which the protagonist of *The Pessoptimist* finds himself entangled make him more of a tolerant victim than a disgusting villain, for he is gradually transformed from a gullible informer haunted by the Nakba⁶ of his people into a simple Palestinian who, refusing to become a pathetic refugee, has opted for a living, not a life. He only needs to survive and, perhaps, feel free to pursue some kind of personal happiness.

On a deeper level, however, the view of laughter cannot on the whole be credited as an account of personal liberation, but rather as a form of political emancipation. This can be understood when the site involves identity and cultural politics where big issues

such as exclusion and inclusion, identification and *otherization* are part of the conflicting discourses over citizenry and citizenship and all that they involve including ethnic, religious, sexual, and identity politics. According to Zizek, "... in contemporary societies, democratic or totalitarian, that cynical distance, laughter, [and] irony are, so to speak, part of the game. The ruling ideology is not meant to be taken seriously or literally" (1989:124).

However, if power relations through the comic are seen by Slavoj Zizek as a game of trading utterances between the oppressed and the oppressor, they are according to Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism meant to stir the still pool of stereotypical images already in stock. The comic discourse is dialogic and polyphonic as it involves more than one voice in that "game" and dismantles the dominant discourse/s with interactive imagination, thus creating what Bakhtin terms the heteroglossiac voices in the text (1989).

In *The Pessoptimist*, Habibi creates laughter and humor by employing a wise fool who constantly teases the hypocrisy of the Israeli "democratic" State and its institutions, more especially the police force and the intelligence service. The tale insinuates, through irony, that simulation of democracy is not and cannot be a real democracy, and that the fakeness of the State is unquestionably built on the biblical myth of the Promised Land at the expense of the indigenous Arab community whose representative voice is embodied in the remaining Arab minority that ironically struggles to preserve its national identity through mere survival. With the distinctive language play, Habibi employs highly skillfully, the teasing comic is meant to create multiple discourses and overturn the monotheistic in the literature of hegemony and dominance. In comic situations that

address issues beyond the face value of a specific event, the power of teasing seems greater than criticism. To criticize is to reform, while to tease is to mock the pretences within the society. Habibi masters the language game by transforming a personal experience that seems to accept its present mean status into a human experience that undermines what is for what should be. The protagonist, playing the wise fool, constantly refers to historical facts and historic figures and events that constitute the cultural identity of the Arab world in which Palestine belongs. By doing so, albeit through the comic, he does not seem to exhume a dead past to rebury it respectably but to blow life into that past and adhere to it in time of distress for the sake of reconstructing it once again. Humor within the comic as a fictional mode of narration frees the consciousness from the confines of rigid knowledge. It invites the “other” to whom the message underlying the comic situation is addressed for a dialogic or a polyphonic type of mental discourse. Although subversive for the most part, humor also implies a need for some type of dialogue with the other. Comedy and survival are elements in most of the great works of world literature⁷, where the powerless character assuming the wise fool seems to play a safe game with the powerful other without losing self-respect. However, in contemporary Palestinian art of fiction, humor assumes yet an additional level of significance. It occupies the border space between fear and laughter and maintains a safe passage to an existential problem which dwarfs personal survival by far. Saeed (Arabic for happy), who describes himself as ill-fated and luckless feigns happiness through his keen use of irony, pun and language play. This is his tool for hiding pretences and showing apprehension of and insight into the complexity of the unexpected situations his daily life is replete with because of the oppressive authority of the occupation. In *The Pessoptimist* and other tales

by Habibi, humor, laughter and irony turn into one of the strongest weapons of resistance which the Palestinian people make use of to regain their freedom and redefine their existence as distinct cultural beings with a distinct Arab memory that cannot be erased by the institutional cruelty of the State of Israel and its premeditated efforts to falsify the history of Palestine. As an Arab novelist and satirist, Habibi assumes a secure place in the field of humor and political satire. The political and humanitarian vision he dramatically and skillfully crystallizes in *The Pessoptimist* is by far unprecedented when it comes to the study of humor in modern and contemporary Arabic fiction.

The Story

Written originally in Arabic in 1974, Habibi's masterpiece *al-Waqa'i al-Ghareeba fi-Khtifa' Sa'eed Abi an-Nahs al-Mutashael*, was translated into English by Salma Jayyusi and Trevor LeGassick in 1985 as (The Secret Life of Saeed, the Ill-Fated Pessoptimist). It is a novel based on a series of tragicomic episodes, reported in the epistolary style of narration and addressed by Saeed, the protagonist, who is mounting the back of an outer space creature, to someone on earth for the widest publicity possible. The events, unfolded, cover a span of almost twenty years (1948-1967) in the life of an ordinary Palestinian young man who returns, as infiltrator, to Haifa, his birthplace, soon after he discovers with thousands of other Palestinians forced to flee their homeland in 1948 for a temporary secure place in the bordering Arab countries, that they would soon become homeless and refugees there. Having successfully infiltrated back into his city, Saeed chooses to collaborate with the Zionist immigrant settlers' police force for his personal safety. However, he gradually works against all the odds to transform himself

from a mean informer for the Zionist State into a simple man who only needs to survive, no matter what.

Saeed's story - feeding on fact and fantasy, tragedy and comedy, and engulfed in a series of life's little ironies - uncovers the contradictions deriving from the dynamics of the paradoxical situations he finds himself in as he unwillingly fills the distance between the pioneer settler Zionists and the Palestinian resistance fighters. Failing to redeem himself or pay it some homage, despite the two heroic situations, which might have elevated and redeemed him (namely the heroic death of his wife and son, and his imprisonment as an enemy of the State), Saeed also fails to belong or fit in the newly established State. Unable to restore his former despicable role as collaborator or join the struggle for a greater cause, Saeed is caught in the strait jacket of his own foolery. Only then does he choose to escape into the miraculous and the fantastic for salvation, which is denied him on earth. It seems that for the Palestinians to voice themselves in a maddening world devoid of mercy and justice, they need the job to be done by some divine intervention⁸. However, Saeed is in no wise a defeatist, indolent hero. Like Pangloss in Voltaire's *Candide*, Saeed is portrayed not solely as a miscalculating, pathetic figure but also as a character who uncovers much for the reader to discover more about what it means to be a Palestinian exiled in his own country by an oppressor whose main concern is masked behind the claim of "national security of the State". If Saeed does not measure up to be a hero in the traditional sense of the term, the tale does by all means hint to a number of communication failures between the oppressor and the oppressed where the dialogic underlying the comic situation takes a one-way traffic. However, there are some heroic nuances, among which are the candid derision of tolerance as an absurd human

value vis-à-vis immigrant settlers' occupation and institutional coercion and cruelty, and the persistently meticulous attempts at exposing Israel as an ethnic and false democracy in the Middle East.

A Comic Hero with a Vision

As one of the Arab minority that stayed on in the wake of the creation of the State of Israel, Habibi writes as an insider. His vision is exclusively focused on Saeed, a prototype for a passive and comic fictional character, who, despite all the concessions he keeps making to the Israeli security agents he offers to serve as informer, fails to adapt to the new realities imposed on that Arab minority. As the narrator of his own tale, Saeed tells an account of his outspoken search for his personal safety and a muffled yearning for belonging, both of which are presented as part of a political satire based on a comic apprehension of the human condition. Despite that *The Pessoptimist* forces itself as a universal quest for lost justice, when compared to Voltaire's *Candide* or Swift's *Gulliver Travels*, for instance, it remains first and foremost a narrative document in search of a robbed national identity in an immigrant Jewish State flourishing on ethnic cleansing of Palestinians (Chomsky, 2006; Pappé, 2006). "*The Pessoptimist*, by demonstrating the various aspects of a particularly grievous situation, can help to show the ultimate form of aggression. In this sense, the message of the novel is global" (Jayyusi, 2002: xxii).

However, the protagonist's vision seems a blur as the comic and the serious elements of the tale blend. To avoid this blur in vision, Habibi uses Saeed as a wise fool to convey his message in a sarcastic manner. Recalling and inviting key events and historic figures from the remote past of Arabia as well as suggestive quotations from

contemporary Arab and Palestinian writers and poets into the fabric of the narrative may be seen as digressive and disconnected from the plotline of the main story. Yet, when past and present are thrown into the ridiculous and the paradoxical throughout the whole narrative, a unified pattern of political satire emerges so crystal clear. If Saeed is not endowed with the adequate traits of a hero entitled to send a straightforward political message, it is because Habibi has already envisioned him as a quixotic character.

In an interview with Radwa Ashour, Habibi says, "I've chosen for my story a character with many defects which I need to expose in the first place" (1978: 49). Among those defects of Saeed's are cowardice, meanness, opportunism, and collaboration with the enemy, to mention only a few. For instance, deciding to visit his own house being occupied by the new European Jewish settlers, Saeed says: "When I reached the front of our house and saw laundry hanging out, my courage deserted me and I pretended to be taking a stroll along the seashore (Habibi: 47).

Saeed is not the type of a hero we usually encounter in most of the fictional works of resistance literature. He is quite the opposite type of character who seems passive, adaptable, and flexible, although at the end of the tale he fails to reconcile with the new realities he has already tried hard to accept. Habibi describes him as one who keeps his family heritage as regards concession and adaptability to the new situations in the surroundings. Saeed confesses that "for the first time, I felt I was commissioned to complete the message of my father, may his soul rest in peace, and serve the [new] State" (p. 69). From the very outset of the tale, Saeed seems to have made up his mind to collude with the new authorities irrespective of how he feels deep inside. This contradictory feeling will eventually lead Saeed to admit, at least to himself, that he has

become no body. Only then, does Habibi show Saeed's in-depth inclination to reject his being dehumanized. By allowing Saeed's character to develop an awareness of the conflict between the oppressor and the oppressed, Habibi succeeds to pass the message underlying the tale. Saeed, who writes his life story in letter form, is keen enough not to skip any of the tiny, dark details shaping his fate as a distinct cultural being. And here lies his skill in presenting the dim picture of his own human experience in a cunningly sarcastic manner that rises to the level of the insightful farce.

Although Saeed's way of thinking reveals a comprehensive level of his education and knowledge, this, in Habibi's art of fiction, does not seem to guide his behavior. In fact, there is a wide gap between the two, for Saeed's behavior is for the most part a justification of what is. The distance between impulse and response in his character is almost negligible, for when the intelligence officer said, "Hush, I hushed" (p. 92). Even when it comes to love as a human emotion, his response seems mechanical: "I knew that she loves me, so I loved her" (p. 130). Saeed's mind seems not to worry about how and why things happen. He simply accepts things for what they are. A lot of similar events demanding some time to deliberate and consider are met with Saeed's quick, and perhaps instinctive, response. This may explain Saeed's frightened soul, for no sooner does he discover the reality of things and people around him than he retires to his former state, a defeated self. For Saeed, there seems to be a hair-breadth distance between reality and illusion. The image of the enemy he has always magnified turns out to be dwarfish and unexpectedly like anybody else. "When I alighted from the donkey, I found that I was taller than the military governor" (p. 12).

Yet, he soon retains his former state of fear when investigated by the security officer: “We know where you went yesterday,” he yelled at me. If this man is not blind, I said to myself, he certainly must be deaf! I went up to him and screamed in his ear, “I wanted a breath of sea air. Is that forbidden?” He slapped me hard, his aim perfect. I said to myself, not deaf nor blind, but definitely a big man. I therefore decreased my own size and replied, “Ask Adon Safsarsheck about me!” (p. 52).

Saeed’s obsession with fear emanates from his need to keep alive, even if he is made to lose his face when deterred by his jailer. For instance, as he was driven handcuffed by the Israeli police to *Shatta* Prison, the lorry crossed one of Palestine’s richest and most bountiful plains *Marj Ibn Aamer*. I found that we were then at a crossroads between Nazareth and Nahal, passing the plain of Ibn Aamer [*sic.*] “Oh, I see we’re in the plain of Ibn Aamer.” Obviously annoyed, he [the Israeli police officer] corrected me: “No, it’s the Yizrael plain!” “What’s in a name?” I soothed him (pp. 123-24).

It is Saeed’s own survival that resurfaces once he faces an impasse related to the security of the State. His resources seem to come to an end when threatened by the Israeli investigator. Hence, he takes the shortest way possible to keep alive: he plays the opportunist even if it takes the remaining part of his human dignity. Unable to harbor any clear plan of his whatsoever, his opportunistic attitude portrays him as an insect on the wing, ready to land anywhere as he straddles the borderline between what is and what could be. Yet, this does not conceal the assumption that Saeed is a victim, not of his own “heroic” action of course but of his mere existence as an Arab who has remained in his own land which the occupation has summarily crossed out and renamed Israel, thus

denying any existence of another race or people other than that of the Jewish immigrant settler community. Saeed is one of those “others” who need no excuse to be there, and whose very existence conflicts with the settlers’ occupation. “And the papers listed the names of those notables who had been detained by mistake, and others as well. And those others are myself” (p. 62).

Whether this statement is whispered or muffled, it implies that Saeed’s character is a new type of a hero we never encounter in classical resistance literature. Saeed is the new model of a hero whose autobiography, although the backbone of the tale, is also a register of his people’s daily suffering as he records their daily clashes with the new situation that marginalizes those who have remained and denies those in exile the right to return home, thus unveiling a public tragedy against which his private and seemingly improvised scene is dismissed as a tiny and trivial detail.

Into the context of representing the public side of the Palestinian drama, Habibi invites the woman as an active participant in her people’s destiny. The woman character in the tale assumes a heroic proportion rarely attempted in Arabic resistance literature. Granted a symbolic significance, which is highly suggestive, the woman takes the lead in the open confrontation with the institutions of the new State. *Yuaad*, an Arabic name for the one to be returned, is Saeed’s intended and would-be wife. She has been exiled from the homeland and disconnected from Saeed but not from the land. Saeed sells himself to the “new comers” in return for a “false” promise to reunite with her. However, when she returns after twenty years of exile – thanks to the open bridges policy after the six-day war of 1967 – she does this through her daughter, who carries the same name and who crosses the borders to collect some news about her brother, a freedom fighter detained in

one of the Israeli jails. She does not concede defeat and therefore insists on exercising her right to return home when the police carry her away, as they did to her mother twenty years ago, to the borders. Against this telling example, the frightened Saeed stands as foil to Yuaad who braves the police force and decries their brutality as usurpers of a land not theirs.

Another woman character who is equally heroic is *Baqiya*, the Arabic name for the one who has remained, who marries Saeed and gives birth to their son, Walaa (Arabic for loyal), who ironically turns against the State and dies with his mother as martyrs who refuse to surrender. Walaa, an offshoot of the submissive Pessoptimist family flouts the rule, violates his father's heritage, and stands for the new generation of freedom fighters to whom due homage is paid. The heroic deaths of Walaa and his mother, Baqiya, strike a sharp contrast with Saeed's candid submissiveness and cowardice, but subsequently their death effects an unexpected change in his behavior and attitude towards life. Although he is not gifted to act as heroically as they have done, his volitional movement to mount the creature from outer space, sit on the stake, and deplore the new authority is unquestionably a shift in his character. Those women characters, his own son, and the freedom fighters of his people he has met in prison unearth the unstained seed of patriotism in him and compel the reader to rethink Saeed's earlier status more positively. It is when he goes mad, at the end of the tale, that Saeed restores some of his freedom and regains our recognition of him as a the prototype of a heroic figure.

It is in Habibi's smart use of irony, which multiplies at crucial moments, that the story goes beyond Saeed as a fictional character to embrace the human condition at large. Habibi borrows Saeed's penetrating eye-sight, which excludes no detail, to scratch

beneath the surface of the new reality and uncover all the intolerable events in the life of his people. The journey taken by Saeed from the very outset of the tale is a search for a roadmap to personal safety and symbolically to a wider level of apprehension of the Palestinian need for salvation and freedom. The harsher reality slaps him in the face, the further Saeed goes on into that seemingly hopeless search. In this context of the targi-comic, Saeed's message cannot go unnoticed. It should be noted that the tale was well received by the Jewish readers, for it reminded them of similar Jewish stories in the world of the "Gentiles" during the Jewish Diaspora (Amit-Kochavi, 2000).

The Need for Divine Intervention

The comic apprehension of power relations as conveyed in Saeed's letters sent to some anonymous addressee, presumably a probable savior, is a telling account of the amount of frustration the protagonist transforms into a source of black humor. In fact, the first would-be savior Saeed implores for protection is ironically a Jewish immigrant settler, one of the Zionist pioneers involved in deporting those Palestinians who could succeed in returning to their land and property as infiltrators from the neighboring Arab countries they have found themselves in as refugees after their forced mass exodus. It is Saeed's father, a former collaborator, who recommends that his son seek the assistance of that Jewish officer. The officer appreciates the father's services to the settlers and gives Saeed a ten-pound banknote to manage himself until he is offered a job in the service of the new authority. "I was offered a job: a leader of some laborers' unit within the Federation of Palestine Workers" (p. 93).

Frustrated by the experience and the false expectation he may have built some of his rosy dreams on, Saeed starts a new search for another savior. This time, he looks upwards for some supernatural power and trifles with the science of astronomy: “Since that moment, I have been dreaming of a day when some history book immortalizes me as it did our ancestors and great astronomers” (p. 82).

Habibi uses irony to ridicule Saeed’s wishful thinking to reach the supernatural through the abuse of astronomy as science. Afterwards, the irony multiplies as Saeed and the imagined savior meet in person. A lonely figure now, Saeed declines for the first time in his life to offer any further services to the State. He is deemed an outlaw and an enemy of the State. He is placed under home arrest and is often detained for no reason. At the end of the tale, when Saeed feels that the road to salvation on earth is of no avail, he conjures up the supernatural and deludes himself that only a divine intervention would put an end to his complex situation. The tale ends up with Saeed seating himself on a sharp-tipped stake, not responding to those who beg him to get down. Saeed’s lunatic behavior, as reported by the State medical advisor, leads him to the mad house where he dies. Yuaad, who comes from Beirut and crosses the bridge over River Jordan to pay him another visit closes the last scene rather ironically: “Well, so he is resting now and has left everyone else in peace” (p. 162). Has he really? The gentleman, the addressee, who has also come to collect Saeed’s letters for publicity suggests another meaning to the ending of the tale.

Saeed’s foolery as a means to self preservation fails to turn him into a nonchalant figure, for he remains in the eyes of the Israeli police force a suspect who deserves derision more than sympathy and compassion. Nonetheless, in his passivity and

resignation as a little man, Saeed succeeds to narrate his own version of the Arab-Jewish struggle, albeit in an ironic tone in which tragedy and comedy intertwine as two inseparable sides of the human experience which no other narrative mode could have equally communicated. As a serious humorist par excellence, Habibi succeeds to depict Saeed's human experience through the comic apprehension of power relations.

Conclusion

As a Palestinian "Israeli" citizen, living before and after the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, Emile Habibi, both as artist and man, used to envision the Arab-Jewish experience as a model of probable co-existence in Palestine in the face of hatred, enmity, dispersion and ethnic / religious fanaticism. In all his work, more particularly *The Pessoptimist*, Habibi holds the plane mirror of his people's suffering for the Israeli other to see their own reflection in it. Despite all the reservations some Arab and Jewish critics may have had to the contrary, the tale insists on this side of identification between the two peoples. The comic apprehension of power relations between the powerful and the powerless in the context of identity politics involves a call for the victimizer to cease seeing themselves as eternal victims of the Jewish Diaspora in search of a homeland. No homeland can ever be built on the ruins of another people's homeland, and no repatriation of the homeless Jewry can ever flourish at the expense of the Palestinian people becoming homeless and / or second-class citizens even in their own birthplace.

Although Habibi's *The Pessoptimist* does not pretend to have conjured up a poetic solution to the complex Arab-Israeli struggle on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean, it, like all genuine literature, does matter in the real world. Although Saeed's experience

might be viewed as “a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing”⁹, I strongly believe that Habibi’s way of narrating that experience has made the tale highly significant. It is the tale of existence on the part of the Palestinian who has been denied that natural right to belong to a homeland for over sixty years so far. The story of Palestine as the homeland of the homeless Jewish has been told single-handedly in the canon of Hebrew literature. Habibi tells the Palestinian side of the same story where geography, history, and cultural heritage are all inseparably and inextricably bound. Saeed, chosen as the ‘wise fool’ to tell that side of the story, is no less impressive than any pathetic or serious Jewish storyteller narrating their side of that story in Hebrew. Habibi may have been considered by some readers as a provoker of anxiety, anger, and probably more, yet his skilful use of the comic as a sympathetic medium carrying the small concerns of the ordinary and the simple people cannot go unfelt when all that together becomes a matter of existence and an attitude towards life. The Palestinian existential experience, as ironically dramatized and comically apprehended in *The Pessoptimist*, rises to the level of a serious quest for identity, both cultural and political. The comic apprehension of the dynamics of power relations, as communicated in this novel, is likely to invite comparison with great works of political satire in world literature.

Footnotes

* This article is an extended version of a paper with the same title presented at the 20th *ISHS Conference on Humor* organized by The International Society of Humor Studies, Alcalá de Henares, Madrid, Spain, 7-11 July 2008.

¹ *The Pessoptimist* invites comparison with Voltaire's *Candide* (1759) which Habibi gives recognition in his novel, and the Czech Jaroslav Hasek's *Good Soldier Schweik* (1923).

² Reference is made to the Umayyad Islamic Empire (661-750) and to poets, like Al-Akhtal, Al-Farazdaq and Jareer, using the comic and the invective as a tool for political satire.

³ Forerunners in this regard are the Egyptian writers: Ibrahim Abdel-Qadir el-Mazini and Tawfiq el-Hakim.

⁴ Emile Habibi does not stand alone in this field; Anton Shammas and Azmi Beshara and others follow in similar footsteps.

⁵ Reference is made to three waves of Jewish settlers in Palestine known in Hebrew as *Aliyas* and the *Sabras*, a Hebrew term for those Jews who were born in Israel.

⁶ *Nakba* is the Arabic word for the aftermath of the massacres and the forced mass expulsion of the Palestinian civilians from Palestine in 1948 caused by the Zionist armed factions, namely the *Haganah*, *Stern* and *Argon* on the eve of creating the State of Israel in Palestine in 1948.

⁷ Reference to European works of fiction by the Spanish Cervantes, the French Rabelais, the English Fielding and Thackeray, and the German John Paul, for instance.

⁸ "Divine Intervention" refers to the title of a movie story (1997) produced by Elia Suleiman, a Palestinian writer-director living in the state of Israel. Suleiman conveys a farcical absurdity of life in the Palestinian Occupied Territories by using a series of surrealistic vignettes. The film shows that the deadly conflict between the Arabs and the Israelis in Palestine over land and identity cannot be resolved without the aesthetic intervention of some divine power.

⁹ Taken from William Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*, Act V, scene 5, lines 19-28.

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