Israel and its literature offer a unique case study in understanding post-colonialism and Orientalism. Its short history as a nation is fraught with conflict, not only with the surrounding countries, but also within its own boundaries. When studying the literature, where does one begin? Starting with the creation of Israel, though seemingly the optimal choice, mars the understanding of the interplay between the Arabs and the new Israelis, especially since some of those new Israelis are Jewish Arabs. This paper is an exploration of various works that focus on the land of Israel, some before the creation of the Jewish State, and the relationships of the people who inhabit it.

Yitzhak Shami’s *The Vengeance of the Fathers* tells the story of tribes of Arabs in what would become Israel, as it details the fall of Sheikh Il-Shawarab of Nablus. It is written in a time where labyrinthine stone walls did not separate the city, but rather the inhabitants were free to traverse the land. Shami first explains Arab tradition. Without this, the full weight of Abu Il-Shawarab’s actions would have little impact on the reader. Abu Il-Shawarab is designated as the flag-bearer for the representation of the prophet of Nebi Youssef and the Nablusites on the pilgrimage to the Mo’ssam.[[1]](#footnote-1) On the way there, the Neblusites and the Hebronites begin a feud, each interpreting the other’s actions as disrespectful. In a culture that prizes honor and dignity, this feud is intolerable, especially on a holy pilgrimage. To make matters worse, the two flag-bearers of the each respective group feed off the hatred of their people as they attempt to calm them down. The feud becomes violent at their holy destination where Abu Il-Shawarab kills his fellow flag-bearer, Abu Faris, and is forced to choose between exile and certain death. He picks both; first exile and then death when he decides, after a life among the lowest forms in Egypt; he must return to his homeland and atone for his actions.

Shami does not delve into the psyche of Arabs, but rather uses the events of the story to explain the honor code and justice of Arab tradition. The Hebronites are declared to be “a rebellious lot, and such is not the way of the Arabs.”[[2]](#footnote-2) They create the trouble but it is the Nablusites who fuel the fire unnecessarily. Both tribes go against everything the Arabs value in their attempt to satiate their pride. The slaying of Abu Faris by Abu Il-Shawarab, however, is worse. Though facing the Hebronites meant certain death, the disappearance of Abu Il-Shawarab is unacceptable. The Arabs of the story, both Hebronites and Neblusites, are not quick to forget the disastrous events of the pilgrimage. The Hebronites planned to force Abu Il-Shawarab and the family he left behind into poverty, forcing them into a state of unrest, and strike when the time came. “The true Arab ‘takes blood vengeance after fifty years and says I’ve been quick’.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Abu Il-Shawarab’s decision to flee only created torture that was inflicted on both him and his family. His hiding built up the desire for revenge more so than had he accepted his fate upon the slaying of his foe.

Understanding the Arab code of honor is crucial to understanding the relationship between Arabs and Jews.[[4]](#footnote-4) In Shami’s story, the Arabs and Jews only have one outright encounter. Shami’s characters lament the loss of tradition in the newer generations who work as hired hands for the Jews. The Jews are depicted as indifferent to their crops and have little to do with the actual planting and reaping of them. The Jews pay well, however, so the Arabs take the positions. This leaves them little time to do much else than tend to crops, since they have to raise both the Jewish crops and their own. The newer generations, then, are the ones who are unable to go on the religious pilgrimages. It is a glimpse at where Judaism and Islamism could intersect, but does not. The pilgrimage in this story is one dedicated to the prophet Moses, who is seen as a friend of Allah in Islamism, but Judaism claims that the Muslims have the story wrong and Moses never crossed the Jordan and the tomb the pilgrims visit does not belong to Moses. The Jews have even worked to convince their Arab workers of this.[[5]](#footnote-5) This hints at the fact that though the spiritual differences mar the relationships between them, many overlook this and, as is shown in other works, they ignore it altogether in the bonds of friendship.

This story may not be full of insight of the Jewish culture, but to understand the conflict between Israelis and the surrounding Arab nations, one has to consider what was taken away. Shami’s story shows a land that, though the rich were the Jews, was peacefully co-inhabited. The Jews and Arabs let each other be and instead, the conflict the reader is forced to grapple with is one between tribes of Arabs.

Building upon the code of honor Shami takes great pains to illustrate is the work of filmmaker Danny Verete in his movie, *Yellow Asphalt: Three Desert Stories*. It is a collection of three vignettes surrounding the interaction of the Jahalin Bedouins and the Israeli Jews who live near and in the Negev Desert. The film is based on true events, and in an attempt to portray an objective viewpoint, Verete lived with the Jahalin Bedouins for some time. This gave him insight into the mindset of the Bedouins, something Shami left for the reader to discover in his work.

The first vignette is the shortest. In it, two Jewish truckers hit and kill a little Bedouin boy and then attempt to dump his body. They have trouble starting their truck and are unable to flee the scene before members of the Bedouin tribe come looking for the boy. In a silent, awkward stand off, the Jews are forced to face their actions and trade a tire for their escape.

The second vignette shows an unhappy Bedouin couple, where the wife contemplates running away with their two daughters. She has asked the elders of the tribe for a divorce but it is not granted. She daydreams the events of what might occur, and even though she is killed in her vision, in the end, she flees. In her vision the viewer sees who she is – a German woman who fell in love with a Bedouin and was unable to cope with the cultural difference forced upon her.

The last vignette, and the most related to Shami’s depiction of Arab honor, is about a married Jewish man, Shmuel, who has hired a Bedouin man, Abed, to help with the farm and a Bedouin married woman, Suhilla, to help with the housework. Shmuel and Suhilla have been having an affair for the past two years, and Abed has known about it the whole time. One day, they are caught in the throes of their love by some young boys from the Bedouin tribe. When Suhilla goes back to her husband that night, he beats her and she runs away to her lover’s house. Shmuel refuses to leave his wife and children for her, and orders Abed to kill her. When Abed cannot, Shmuel kills her himself. The rest of the vignette is a depiction of what happens to Abed who went against his allegiance with the tribe, first in not speaking of the affair, second by not informing them of her murderer, and third by not killing Shmuel. Abed’s inability kill anyone, failing to shoot both Suhilla and Shmuel, is a dishonor to the tribe and eventually forces him into exile.

This movie illustrates the fear Jews have of the Bedouins, especially of the men. To the Bedouin tribe, as it was with the Arabs in Shami’s short novel, justice is decided amongst themselves. Crime debts must be paid, and that is especially true if it is a family member that went against the tribe. The Jews had everything and, in many ways, seemed untouchable. That is, until one was singled out.

The German woman from the second vignette, and Suhilla from the third both show how the Jews regard Bedouins on a singular level and how the Bedouins regard outsiders. Essentially, they mean nothing. They are not as important as the tribe as a whole, or as a Jewish family. The Jews are quick to exploit the Bedouins, but the Bedouins are not so forgiving of the Jews either.

This movie shows that there is a greater respect for women in the Jewish culture than in the Bedouin traditions. Though neither woman, the German in the second vignette or Suhilla, seem to be respected at all, the German woman is only helped by an outside bus driver. As she is running away with her daughters, she meets the bus driver and he hides her until one of the girls makes a noise giving away their location. Then, he fights her husband as she makes her escape. In the third vignette, Suhilla’s well-being is a concern of Shmuel’s wife and the police. Even though they know the Bedouin’s have a different way of taking care of their people and a different justice system, they still try to make sure Suhilla’s killer is found.

If anything, this movie errs on the side of Jewish compassion over Bedouin compassion. As Shami showed, the Arabs have a code of honor and prestige.[[6]](#footnote-6) The movie however, turned this into a cold sense of revenge. The Bedouins do what is best for the tribe as a whole and they are depicted as a group that obeys the elders, but the Jews are still the more compassionate group. The Jews care for their own and for the Bedouins, at least to make sure they are not dead.

The Jews in the movie appear to be of European descent. This could be the reason for the hostility between the Jews and the Bedouins. There is no mutual understanding of Arab culture, especially not of the tribes. The short novel, *The Hill of Evil Council*, by Amos Oz only adds to this sentiment. The feeling that this movie, though possibly unintentional, and Oz’s story emit are those of Orientalist values. The Arabs, be they Bedouin tribes or not, are the “other” and the Jews, especially in Oz’s novella, are “westernized”, or desiring of becoming so.

Amos Oz is one of the best known Israeli writers in the “western” world. His work is brilliantly crafted, and to someone who is not looking for it, deceptively Orientalist. What Oz does in his short novel *The Hill of Evil Council* is to show intentionally how the British were Orientalist, but in doing so, he lays the groundwork for a new Orientalism.

The story is about Hanan, a veterinarian who moved to Palestine prior to the World War II. He falls in love with Ruth and they have one son, Hillel. It centers on the relationship between Hanan and Ruth and the British High Commissioner’s society and the settlement of Tel Arza. Hanan is an idealist, and his wife is a romanticist. They attend a ball at the High Commissioner’s estate which is the last place Hanan sees Ruth before she runs away with a British officer.

Ruth desires all things “Western” and she would not have married Hanan had the ship she was supposed to take to America not been rerouted due to the war. She loves the British officers and ladies, while they look down upon her husband. Hanan was mistaken for a servant when he was playing doctor to help Lady Bromley. Later, Lady Bromley rebukes him for trying to undress her as he waited in vain for his wife to return.[[7]](#footnote-7) Hanan had loosened her corset so she could breathe after fainting. She did not trust him and instead was attempting to lure him to her bedroom. However, Hanan is not to be pitied completely.

Hanan refers to the new Jewish settlers as pioneers, a term that denotes that they are the first to arrive. The truth is that not only are there already Arabs in the land, but there are also Jewish Arabs occupying the space. The Arabs are mostly referred to by Hanan as shepherds. He sees them only as nomads and not as a stationary people.

Hillel, the impressionable youth, is brought up to refer to them as Orientals.[[8]](#footnote-8) He believes that “our land belongs to us, both according to the Bible and according to justice,”[[9]](#footnote-9) which is a Zionist thought, but what about the Arabs already there? Who is bringing them justice? Oz creates the European Zionist sentiment so skillfully, that it flows too easily into the Orientalist ideals already in place.

Worse than Hillel, though, is the character of Mitya, who has helped shape the mind of the little boy. Mitya believes “all Arabs, nomads and peasants alike, were simply Israelites who had been forcibly converted to Islam and whom it was [his] duty to now rescue.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Though this idea is not widely held by members of the community, combined with Hillel’s (which is widely accepted) it only exaggerates the idea that there is something wrong with the Arabs, and that they are all Islamic and need to be converted.

Oz’s story is not to be discredited, however. The sentiments that shine through were and are truly felt by citizens in Israel. The Institute for Palestine Studies, condensing the report by Israel Shahak, asks the question “Who is a Jew?”[[11]](#footnote-11) To understand the Orientalism, one has to look at the discrimination that occurs so blatantly in Israel.

The relationship between the Arabs and the Jews that Shami highlighted, Verete expanded on, and Oz bypassed as menial is exactly what the book *Keys to the Garden* tries to refigure. This book is a collection of short stories, excerpts from novels, memoirs, and poems that were written by Mizrahim Jews. They are Jewish Arabs who have been pushed into the middle of the Israel and Arab conflicts. Ashkenazic Jews “orientalized” the Mizrahim in order to better fit into the “west”.[[12]](#footnote-12) However, because of the creation of Israel and the tensions it created in the Arab world, the Mizrahim were no longer welcome in their native countries either. This is made clear by the stories in this book.

Nissim Rejwan details his life in Iraq and the inevitable transition to Israel in *Passage from Baghdad*, an excerpt from his memoir. In Iraq, Rejwan worked in a bookstore that sold British and American literature. His friends were a mix of Jewish and non-Jewish Iraqis. Even as World War II and the conversion of Palestine to Israel occurred, these friendships went unaffected. It was not until Rejwan chose to move to Israel that contact ceased. The move occurred because his job was whittled down to part-time and he was unable to pay the bills. Tensions were rising between nations and though his friends disagreed, he left. Before his departure, his friend pointed out, “If you imagine for a moment that you are nearer, in outlook and temperament, to a Jew, say from Germany, Russia, or Poland, than you are to me or to Iraqis in general then you are quite simply mistaken.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Rejwan was Iraqi. It did not matter what religion, his culture was Iraqi. To leave his home country meant that Rejwan was walking into a life of second-class citizenry.

This was the same friend who had told him that Jews were the “salt of the earth.”[[14]](#footnote-14) The Jews were all over the world and rightfully so. They provided a flavor for each of their respective nations and to take that away not only makes the former nation a little blander, but too many concentrated into one space will not work. Just as too much salt makes a food inedible, too many Jews makes a nation unlivable. Rejwan’s Iraqi friends believed in a democracy and did not see how Israel would last being that its government was infused with religion. His group of friends was an exception, though, and if he had not left voluntarily, he may have been pushed out as others were.

Rejwan’s memoir also shows what happens to one who moves to Israel. Getting any correspondence out to his Iraqi friends was improbable, but getting it back was impossible. For them to be linked to Israel in any way meant career suicide and most of them were government officials. The point is Rejwan represents a group of Israelis who were sent into exile, more or less. Unlike the European Zionists, the Ashkenazic Jews, many Mizrahim were not seeking sanctuary. The Mizrahim were banished in a way to Israel, and that is clear in the work of Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff.

Kahanoff was born in Eqypt to parents of Iraqi and Tunisian descent. Her work in this book highlights the loneliness that exile brings. The essay “A Letter from Mama Camouna” shows the generational differences on opinion of the creation of Israel. It goes beyond that, though, to illustrate what Israel meant to the Mizrahim. To the survivors of the Holocaust, all sympathy went out. They were, after all, members of a family, but the family ties were strongest in the Middle East and North Africa. They were not disrupted and destroyed by German Nazis, but the creation of Israel changed everything. The choice to leave was disappearing, and even Jews in Egypt were being pushed out. When the Mizrahim arrived in Israel, they lost the family bond. They lost connection to those they loved and some felt they lost their past as they condensed their lives down to fit into their new home. Letters were all they had and even those stopped as children tried to assimilate into Israeli culture. To many Mizrahi, Israel meant loneliness.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Kahanoff and Rejwan are only two samples of the many Mizrahi authors and poets in the book *Keys to the Garden*. These pieces echo the same sentiments, Israel meant exile and exile meant loneliness. They are the forgotten of the story of Israel. They are the Jewish Arabs that were at peace in their own land until Zionists, with the help of the Western world, disturbed everything.

None of these works, the books or the movie, are complete representatives of Israeli literature. Nor are the three chosen here complete, but they are a start. To understand Israeli culture, one needs to understand every aspect. This includes the Orientalism in it, the “Westernization” of it, the feelings of exile, the tensions with Arabs, and the compassion for Arabs. What is popular in the “West” is the work of writers like Amos Oz who continue to feed the idea that Israel is full of Ashkenazic Jews, leaving Mizrahim forgotten. Sephardic Jews, of which Shami was one, are also forgotten. It is easier to identify with a nation like Israel if they are similar, and Israel needs to belong in the “West” because they have ostracized themselves from the “East” and “Middle East”.

There is a power struggle that these works highlight between the Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews, as well as between Israelis and the Arabs. The Israeli and Arab conflicts are obvious to most people. Anyone who reads a newspaper sees the struggle between the two. The links Israel had to the Western world allowed them to be victorious and they made sure they stayed that way, but who paid the cost? Is this a religious power struggle? This only furthers the Orientalism between the Israelis and the Arabs.[[16]](#footnote-16)

If we re-examine Shami’s story, we see that friction between Judaism and Islamism. The Jews hire Muslims who then cannot observe their festivals and traditions in order to still get paid. Not only that, but the Jews denounce certain religious passages the Muslims hold to be true. For non-Jewish Arabs working for Jewish employees, one would get the impression that Arabs are more like rag dolls and are disposable. The film’s last vignette displays this as well, but it also complicates it.

Though Shmuel, in *Yellow Asphalt,* went unpunished, the fear he and his wife had of the Bedouin tribe show that not all the power lays within Israel. The desire for more control and more power rises up out of this fear even, but because the Bedouin’s are able to collectively frighten the Jewish people around them, they are often left to their own devices. One could argue that Shmuel wanted Suhilla dead because she would ruin his family, but it goes deeper than that. If he is caught with her, or if the Bedouins even suspect it, they are both dead.

The power struggle, though, is even more apparent if one reads works like those of Oz and puts them next to the Mizrahi literature that is collected in *Keys to the Garden*. On their own, they represent a group of Israelis that have been wronged. The Ashkenazi were not welcome in Europe. The push for Palestine was only a collective effort because England also wanted them out. Jews were Oriental – they were closer to the Middle Eastern Arabs than they were to the European Christians in the minds of “Westerners”.[[17]](#footnote-17) Or so the “West” thought. Really, even though they could trace family roots hundreds of years back to the “Middle East”, they were European and were more different than similar to their Mizrahi cousins.

The books show that religion alone cannot hold a nation together. When one group is ignored, the sanctuary becomes an exile. It is like post-slavery United States. Though there are many differences, this is one way the Ashkenazi have been able to fit into the “Western” culture. They have become the oppressors in their mission to never again be oppressed. The Mizrahi have become the former slaves and the Ashkenazi the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant plantation owners.

The short novels by Shami and Oz, paired with the movie *Yellow Asphalt*, and combined with a mix of Mizrahi literature begin the road to understanding the complexities of Israeli culture and the Orientalism that exists within its own boundaries and spills out into the rest of the “Middle East”. It gives a dose of history to understand the changes of the land, itself. To understand Israel and the tensions of the land around it, one must first look at the land before Israel was there and the relationship of Jews to Arabs at that time. Only then, can one break down the Orientalist walls perpetuated by the relationship of Ashkenazi to the “West” and begin to understand the clashes and connections between the Arab cultures and the Israelis. However, one cannot ignore those Orientalist views either, because those views helped get Israel where they are today and any representation of Israeli literature without Ashkenazi works fails, just as one solely comprised of Mizrahi pieces does too. I fear that even here, I have failed to provide a worthy representation because not all of the sects are equally represented. Perhaps that is another project.

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1. Mo’ssam is the festival of pilgrimage to the tomb of Nebi Moussa (the prophet Moses). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Yitzhak Shami, “The Vengeance of the Fathers,” in *8 Great Hebrew Short Novels,* ed. Alan Lelchuk and Gershon Shake (New Milford: The Toby Press, 2005), 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Yitzhak Shami, 151. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Some Jews are Arabs but to keep it simple, this separation will be noted as such unless otherwise noted. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Yitzhak Shami, 69-70. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Alan Lelchuk and Gershon Shake, ed., *8 Great Hebrew Short Novels,* (New Milford: The Toby Press, 2005), xvi. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Amos Oz, “The Hill of Evil Counsel,” in *8 Great Hebrew Short Novels,* ed. Alan Lelchuk and Gershon Shake (New Milford: The Toby Press, 2005), 358. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Amos Oz, 323. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Amos Oz, 320-321. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Amos Oz, 339. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. “Who is a Jew?” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 2, No. 4, (Summer 1973): 151. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Aziza Khazzoom, “The Great Chain of Orientalism: Jewish Identity, Stigma Management, and Ethnic Exclusion in Israel,” *American Sociological Review* 68, (2003): 482. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Nissim Rejwan, “from Passage to Baghdad,” in *Keys to the Garden,* ed. Ammiel Alcalay (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1996), 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Nissim Rejwan, 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff, “A Letter From Mama Camouna,” in *Keys to the Garden,* ed. Ammiel Alcalay (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1996), 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Edward Said, “Orientalism Reconsidered,” *Cultural Critique* 1, (Autumn 1985): 99-100. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Aziza Khazzoom, 482. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)