



International Conference on Social Sciences in the Modern Era

21 – 23 February 2024

Birmingham, United Kingdom

The Oriental Men and Women in the Short Stories of Ya'akov Hurgin (1898-1990)

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Abstract

Yaakov Hurgin was born in 1898 in Neveh Shalom, a Jewish quarter in Manshieh, now part of Tel-Aviv-Yaffo, at that time part of Arabic Jaffa. His parents came from Czarist Russia in 1890, the time of the first wave of Zionism. As a boy he played with Arab friends, from whom he learned the local Arabic dialect, and saw the daily life of Arabs in Jaffa. He went to "Ezra" school founded by German Jewish organization, where he acquired his knowledge of German and French, and continued his education in the seminary for teachers in Jerusalem. Just as he finished his studies the WW1 began. Hurgin, who was an Ottoman citizen, was mobilized into the Ottoman army as an interpreter, since he spoke Turkish, German and local Arabic (and also Hebrew and English). In this role he served at the front in Syria and Lebanon becoming acquainted with Arabs of different social status and different Islamic sects.

After Palestine was conquered by the British, Hurgin was attached, again as an interpreter, to a British military hospital in the Sinai peninsula. The unit was in charge of wounded Turkish military prisoners. The staff included doctors and male nurses, Armenians, Sudanese and Christian Arabs, among whom were drug takers and homosexuals.

When he was released from the army Hurgin moved to Tiberias, at that time populated by 1920 he Sephardic and Ashkenazi religious non-Zionist Jews. His first collection of short stories, published in 1929, contains a gallery of Tiberian oriental Jewish and Arabic portraits. In 1930 Hurgin moved to Tel-Aviv where he worked as the editor of the rightist journal for children Haboker Liladim. In 1943 he published two volumes of stories, most of which are again portraits of oriental Jews and Arabs.

Hurgin's rightist political orientation, his non-ideological stance toward the Zionist project and his interest in characters who were so far from the Zionist reality – these can explain the wall of misunderstanding between him and the contemporary literary establishment.

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In contrast to pre- and post 1948 Hebrew literature, most of it written without close acquaintance of Oriental life and people, in Hurgin's stories Arabs and Oriental Jews – men and sometimes women - are the main characters, and as such their complicated inner world and relationships is the center of story. They are described neither as a Romantic model for Zionism nor as a dangerous goy, not even as a sexual object, but – just the same as Jews who came from Europe - as 1 human beings (not a great compliment in this context), having weaknesses, drives, desires, dreams of love, fears, ambitions, illusions, jealousy, hypocrisy, narcissism and self deception. But the reader is invited to feel for them. The depiction of Arabic (as well as Jews) characters is comic, sometimes grotesque, but always touching. In situations of moral dilemma the consciousness of the character becomes a scene of deceptions game, where the part that desires to sin somehow succeeds in achieving a sort of ""transaction permit"" from the part in charge of morality and dignity. The Arabs in Hurgin's stories are not general images of the whole Arabic world and mentality, but differentiated citizens of the Ottoman Empire or the British Mandate. They are not all shepherds and farmers. Some of them live in a city or a town (Jaffa, Balbek); they are either Shi'i or Suni, either modernized or traditional, they can be Palestinians, Lebanese, Armenian, Turkish, Sudanese. This differentiation prevents the reader from understanding the character as a representation of the entire Arabic or Palestinian mentality. Zionism and other modern European ideas (such as Humanism and Equality) are alien and hardly comprehensible to the oriental characters. This is perhaps Hurgin's implied criticism of the over serious ideological frame of mind which the Zionist pioneers brought with them from Russia. Hurgin's descriptions of the Palestinian milieu and way of talking is more authentic than any other such description in pre 1948 Hebrew literature. He inserts in the text Arabic words and idioms and refers to concrete items which only local people are acquainted with. This makes the reader feel that the writer has a close knowledge of the external and the internal world which he depicts. And indeed, until lately Hurgin was exceptional in his literary description of Arabic men and women."

Keywords: Orient, literature, humanism

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