

Ofra Matzov-Cohen

"Manly beauty that could steal hearts": Attributes of the Levant in the land of Israel in A man and his house perished by Asher Barash

Abstract

The concept of the Levant looks to meanings in geography and sociology, bringing these to bear on images of society in the Mediterranean Basin. The term involves a pre-conceived outsider's perspective on the Levant and the different ways in which its social makeup can be represented. A large number of early twentieth-century works of Hebrew literature include story arcs based in the Land of Israel and neighboring countries. The Levant often provides the setting in the writing of Asher Barash (1889-1952), where the ploy seems to serve two main purposes: one is to provide a realistic background in keeping with the historical period. The second aim, which comes to the fore in Barash's Eretz Israel novellas, is to take advantage of the pied human landscapes of the Levant as a counterpart to the complexity of the inner world of his characters. The present study sets out to examine the literary devices and techniques used in portraying the Levant and the Land of Israel in Asher Barash's A Man and His House Perished (*Ish u-veto nimhu*) (1933). My aim is to examine the manner in which Barash resorts to attributes of the Levant as an expression of the multi-faceted character of the protagonist, Boris Keldam, and his relationship with those around him. The hypothesis will be tested by focusing on this and "As a City Besieged" (*Ke-ir netsurah*) (1935), another work by Barash in which Keldam plays a prominent part.

Key words:

Asher Barash; A Man and His House Perished; Levant; postmodernism Women; protagonist; secondary character.

Introduction

The Levant in its many guises comes to the fore in different writers working in Hebrew in the Land of Israel at the beginning of the twentieth century. The list includes Yehuda Burla, Yitzhak Shami, Jacob Churgin, Isaac Shenhar, and S. Y Agnon.¹ Levantine landscapes in the Land of Israel and elements of psychological portraits associated with the Levant also appear in the writings of Asher Barash (1889-1952).² Descriptions of life in Eretz Israel include episodes unfolding in Tel Aviv, Jaffa, and Haifa,³ as well as landscapes from Mediterranean countries where Jews from Tel Aviv were expelled by the Ottoman regime. "Gardeners"(Gananim),⁴ "A Man and His House Perished" (Ish u-veto nimhu),⁵ "As a City Besieged" (Ke-'Ir netsurah),⁶ "Arabians" (Aravim),⁷ and "Akmek" (Akmek) are examples.⁸

"A Man and His House Perished" centers on the misfortunes suffered by Boris Keldam, a businessman coming to settle in Eretz Israel,⁹ where he endeavors to start a family, but fails three times to do so. Keldam also appears in "As a City Besieged," in which a spectrum of character types from a variety of locales in Eretz Israel are portrayed. Images of the Levant seem to be serving a subversive function in Barash's writing, implicitly gesturing toward the protagonists' inner world. The present paper purposes to achieve an integrated understanding of the role of the Levant in Barash's works; it will accordingly explore the possibility of different interpretations of the way Barash's work conceptualizes Levantine images.

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1. See, for instance, S.Y. Agnon, 'Givat Hahol', *Al Kapot* Hamanhool, Jerusalem 1978, pp. רפג, ריז-רצו.
 2. For biographical information on Barash see, A. Barash, *Kitvey Asher Barash* [Writings of Asher Barash], 1, Tel Aviv 1952-1957, forward to the book. Also, A. Shaanan (ed.), 'Asher Barash', *Milon Hasifrut Hahadasha Ha'ivrit Vehaklali* [Dictionary of New Hebrew and General Literature], pp.162-163. Barash joined the pioneering cultural enterprise. For example, he was the editor of the periodical "*Hedim*" alongside Yaakov Rabinowitz, where the works of young modernist poets of the Third Aliya were published (such as Avraham Shlonsky, Uri Zvi Greenberg, Yitzhak Lamdan and Avigdor Hameiri). In addition to his creative writing and its publication in newspapers like *Hapo'el Hatz'ir*, *Ahdut* and *Moledet*, he held a number of positions in teaching and supervision of teaching and education. He served as a teacher at the Herzliya Gymnasium, at the Levinsky Teacher's Seminary in Tel Aviv, at the Reali School in Haifa (Sha'anan, *ibid*, pp. 163-162).
 3. N. Toker, *Hezyon Holot Veyarchetey Olam: On the Connection of Place and Time in the Stories of Asher Brush* [Vision of Sands and the World's Edge], Givatayim 1980, p. 15.
 4. A. Barash, "Gananim" [Gardeners], *Writings of Asher Barash*, 2, Tel-Aviv 1951-1957, pp. 255-353. Part of the Levantine human landscape in this novella is based on characters from Eastern Europe, with additional types hailing from Arab countries: The brothers Ephraim and Menashe are young Eastern European Jews, while Salim, the boy, and his little sister Rumia whose dark prominent look gives her the "head of a Negro," are Jewish immigrants from Yemen (*ibid*, pp. 8-97, 43). Other characters from Tel Aviv are Arabs, such as the old Muslim accompanied by his two veiled wives and the group of girls who trail after him (*ibid*, p. 19).
 5. *ibid*, 'Ish uveyto Nimhoo', pp. 101-137.
 6. *ibid*, 'Ke'ir netzura', pp. 235-141. In this novel, the characters represent the human mosaic making up Tel Aviv in 1917. Many are Eastern European Jews such as the young geology teacher who comes on the eve of the war from Kharkov (*ibid*, p. 168), the veterinarian from Riga and his wife Mrs. Gubernator (*ibid*, p. 184), Gospodin Vigdorob from Petersburg (*ibid*, p. 185), Boris Keldam, Raisa and Zalman Sidkov (*ibid*, p. 188). Chapter XI, with the portraits of Sidkob and his wife Raisa (pp. 188-195), was first published on its own as work in eleven parts titled D. Kimchi, 'God, are you Jealous of Me?', D. Kimchi (ed.), *Mivhar Siporey Eretz-Israel*, Tel-Aviv 1965, pp. 33-50. Other Jews in the story, such as Gina, Keldam's first wife, are originally from the Middle East (p. 188).
 7. Each of the three parts of the short story 'Araians' (*Arveyim*) (*ibid*, pp. 246-249) centers on a different character. All three live in Eretz Israel, making each of the three individual portrayals a unique component of the Levantine setting: Hajj Abraham, a local Arab; Shafia, a Christian woman; and Mahmud, a Muslim Turkish military deserter hiding in the country.
 8. *ibid*, Akmek [Akmek] (from the Turkish for "bread"), pp. 239-241. Local Arabs along with arrivals from neighboring countries, such as Turkey and Lebanon: i.e., the tragic figure of the Turkish soldier.
 9. "Eretz Izrael" as a toponym appears in the original text of Barash's works. See, for example, *ibid*, 'Gananim', p. 112, 'ish uveyto nimhoo', *ibid*, p. 102, *ibid*, 'ke'ir netzura', p. 142, and others.

Conceptualization of the Levant

"The Levant" as a term suggests a geographical reference to the eastern part of the Mediterranean; "Levantine," the adjectival form, describes people or objects associated with this region.¹⁰ This spans a wide spectrum of cultural associations without identifying a specific nationality to the exclusion of others. The associations hail from the legacy of the once great Levantine port cities such as Beirut, Alexandria, and Smyrna (İzmir), whose culture was marked by the special value it placed on hybridity, commercial exchange, and cosmopolitanism. This formed a contrast to inland urban centers such as Ankara, Damascus, and Cairo. But considered from a different perspective, the Levant has been described as ignorant or superficially educated at best, immoral, and lacking in integrity. Likhovski notes that modern Hebrew brings nineteenth-century European anxieties to bear on the way it uses terms indicative of Levantine cultural connections. This stems from fear of cultural hybridity, which had seeped into Zionist thought, especially following the Arab Revolt of 1936. An unbridgeable gulf separating Jews from Arabs came to the fore in the course of this uprising, accounting for a drastic shift away from the earlier Zionist support for "Levantinism" when, as Likhovski argues, it had been typical for Zionists to want to adopt different elements of local Arab culture, "largely influenced by the romantic notion that identified the East with ancient purity and absence of European decadence".¹¹ As the below will make evident, the same attitude is prominent in Boris Keldam in "A Man and His House Perished" (Ish u-veto nimḥu).

A cultural mosaic had long been recognized by Europeans in the Land of Israel. Foreigners living in the Land of Israel during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries left eloquent testimony to their understanding of the Levant/East. Hadara Lazar cites the *Levant Trilogy* by the novelist Olivia Manning (1908-1980):

The climate is ideal, never too hot, yet terrible. Everyone hates everyone. The Polish Jews hate the German Jews and the Russians hate the Poles and the Germans. They all live in small communities and everyone tries to grab everything for himself: work, food, apartments, houses. And then there are the Orthodox Jews who came here first and want to run the whole show. The sophisticated western Jews hate the characters from the Old City, their fur hats and their caftans hatred of the Jews unites all Jews, and hatred of the British police unites Arabs and Jews, and police officials hate the authorities above them [...] what a place!¹²

The unique human landscape in Palestine, with its demographic diversity and conflict among groups resembling and opposing each other at once, is the focus of attention here. Unlike the historian, Barash "does not derive his overall view from [...] observing political, sociological, and personal processes". His vision is based instead on "the personal reality of ordinary people, independently of whether they actually existed, on their psychology and their relationship with the world".¹³ Lazar, a historian, paints a general picture of local human complexity, whereas Barash in "A Man and His House Perished" creates his own literary reality, seeking to individuate the voice of the subject in the cacophonous space of his setting.

10. A. Likhovski, 'Moreshet Hamishpat Hamandatori' [The Legacy of Mandatory Law], *Jerusalem Under the British Mandate: Work and Legacy*, Y. Ben-Arieh (ed.), Jerusalem 2003, p. 278.

11. *ibid.*

12. H. Lazar 'Mandatory Jerusalem: A Point in Time', Y. Ben-Arieh (ed.), *Jerusalem and the British Mandate: Interaction and Legacy*, Jerusalem 2003, p. 41

13. M. Shaked, *Hulyot veshalshelet* [Vertebrae and Chain: The Hebrew Novel on Family History], Tel Aviv 1990, p. 237.

Like many of Barash's Eretz Israel works, "A Man and His House Perished" is set in the early 1900s under Ottoman rule. Levantine scenery forms an important element in the development of the plot, suggesting that however pied and resounding with glossolalia, the Levant remains far from harmonious or ideal.

The Landscape: Turkey, Syria, Beirut, Jaffa, Tel Aviv

Capital cities and surrounding countries are conspicuous clusters of Levantine scenery in Barash: Turkey in *Gananim* is a colorful stopover for the protagonists on their way to the Land of Israel. The Galician brothers, Ephraim and Menashe Kliger, see Constantinople as "great ... [with] mosques and multitude of colors, aroma of the roast spit and bustle of Oriental masses in the streets".¹⁴ They are overwhelmed by sensory perceptions, suggesting that their impressions are superficial, too. Their notion of Constantinople as exotic is, according to Peter Mason, "produced by a process of decontextualization: taken from a setting elsewhere (it is this 'elsewhere' which renders it exotic), it is transferred to a different setting [...] It is not the 'original' geographic or cultural contexts which are valued, but the suitability of the objects in question to assume new meanings in a new context".¹⁵ Constantinople holds an attraction for the Eastern European brothers, and their expectations for their future in the Land of Israel, also a part of the Levant, are accordingly infused with a sense of vitality and promise. The brothers are naively unaware of the pitfalls of human interaction awaiting them which is crucial for their settling into their new land.

Other Oriental locales come up in Barash, such as Syria and Beirut; Keldam is familiar with them because of his business travels as a trader. His trips also give him an opportunity to take time out: his stays in Beirut include time spent with prostitutes and playing cards, while his pregnant wife, left alone in their Tel Aviv home, awaits his return.¹⁶ The pastimes with which he fills his trips are all typified by the artificiality of his contacts with the people he meets; the same is true of his business contacts. The situation is evocative of the pied appeal of the Levant: everything about the region looks beguiling and tempting, but mortal dangers lurk beneath the surface, such as the venereal disease that Keldam contracts. Irresponsibility and apathy vis-a-vis the individual is the stuff beneath the beckoning glitter.

Eretz Israel takes on distinctive Levantine features under both Ottoman and British regimes. Banquets are held at Keldam's house in the British style; both Oriental and European refreshments are served. Raisa Sidkob, the wife of a well-known and wealthy merchant and an acquaintance of Keldam's, invites friends to a British tea "with sugar cubes, Swiss chocolate, sweet poppy seed scones".¹⁷ Russian emigrants develop a culture of their own in their new environment, partly maintaining their original habits and partly taking on local customs. Postcolonial thinking is an outgrowth of political and social developments in the colonial mindset which sought to impose its cultural infrastructure on the dominated populace. This stemmed from the age old assumption that the dominated societies lacked a cultural heritage of their own. In its early stages, postcolonial thought addressed issues such as slavery, capital and labor flows, class relations, geography, and forms of imperial domination.¹⁸ Post-

14. 'Gardeners', p. 10.

15. P. Mason, *Infelicities: Representations of the exotic*, Baltimore 1998, p. 3.

16. 'A Man and His House Perished', p. 110, Writings of Asher Barash, 2, Tel-Aviv 1951-1957.

17. 'As a City Besieged', p. 42, Writings of Asher Barash, 2.

18. H. Herzig, *Literary and Cultural Theory: Contemporary Schools of Thought Further Steps*, Raanana 2005, p. 352.

colonialist theory "... examines the power relations between the West and those under its control ...".¹⁹ exploring the possibility of undermining the hegemony of colonialist ideology, thus allowing Third World countries to discover their own culture and heritage.²⁰ In "A Man and His House Perished" the women, "most of them Russian-born",²¹ lead a European lifestyle with an Oriental twist; hospitality with Eastern refreshments is an example. But this is a relatively minor detail that does not on its own suffice to demonstrate any thoroughgoing adoption of local customs by Europeans living in the Levant. The women manifest a typically post-colonialist mode in the patronizing and aloof attitudes which they assume toward Keldam's wives, first Gina²² and then Allegra.²³ They accept Keldam's invitation to the banquet in his home, angling to meet the hostess - but then barely speak to her. In their words, Keldam's wife Gina is not worth interacting with because "... there is nothing to talk about with her".²⁴ As for Allegra, "Keldam felt that there was a barrier between her and the others".²⁵

The social makeup of early 20th-century Tel Aviv occupies center stage in Barash. This consists primarily of the Jewish upper middle class: the doctor and his wife, who live on Ben Yehuda street,²⁶ or a lawyer's wife, whom her young Yemeni housekeeper Rumia thinks of as "a Russian who came from Berlin". In Rumia's eyes, the lawyer's wife is an upper middle class hedonist hanging out at parties such as the Purim banquet. Purim is a traditional Jewish festival, but to Rumia the banquet is anathema where "bad things have happened, despicable..."²⁷ as she thinks of her house Landlady's conduct.

There are professionals among the locals, including traders like Keldam's partner, Abutbul the Sephardi Jew, and Schmidt the German, owner of a fabric store.²⁸

Barash's Tel Aviv has a place for the well-educated, too, such as the European-trained physicians Dr. Naamani from Russia and Dr. Hoffman from Germany.²⁹

Tel Aviv also harbors transients, passersby who come to the city of Jaffa for business for a short time. Many of these are traders from different shipping ports, while others work for the Turkish government: high officials, army officers, and soldiers. Interspersed among these in a striking way are a group of young Jewish military men - Tel Aviv residents on their way to military training in Istanbul. They are then to return to Eretz Israel and serve "the Ottoman Empire [...] for the benefit of the small homeland, the beloved Eretz Israel".³⁰

Jaffa, shimmering with elements of the Arab Levant, is clearly set apart from Tel Aviv, where Levantine elements combine with adherence to European cultural norms. Thus, Jaffa's Arabs - part of the Levantine landscape - are characterized by the traditional status of their women. Thus, an elderly Muslim from Jaffa appears in "Gardeners", his wives trailing behind him and generally submissive.³¹ The three immigrants, Ephraim, Menashe, and Mira, who live in nearby

19. *ibid*, p. 353.

20. *ibid*, p. 235

21. 'A Man and His House Perished', p. 103.

22. *ibid*.

23. *ibid*, p. 108.

24. *ibid*, p. 103.

25. *ibid*, p. 108.

26. 'Gardeners', p. 21.

27. *ibid*, p. 42.

28. 'A Man and His House Perished,' p. 110.

29. *ibid*, p. 111.

30. *ibid*, p. 170.

31. 'Gardeners', p. 19.

Tel Aviv, form a striking contrast, with Mira walking "slightly ahead of both" brothers who stroll along together. Each social group has its unique norms, accepted and obvious to its members but possibly peculiar and unacceptable from the point of view of others. The apparent mutual incompatibility of the different cultures reiterates the conflicts which make up the main protagonist's personal life. A Russian arrival married first to one, then to another native of the Levant, he at first patronizes them, but then the intimacy of living together brings a change about, which becomes most clearly evident in his third marriage, a union dominated by a mixture of confusion and intimacy. Keldam and his third wife fry *latkes*³² together, both of them talking and Leah "laughing away". Keldam is actively involved in the domestic scene: he turns on the gas, stirs the batter, then, laughing, serving the patty, sinking his teeth into it before bringing it close to her mouth. An anachronous newlywed, he is "full of gratitude for her" and looks at her tenderly, "his eyes fondling her figure".³³

Integrity and fairness in the Levant

Westerners living in the Levant tend to see the locals as naïve and childlike. The Austrian doctor who diagnoses Keldam's venereal disease understands that the disease was responsible for the death of Keldam's wife Allegra and their unborn child. To Keldam he says that this explanation will not reach Allegra's parents: they are "naïve Eastern folk; they are better off living in their innocence".³⁴ Naïveté is the state of innocence best left undisturbed by knowledge that can not be put to constructive use.

Keldam is naïve in his own way. As a businessman he puts his trust implicitly in his partners - to the point where he understands he has lost his fortune and can do nothing to reverse this situation.

He also lets Sholkov, who has occupied his home while Keldam was away, continue living there with his partner while he himself becomes a sub-tenant in the same house, his former private property.

Keldam's suicide is another show of naïveté. Taking room in a hotel for the express purpose of ending his life, Keldam is careful about aesthetics, planning the way he will slit his wrists so that the room remains unsullied. The painstaking care he devotes to this is a departure from everything he has been and done since his arrival in Eretz-Izrael: his prostitutes, his deceitfulness toward his wives, whom he keeps in the dark about his medical condition, and more. His conduct is unethical as well as opposed to any code of aesthetics,³⁵ most significantly, it is expressive of the profound loneliness he experiences in society. The special events and gatherings which society stages prove meaningless for the individual.

Values typical of Levantine society find their expression in economic terms in Barash. Keldam's business ventures are successful financially, but fail in the end largely as a result of deception, intrigue, and greediness. In "A Man and His House Perished" and "As a City Besieged" business dealings are rife with swindling and deception, which are accepted as legitimate. Gossip spreads about the embezzlement of public funds committed by Dan Kris, a friend of Keldam's who occupies the post of secretary at the National Treasury; Kris adds

32. A fried dish made from vegetables. Its basic version contains fresh and crushed or cooked potatoes and crispy fried in boiling oil.

33. 'A Man and His House Perished', p. 130.

34. *ibid*, p. 112.

35. On the ethics and aesthetics see for example: R. Lorand, 'Ethics and Aesthetics: Two Types of Order', *Jygun*, 37 (1988), pp. 37-51.

rooms in his house, then finds himself short of funds. When his misappropriation of "some eight thousand Egyptian pounds"³⁶ for personal use (his entertainment in Haifa is a case in point) comes to light, he beseeches his friends for help, unscrupulously resorting to "oaths and promises, flattery and self-abasement suggestive of effacing the sense of his own humanity within himself".³⁷ He ultimately fails to pay what he owes and, despite the assistance proffered by Keldam, flees the city with his family in Keldam's absence.³⁸

Sholkov, another acquaintance, proves a different kind of turncoat: he occupies Keldam's house while Keldam is away in Constantinople with Allegra. Keldam's return to Tel-Aviv makes no difference: Sholkov stays where he was, ipso facto making the dwelling his own.³⁹ Actually indebted to Keldam, Sholkov proceeds to interfere in Keldam's business, threatening to supplant him in it.

Keldam's relationship with the Arab merchant, Abu-Batzal, is, by contrast, built upon sincerity and trust. The two have an open discussion about the growing tensions between the national groups they belong to. The Arab complains of the unreasonable anger that Jews manifest against Arabs; Keldam does not try to reject the Arab's point of view.⁴⁰ The frankness between Keldam and Abu-Batzal goes hand in hand with mutual support when the Arab loans Keldam five hundred Eretz-Eretz-Israeli liras.⁴¹ A gesture performed against the backdrop of overall Levantine intrigue and deception,⁴² this act of generosity offsets other characters' distrust and disloyalty toward Keldam. The hero is led to the conclusion that there is no salvation from his distress; he feels deeply alienated by the Levant where petty individual gain seems to be the name of the game.

Expressions of the Levant

Boris Keldam - From East Europe to the Middle East

Boris Keldam is inscribed within a number of different spheres: the social, the family, and his own personal world. Coming from Eastern Europe, where he was educated as a merchant, Keldam undertakes successful ventures in Turkey and Palestine.⁴³ Before immigrating to the Land of Israel he lives in several places in the Mediterranean Basin: three years in Istanbul are followed by a few months in Beirut, whence he proceeds to Jaffa, there to set up his own home and business.⁴⁴ His work continues to take him on trips to Damascus and Constantinople, where he cultivates a friendship with the much esteemed Effendis.⁴⁵

Keldam also maintains thriving business ties with merchants and functionaries from different countries who come to Jaffa. Consular officials -- even Jamal Basha himself -- are fond of him.⁴⁶ Keldam is part of an extended bureaucratic and social network: post office directors, bank

36. *ibid.*, p. 115.

37. *ibid.*

38. *ibid.*, p.118 .

39. *ibid.*, p. 114.

40. *ibid.*, pp.132-131 .

41. *ibid.*, p.132.

42. The proximity of this moment to Keldam's suicide is suggestive: Keldam is apparently so far gone in his despair that even the deal with Abu-Batzal, which could have saved him from his financial quandary, is of no use.

43. *ibid.*, p. 102.

44. *ibid.*

45. *ibid.*

46. *ibid.*, p. 108.

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managers, merchants. Working in the city and overseas, he is proficient in several languages spoken in the Levant: French, Italian, Greek, Turkish, and Arabic. "It was surprising"⁴⁷ for Keldam to hear Hebrew or Russian - an indication of his interaction with the pied tapestry of humanity that is Tel-Aviv.

Earlier, Keldam is tagged as a founding citizen of Tel Aviv, having arrived "before the first house was built".⁴⁸ He is part of the history of the construction of the first neighborhood, Ahuzat Bayit, from which the city of Tel Aviv later grows. Keldam is "also among the top ten who committed to build a home, bought a plot and covering the initial fee immediately".⁴⁹

Flexible and chameleon-like, Keldam seems made for the Levant, including its illicit occupations: "He was an agent for all kinds of goods, known and unknown ... seems a reasonable conclusion that he also had a share in the illegal drug trade... drank champagne and played cards".⁵⁰

Working with Orientals, Keldam is duped by them occasionally. His partner, Lysoboy, tricks him, forcing Keldam to start a new business. He opens an ice factory together with Sholkov and a Greek business partner from the Ajami neighborhood, to be then deceived by Sholkov.⁵¹

But he is far from being simply naïve; sometimes he is the one to cheat others. A naval officer says about Keldam: "A lunatic Levantine like him [...] I would have handcuffed him!"⁵²

"Levantine" is clearly a pejorative here, a hint at fraud, manipulation, and mercantile greed.

But the same Levantine flexibility seems to account for the ease with which Keldam adapts socially. When in Tel Aviv, he appears "more European", but when in Jaffa "[...] he could often be seen walking hand in hand with an Arab, or being part of spirited dancing, boisterous singing and carousing."⁵³ A part of the local cultural scene, he invites guests of different cultural backgrounds, most of them belonging to the upper class, to the banquets at his home. Some of the guests occupy prominent positions in their communities; some are on intimate terms with the authorities. Jewish writers and activists are invited, such as Shlomo Gamzu. Arab invitees include "public officials ... [such as the] Arab police officer... [and] three Arab guards."⁵⁴

Keldam is also on familiar terms with Trask members - the city's Zionist pioneers.⁵⁵ Like Keldam, they are of Eastern European origin; the shared bond comes to the fore in Keldam's solidarity with Zionist ideology. But in both "As a City Besieged" and "A Man and His House Perished", the pioneers make their appearance in connection with pleasure seeking and representations of frivolity,⁵⁶ unmindful of the practical Zionist teaching that provided the impetus for their immigration to Eretz-Israel. Like Keldam, their lives revolve about a combination of lightness and hedonism; however, while Keldam is a prominent man of affairs who builds a large house in Tel Aviv and invests in starting a family,⁵⁷ Trask members while

47. *ibid.*

48. *ibid.*

49. *ibid.*

50. *ibid.*

51. *ibid.*, p. 117.

52. *ibid.*, p. 126.

53. *ibid.*

54. 'A Man and His House Perished', pp. 106-104; 'As a City Besieged', pp. 195-194.

55. A telling comment is inserted in parentheses in the text: "(The first *Trask* company was founded at the time, headed by the cheerful bachelor, the drawing teacher at the boys' school, and Keldam supported it)" (*ibid.*, p. 103). On the *Trask* group, see H. Halperin, *The Maestro: The Life and Work of Avraham Shlonsky*, Tel Aviv 2011, pp. 132, 143-141.

56. 'A Man and His House Perished', p. 108.

57. Keldam himself sees these steps as part of advancing the goals of Jewish settlement.

their time away being non-productive.

Aesthetics in Levantine culture

Keldam is an esthete, cultivating this preoccupation in several ways. His home is clean and well-kept, primarily by his wives and the housemaid, "a Sephardi woman from Neve Shalom".⁵⁸ After Gina's death, the house is taken care of by an "elderly kind-faced Arab".⁵⁹ He also has a well-tended, beautiful garden "planted with bushes and flowers [...] a glowing hibiscus with large flowers, a Florida keys Indian with leaves reminiscent of a vine [...] in the summer - small rugs of shrubby Jerusalem sage of all colors [...] and in the winter - white, purple, yellow chrysanthemums".⁶⁰

One of the plants, a delicate Egyptian jasmine, is a gift Keldam receives from an Arab friend.⁶¹ As Hamutal Bar-Yosef has noted, the abundant botanical detail is an essential element of Barash's realism.⁶² The diverse flora and fauna echo the human landscape in Keldam's social life, while Keldam himself is described as paying meticulous attention to his personal appearance, dress, and manners. Keldam is considered a handsome man: his Levantine looks impress both men and women, "a manly beauty that could steal hearts".⁶³ After his death, mourners at his home reminisce about his impressive appearance and personal qualities. They speak of him as a man with a great heart who has helped others, offered loans, and offered gifts to those in need: "a charming guy, a heart of gold... a Levantine type".⁶⁴

Aestheticism is also part of the insistent attention Keldam pays to the appearance of his wives. He wants his first wife to be exquisitely dressed at the party he holds in honor of her arrival in Eretz Israel: "[He] put a costly dress on his wife, decorating her with abundant jewelry".⁶⁵ His second wife, Allegra, is also elegantly dressed, "a fine mixture of Oriental and European tastes".⁶⁶ Her eclectic style forms a parallel to his intercultural way of life. At the same time, Keldam's obsession with his wives' outward appearance conveys his perception of women as purely aesthetic and decorative objects. This provides an illustration of the status of women in the story: they are neither opinionated nor independent. They tend to appear as part of the background, an appendage of their male partners. The women showing up at Keldam's party remain aloof toward his wife, the ostentatious display of wealth in her home and even her dress and jewels notwithstanding. They seem unaffected by these manifestations of wealth and economic status; the women obviously have more substantial concerns. Yet their immediate rejection of her without so much as an initial exchange suggests a different kind of superficiality and prejudice in their worldview.

The meticulous care, order and cleanliness with which Keldam plans his suicide are the apogee of his aesthetic concerns. He chooses the location carefully to avoid leaving a sullied space. This seems a way to endow his act with supreme value, putting it on a level with his public image: "It could not be that his life would be forfeit under the heavens [...] he had always loved

58. *ibid.*, p. 108

59. *ibid.*

60. *ibid.*, p. 102.

61. *ibid.*, p. 103.

62. H. Bar-Yosef, 'On 'Man and His House Perished', N. Tamir-Smilanski (ed.), *Asher Barash: Criticism of His Work*, Tel-Aviv 1988, pp. 151-145.

63. 'A Man and His House Perished', p. 102.

64. *ibid.*, p. 102.

65. *ibid.*, p. 103.

66. *ibid.*, p. 108.

order".⁶⁷ The aesthetic sense shaping his external appearance is linked to his self-image, which he wants to make a public show of, even in the act of death, a fundamentally violent moment. An oxymoronic longing manifests itself in the fundamental violence: Keldam seeks to kill himself in an aesthetically pleasing way, although suicide is, on the face of it, hardly concerned with beauty.

Keldam leads a life in conformity with what is expected of him, a busy jumble of pursuits, to which the suicide forms a chilling contrast: the individual is set apart, the Levantine tone of Eretz Israel defining him in his loneliness as the solitary bearer of responsibility for his own fate to his.

Joined together with this, aestheticism becomes all the more starkly an expression of externality in Keldam's life; spirituality is dispensed with. The superficiality of the Levant as a whole may be the implicit object of the critique emerging through the tragedy of Keldam's life.

Keldam's Attitude toward Women

Disrespect and objectification

For Keldam, female companionship is an essential attribute of his socioeconomic status. His pragmatic idea of marriage - matrimony is a must for starting a family - forms a counterpart to this way of thinking. To this end he must build a luxurious house, furnish it, and have a luscious garden. He next goes to Beirut to retrieve a woman - the woman whom he will marry will be as much a part of the decoration of the house as the garden. Marriage is urged upon him by his friend, Dan Kris; his trip to Beirut for the express purpose of finding a bride is a businesslike step like any other entrepreneurial operation. It features no other experiential elements. Bringing a bride home from Beirut within a week marks the completion of the "furnishings" in his house in Tel Aviv.⁶⁸ Gina is "imported" like precious merchandise from Beirut. Her name never comes up during their period of courtship; she remains an unindividuated object for Keldam. His indifference is obvious when he first introduces her to his friends and their wives. Turning to the women, he seems to be inviting them to evaluate the merchandise he has imported. The women examine Gina, saying that "she is a good woman, but there's nothing to talk about with her,"⁶⁹ thus completing Keldam's dehumanizing objectification of his new wife.

Shortly after their wedding, Keldam stops providing for Gina's basic needs. He "abuses her and treats her like a Russian drunk [...] not even as an Arab effendi, who would have upheld some traditional family manners [...] Surely, he will not divorce her or take another woman in her place. He is not a *Sephardi*".⁷⁰ Suffering from pangs of conscience, he comes up with the idea of hosting a masquerade party at his home. He entreats Kris to seduce Gina during the party so as to awaken her "with a little 'daring'".⁷¹ The party takes place on Purim, a holiday traditionally associated with disguise and humor. But the amusement Keldam intends provokes a hysterical response on Gina's part. Unable to escape Kris' harassment, she falls down on the floor, whimpering "hysterically".⁷²

67. *ibid.*, p. 134.

68. *ibid.*, p. 102.

69. *ibid.*, p. 102.

70. *ibid.*, p. 104.

71. *ibid.*

72. *ibid.*, p. 106.

There is more harassment after Gina's death. Keldam, now a widower, hosts a ball and invites Raisa, the wife of one of his friends, Zalman Sidkov. With her husband away on business, she arrives at Keldam's house on her own. Keldam forces himself on Raisa in the course of the evening despite her objections, kissing her on the mouth. He makes a public announcement of this: "God, you are jealous of me... I kissed her"⁷³

These incidents demonstrate Keldam's chauvinistic and contemptible attitude towards women. He disrespects and disdains the memory of his late wife by forcing himself on Raisa.

Keldam's Violence and Infidelity

Keldam is a notorious wife-beater, with bouts of violence against Gina and Leah: at some point "he had also begun to beat her [i.e., Gina, his first wife]"⁷⁴ Lying next to her in bed one night, he punches her "on her face" with his boot; blood bursts out of her nose and mouth.⁷⁵ He abuses her verbally, calling her a "bitch", making her hide in the shower. The narrator tries to make sense of Keldam's violence, suggesting that Keldam is influenced by Gina's detailed stories of abuse at the hands of her stepfather. Her accounts of the violence she's been subjected to in the past reverberate restlessly in his mind.

The abuse suffered by Gina at the hands of both her stepfather and her husband suggest that wife-beating was a common practice in Levantine society. It may have been accepted as a way of relieving family tension. This type of marital violence is representative of a perceived mode of male ownership of women. This is borne out by a conversation between Keldam and the old doctor's daughter. Keldam tells her that every "respectable" husband beats his wife, and asks rhetorically: "If he does not hit her, how will she feel?"⁷⁶ The girl is not impressed and tells him to "Go to hell!"⁷⁷ She insists that if she had been his wife, she would have fought back.⁷⁸ Her quick outraged response is a voicing of a modern and different sensibility. For Keldam, women are inferior objects owned by males. The girl's confidence and independence are indications of a complete rejection of this type of male oppression.

Keldam has a different kind of relationship with his Turkish second wife, Allegra. Their union is characterized by mutual respect, suggesting that wife-beating is not necessarily an accepted Levantine norm. Barash points to other couples whose domestic life is free of abuse. The orchard owner, Shulkov, and Mrs. Karpin live quite happily together.⁷⁹ The Shulkovs are contrasted with Keldam's marital failures, making it clear that the responsibility for his fiascos is his alone. Barash thus makes us see that building an enviable house with a garden is by itself no formula for conjugal happiness.

After Gina's death, Keldam begins to regret his violent abuse of her; he is even tormented by his memories. He treats Allegra differently, trying to behave with restraint and respect. He lets her visit her parents in Turkey, encouraging her to stay there until the birth of their child. His gentleness may be accounted for by his confidence that she will bear him a son; he even chooses a name that he likes, Yigal.⁸⁰ He expects his son to be like him, in line with a patriarchal

73. 'As a City Besieged', p. 195.

74. 'A Man and His House Perished,' p. 104.

75. *ibid.*

76. *ibid.*, p. 105.

77. *ibid.*

78. *ibid.*

79. *ibid.*, p. 113.

80. Mentioning to Allegra that he doesn't like his name, "Boris", nor "Ber". But, he likes the name Yigal, which is "... like the name of the heroic guard in the Galilee", *ibid.*, p. 109.

mindset in which the father names his son and heir.

Keldam's infidelity becomes especially poignant when he is infected with a venereal disease by an old prostitute.⁸¹ This may be a visitation of universal justice upon him, a form of retribution for his mistreatment of women as mere instruments for his personal needs. The disease makes him deteriorate mentally, measure for measure meted out for the mental anguish he causes the women his his life. But Barash's meaning remains ambiguous: does he mean to imply that Keldam's actions should be attributed to innate tendencies or that they are reiterations of local Levantine norms Keldam observes in Eretz Israel? Could it be his misinterpretation of Levantine permissiveness that prompts his promiscuity, which in turn leads to his venereal disease and ultimately pushes him to his death? In Bar-Yosef's words: "Should we interpret the fate of Keldam as the revenge of the Levantines upon European man, or as the stifling of the healthy process of Levantinization by the violent despondency of the remnants of European culture?" In her opinion, the text provides no final answers.⁸²

A hint as to the answer appears when, having been made aware of his condition, Keldam is asked by an Arab in the street, "Where is the wound from, from our city or from Beirut?" The Arab has noted the telltale sores about Keldam's mouth. Both laugh, but Keldam now knows that people understand the nature of his "wound."⁸³ The Arab's caustic question suggests that venereal disease was common in the Levant; Keldam, son of Ashkenaz, has simply adopted the behavior patterns locally associated with masculinity.

Conclusion

Keldam lives in Tel Aviv at the end of the period of Ottoman rule over Eretz Israel and the transition to British Mandatory Palestine. This is a time of enormous political and cultural change, alternation between Eastern and Western hegemonies, and deep anxiety. In Barash's words: "...a time of agitation for the settlement of the land [...] the negative attitude of the military bureaucracy and the stubborn opposition of the Arabs to Jewish immigration to Israel reached threatening dimensions".⁸⁴ A parallel emerges between the turbulent events in the Land of Israel and the protagonist's life.

A multitude of ethnic groups coexist in the same public space; while in the personal space of the individual, the emotional turmoil experienced by Keldam vis-a-vis his wives, the psychological crisis he finds himself in the midst of, his different women's mindsets, and the invasion of his private space by strangers. All these unfold not in the esoteric margins of Levantine society, but at its very center.

The Levant is dominated by materialism. Money and social status are key. Barash portrays Levantine society as cunning, subversive, often hypocritical, and driven throughout by motives of gain, thus making the Levant postmodernistically multiple and disunited in character.

Unlike modernism, postmodernism values and aspires to heterogeneous structures. David Gurevitz writes that "postmodernism is essentially a 'mental state' (a process, a general cultural sensitivity), an artistic style and a 'lifestyle' that rejects any universal [...] view of cultural practices, presenting instead a polyphonic, carnival and pluralistic notion that

81. *ibid.*, p. 103.

82. Bar-Yosef (above note 62), pp. 145-151.

83. *ibid.*, p. 111.

84. 'A Man and His House Perished', p. 117.

emphasizes the ethnic, cultural, sexual, and emotional aspects of its objects, highlighting the differences among identities, cultures and people".⁸⁵

Much of this postmodern pluralism and emphasis on difference can be seen in the world inhabited by Keldam: cultural, sexual, and emotional difference occupies center stage in Barash's writings. In the Levantine public sphere, the elements comprising this ethnic multitude manage somehow to co-exist. In Keldam's personal space, this difference, as it relates to the delicate mental state of his wives and his own emotional crises, is far less stable. Barash treats the cosmopolitanism of an emerging Tel Aviv with a refined sense of realism free of any esoteric or folkloristic elements. Postmodernism "without ambition either explicit or concealed of establishing a hegemony of one type or another"⁸⁶ is a value compatible with the Levantine cultural space. Even so, Keldam also falls prey to a kind of stereotyping in his descriptions, as we have shown.

Keldam is alone in facing his adversity, with no assistance or source of support or consolation even though he is part of a society that claims to be upholding the values of sympathy, kindness, and openness. In both "Gardeners", and "A Man and His House Perished", the subject finds the cure for his distress in suicide. And yet, from the point of view of Levantine society, there is nothing shocking in Keldam's desperate act. The time is one of the supplanting of one form of imperialist rule with another, a time of war, ethnic transition, and social upheaval.⁸⁷ So the Levantine locals make do with mere nodding and chatting away about the deceased.

The protagonist's death, which takes place in isolation and without the knowledge of his wife or acquaintances, underscores the importance of social status in the Levant: Keldam's self-imposed isolation is an expression of human dignity; but it also reflects the inability of Levantine society to respond to the suffering of the individual, reinforcing the barrier between the subject and his milieu.

The act of suicide is indeed terrible, but by taking his own life Keldam is also making a statement about being in control of his fate, in marked contrast with earlier stages of his life when he could not act upon his own decisions.

85. D. Gurevitz, *Postmodernism: Culture and Literature at the End of the 20th Century*, Tel-Aviv 1997, pp. 25-24.

86. *ibid.*, p. 29.

87. See for instance, A. Halamish, *From a National Home to a State on the Way: The Jewish community in Israel between the world wars*, Raanana 2004-2012, pp. 35-34.