



“Straight out of the button-molder’s own ladle”: On the complexity of characters in Arthur Koestler’s *Thieves in the Night*

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the complexity of female and Arab characters in Arthur Koestler’s *Thieves in the Night*. Through an analysis of three main characters (Dina, Ellen and the Mukhtar of Kfar Tabiyeh) and several minor ones, it shows that the allegation of contemporary reviews, and some works on Arthur Koestler ever since, that the novel is excessively built on stock characters is untenable. In fact, the representation of women and Arabs is both specific and detailed, in addition to the fact that these characters show a clearly detectable line of development, even if their initial presentation might in some cases be reminiscent of Petrarchan or other types.

KEYWORDS: Koestler, characters, stock, type, Arab, women.

1. INTRODUCTION

Although after decades of relative silence there has been a renewal of interest in research on Arthur Koestler since the late 1990s (most recent works being biographies¹ or pseudo-biographies²), they have neither significantly changed the picture that, as far as his fiction is considered, Koestler is remembered as a one-book author, nor provided detailed analyses of his literary texts.³ Yet, regardless of their somewhat forgotten status, I am convinced that some of his books, and in particular *Thieves in the Night* (1949a),⁴ are comparable in literary interest to his canonized novel, *Darkness at Noon* (1940). In fact, I side with Sperber’s claim that the novel’s obscurity is primarily because “critics treated his

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writing with too much seriousness in the '40s and '50s", and then with a "subsequent neglect [which] seems just as unfounded",⁵ simply because "they usually argue from narrow premises: the aesthetic critic assumes an eternal split between politics and literature, and the chauvinist critic dismisses Koestler's work because he is not a native" (1977: 3, 5). This alleged chauvinism has since been confirmed by Vernyik (2016), who shows that the majority of the novel's British reviews in the 1940s were politically biased and also indulged in critical fallacies.

Yet, while such a biased reaction is clearly neither professional nor laudable, it is certainly understandable. The book openly criticized British policies in Palestine, a territory that "Britain ruled [...] for over 30 years between 1917 and 1948: first as a Military (December 1917–June 1920), then as a Civilian (July 1920–September 1923) and, finally, as a Mandate Administration (declared on 29 September 1923, and lasting to the end of 14 May 1948)" (El-Eini, 2005: 1). What made this criticism particularly painful for some readers, however, was the novel's focus on an especially turbulent time of the British Mandate of Palestine, between 1937 and 1939, the last three years of the "1936–1939 Palestine revolt against the British Mandate" (Kochavi, 1998: 146). This upheaval was the Arab population's reaction to the fact that "[f]rom 1933 to 1936, more than 130,000 Jews arrived in Palestine" (Kochavi, 1998: 146) owing to an increasingly "virulent anti-Semitism in Central and Eastern Europe and to the rise to power of Adolf Hitler and Nazism" (El-Eini, 2005: 26). During the period, and even more so afterwards, the British administration faced the double dilemma of the ethicality of turning back those thousands of refugees who were arriving to Palestine in the hopes of escaping certain death, and the just as pressing and real issue of the need to keep the situation in Palestine under control. Given the fact that the revolts appeared as a reaction against the increasingly intensive Jewish immigration, it seemed a logical, even if severely controversial, step to try "appeasing the Arabs" by limiting "drastically the scope of this immigration" (Kochavi, 1998: 146). The British decision to do so then led to such frightful results that this topic remained a point of contention for all sides for the next seven years (Kochavi, 1998: 146–153), including the novel's year of publication.

At the same time, even this general debate about the role of the British administration might not have warranted the novel's overwhelmingly negative British reception so much as the unfortunate timing of its publication. The novel reached the shelves of British bookstores relatively shortly after "'Black Saturday' (29 June 1946), during the course of which approximately 2,700 Jews were detained" (Kochavi, 1998: 153). As Scammel explains,

"Black Saturday," as it came to be called, was a British riposte to Jewish sabotage of the colonial infrastructure, especially the destruction of eight road and railroad bridges linking Palestine to its neighbors, but it led in turn to one of the worst atrocities of the British Mandate, the blowing up of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem by the Irgun. (2009: 278)

In other words, while publishing a novel about the transformation of a pacifist liberal into a terrorist is certainly controversial enough as a topic, portraying him as someone who attacks the British in Palestine at a time shortly after a similar attack is certainly conducive to a negatively biased reception.⁶

Beyond the general historical context, another factor that might have led reviewers to write hostile reviews was Koestler's explicit support for the Zionist cause in many of his pieces as a journalist. The reading public was well-aware that he was a reporter dispatched to Palestine working for the *News Chronicle* in 1937, where he published "three long articles", claiming in each of them that "the need for a Jewish homeland was more urgent than ever" (Scammel, 2009: 145, 147). On top of this, in 1944, he "joined the Palestine Luncheon Club" and also "attended meetings of [...] [the] Anglo-Palestine Committee" (Scammel, 2009: 235, 236). And he did not stop there: shortly before the book's appearance in stores, he published two articles in *The Times* and one in *Life*, in which he was "openly defend[ing] [...] the Irgun and the Stern Gang" (Scammel, 2009: 275, 276).⁷

At the same time, those very topics that led to the book's condemnatory reception in the late 1940s could make it an appealing and intriguing read for the 21st century reader. Its complex discussion of issues such as terrorism, extremist political groups, and a refugee crisis make it just as up-to-date and relevant as it was at its original publication. And so does the fact that the foundation of modern Israel notwithstanding, the situation in Palestine is far from resolved.

Beyond the charges of being anti-British and partisan, tackled in detail in Vernyik (2016), many additional claims of the reviews published in the 1940s are also problematic. Although they may not be either biased or fallacious, they are not demonstrated on the text itself, and a careful reading of the novel often shows that the opposite of them holds. The present essay deals with one such claim, namely the alleged typicality of the book's characters, and proves that this charge is unfounded, since the text in fact abounds in complex and well-developed characters. This is a rather important point, since the charge that the novel's "characters are types" (Crossman, 1946: 321), and so unimaginative that they seem to be "taken [...] straight out of the button-molder's own ladle" (Fremantle, 1947: 494), and ultimately "fail to come to life" (Holme, 1946: 3), was a frequent claim at the time of the novel's publication.⁸

Even more importantly, the effect of those initial reviews has been so long-lasting that most monographs and articles on Koestler have kept repeating the sweepingly general statements of those very reviews ever since. Scammel, for example, talks of "haste, a certain cheapness of phrasing, oversimplification" (2009: 282). In a similar vein, although Márton claims that the book is "a real novel, with flesh and blood characters"⁹ (2006: 205; my translation), which seemingly contradicts the view of the early reviews, he then immediately contradicts himself as he lists several literary stereotypes: "the village Vogt is a wily miser and liar, the Arab snobs smoking nargileh in the cafés of Jerusalem are pale copies of their

Bloomsbury originals, while the representatives of the colonial power are nitwits who stepped over from the novels of contemporary English authors”¹⁰ (2006: 206; my translation). Cesarani likewise claims that “[e]ach figure has a didactic function”, and the focalizer, and at many points also narrator, protagonist, Joseph, is “often veering into the language of race and using some blatant anti-Semitic tropes” (1998: 246, 247). In other words, decades after the novel’s publication and initial reception, the little that is written about it still understands its characters as types.¹¹

This article, while partially accepting claims to the typicality of *Thieves in the Night* (Koestler, 1949a) and working with how characters in the novel draw upon literary conventions, shows that the characters in question rework those conventions and make them more complex. Given the limitations of this article, and the surprisingly high number of characters in the novel, however, the scope of this analysis has to be limited: it only discusses the novel’s female and Arab characters. The former in relation to two conventional representations of women: the unapproachable lady of Petrarchan love sonnets and the seductress; and the latter in relation to common Arab stereotypes. Comparisons of the novel’s Jewish and British figures to clichés would also certainly warrant their own articles: the former because of their sheer number and the occasional allegations of Koestler’s portrayal being anti-Semitic (cf. e.g. Cesarani, 1998: 247; Holme, 1946: 3), and the latter because of their complex relations to the already mentioned biased British reception.

2. ON THE TYPICALITY OF CHARACTERS

Before an actual analysis of the veracity of the claim about the typicality of the novel’s characters could be undertaken, it is essential to clarify what it could be referring to. In my opinion, it can be interpreted in at least two different ways: that the characters are recognizable and have a reference beyond the specific events of the book; or that they are stock characters. The characters being types in the first sense is to some extent both desirable and unavoidable. As Wellek and Warren explain, “characterization in literature has always been defined as that of combining the ‘type’ with the ‘individual’ – showing the type in the individual or the individual in the type” (1949: 23). What is more, exactly the realists (those who most programmatically claimed representing social reality “as it was”) were particularly obsessed with the importance of the novel’s characters being recognizable types, going as far as to see “the primary task of the artist as the creation of types, figures who, although individuals, still have universal significance” (Wellek, 1961: 12). In fact, the truthfulness of the previous statement is easy to see once one realizes that it could be argued that without a certain amount of typicality, the reader may not even be able to understand and relate to the work of art: “To stress the ‘individuality’ and even ‘uniqueness’ of every work of art –

though wholesome as a reaction against facile generalizations – is to forget that no work of art can be wholly ‘unique’ since it then would be completely incomprehensible” (Wellek & Warren, 1949: 7).

The other possible way of interpreting the claim of the characters being types is to understand the term as a synonym for “the stereotyped stock character of literary and folk tradition” (Baldick, 2008b), examples of which include “the absent-minded professor, the country bumpkin, the damsel in distress, the old miser, [...] the wicked stepmother, [and] the jealous husband” (Baldick, 2008a). Leaving aside for a moment whether or not the characters of *Thieves in the Night* (1949a) are indeed so traditional and predictable, one should first of all realize that this, in itself, would not necessarily be a reason for considering it of low literary value. There are several examples of respected works in the European literary canon that are built on stock characters, from the plays of Plautus (Gill, 1925: 79) through English Restoration comedies (Wellek & Warren, 1949: 101), the fairy tales of E. T. A. Hoffmann (Zipes, 1977: 447) and the novels of Charles Dickens (Grob, 1964: 568), to Brett Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho* (1991) (Helyer, 2000: 728).

Koestler himself was most certainly aware of the problem of typicality as opposed to uniqueness. In fact, he discussed the role literary types can play in novels in his essays devoted to the craft of writing. The most pertinent ones are his “The Novelist Temptations”, published in *The Yogi and the Commissar* (1945), his “The Future of the Novel” (1955/1946) and his *The Act of Creation* (1964). In “The Future of the Novel” he puts forward a theory that is very similar to the view expressed by René Wellek; i.e. that every literary work of art is a combination of the type with the particular: “It seems to me that the action of the novel is always the distant echo of some primitive action behind the veil of the period’s costumes and conventions”, going so far as to say that in his view, “[n]ovels which are not fed from archetypal sources are shallow or phoney” (Koestler, 1955/1946: 96, 97). His *The Act of Creation*, some eighteen years later, strikes the same note, claiming that the “poetic image attains its highest vibrational intensity as it were, when it strikes archetypal chords – when eternity looks through the window of time”, with the due warning that the “creative mind knows how to draw on archetypal symbols without degrading them by misplaced concreteness” (Koestler, 1964: 353, 357). In other words, whether or not Koestler’s novel is overly stereotypical in its portrayal of characters, there is ample evidence as to the novel being the result of a conscious program of representation.

2.1. Women in *Thieves in the Night*

Turning now to the novel itself and the way it portrays women, the most obvious example to start with is Dina, the protagonist’s primary romantic interest. This is because she visibly shares some features with the idealized and unapproachable lady of the Petrarchan love sonnet who “never allows the poet to satisfy his desires” and is characterized by “the absence

of any change” (Dasenbrock, 1985: 39), who is a “[symbol] of purity” (Kesler, 1990: 107), and whose distance in some cases, most notably in those of Dante and Petrarch, is ultimately embodied in the death of the loved one (Dasenbrock, 1985: 39–40). Just like these idealized women, Dina is sexually unavailable to the extent that “she could not bear to be touched” (Koestler, 1949a: 62). Likewise, her purity is so emphatic that her body is shown having an “immaculate surface” (Koestler, 1949a: 64). She is further described as someone “blessed” and is compared to an “oasis” (Koestler, 1949a: 55). At one moment, Joseph even experiences something that directly mirrors the Petrarchan love sonnet:

In that moment he was so full of a warm, simple certainty about everything that he felt no shame and no need to pose. He leaned his head against the foot of her chair, closed his eyes and let the tears run down his face. He felt that in this moment of abandon he lost his last chance of ever winning her. But the bliss of surrender, of shedding all pretence, was stronger than his desire. It is finished, he thought, for it is I who am giving myself, not she... (Koestler, 1949a: 72)

This scene incorporates many elements of the tradition: the male “lover freely gives his heart to a lady” (Ruffo-Fiore, 1972: 320), and he “has no wish to escape from such sweet torments” (Waswo, 1978: 8), yet the unattainability of the loved one is not experienced as frustration, but accepted as “the truest form of love – precisely because it [is] not reciprocated” (Scaglione, 1997: 561). Ultimately, Dina even attains the status of Dante’s Beatrice, as she also dies (Koestler, 1949a: 259), removing even the theoretical possibility of a physical union.

But with all this impressive list of similarities, Dina is significantly different, and a potentially more complex figure than the idealized lady of the sonnets. First of all, she does not keep refusing Joseph out of mere “cruelty and coldness” (Ruffo-Fiore, 1972: 320), but is unable to enjoy being touched by a man, much less any form of sexual intercourse:

She could put her hand on a man’s, or lay her arm round his shoulder, but winced in suppressed panic if he tried to do the same to her. She would sit on a form at the dining table and suddenly become conscious of her shoulder or hip touching her neighbour’s; she would shrink into herself and make herself small and try to control her trembling so as not to offend the other; and after a while she would get up and slink unobtrusively out of the room, with her meal unfinished. (Koestler, 1949a: 62–63)

This, unlike the conscious and allegedly heartless decision of the ladies of the sonnets, is an unconscious reaction that she could not be cured of, although “[d]octors had been consulted” who “suggested drugs, hypnosis, psycho-therapy” (Koestler, 1949a: 63) to no avail.

Furthermore, rather than accepting the situation, she tries to overcome her mental block in the case of Joseph, but she is not able to:

Suddenly I had the wild idea that perhaps Dina's trouble was just fuss and hypochondria, and that by taking her by surprise I could break down the barrier. I silently counted ten to myself and then turned towards her and grabbed her by the shoulders with a hard grip. She did not shrink back, it was almost as if she had expected it; in fact I am convinced that she had expected it. She did not resist as I drew her towards me, but her body grew taut and unyielding; and she trembled so violently that I could hear the faint grinding noise of her teeth as she locked her jaws to prevent herself from crying out. By then I was terrified but I wanted to go through with it and I knew that Dina wanted me to go through with it, in the same desperate hope. (Koestler, 1949a: 178)

While this scene is somewhat controversial because Joseph is the focalizer, and the thoughts and emotions of Dina are only communicated in the form of his guesses, which might just as well be the projections of his wishes, this is not the only episode that shows Dina trying to overcome her own limits. In another scene, with a third person narration showing the two of them from the outside, she both kisses him and asks him to sleep together:

She slid down to the floor and touched his face with her lips. "Will you let me sleep with my head on your arm?" she asked, lying down at a little distance from him and pulling the blanket over both of them. "But please don't do anything."
"No," he said, lying stiff and frozen with the soft warm weight on his arm. "Sleep, Dina, you are safe; we are both safe here." (Koestler, 1949a: 73)

In other words, although the physical attraction felt by Joseph is not returned by Dina, simply because she is not able to return it, she actively tries to change this situation, a behavior that is significantly different from that of the relevant stock character.

The reason for her behavior likewise does not fit into an understanding of her as a representative of the Petrarchan tradition. It is the result of severe trauma caused by the Nazis during her tortuous interrogation. What exactly happened is never explicitly mentioned, but based on the description, rape is a likely candidate:

During those six months, when they kept on trying, methodically, scientifically, ingeniously, to make her betray her father's hide-out, happened the things to forget. [...] Somewhere inside her the memory of those things lay encrusted, like a bullet which had not been extracted, in its cocoon of insulating tissue. Normally the injured is unconscious of it except when touched near the scar; and Dina's scar expanded over the whole immaculate surface of her body. (Koestler, 1949a: 64)

The fact that the whole of her body was involved, certainly points in that direction. In fact, this opinion is shared by some of the reviewers: Chamberlain mentions Dina having been “raped by Nazis in the central [sic] European ‘night of the long knives’” (1946: 197), while Pick talks of Dina as “a lovely refugee girl who ‘cannot bear to be touched’; the Nazis had tortured – and perhaps also violated her – before she escaped to the Promised Land” (1946: 12), to mention but two examples. Beyond this case of rape, some commentators also suggest another violation at the time of her death by the hands of her murderers (cf. e.g. Fremantle, 1947: 494 or Glazer, 1947: 56). In other words, although Dina’s behavior might seem Petrarchan on the surface, its motivation is completely different, and psychologically much more complex.

It is worth noting, however, that the character of Dina might also take its inspiration from a source earlier than the Petrarchan love sonnet. Her name, along with the character’s innocence and rape, recalls the biblical Dinah of the Genesis:

Now Dinah the daughter of Leah, whom she had borne to Jacob, went out to visit the daughters of the land. When Shechem the son of Hamor the Hivite, the prince of the land, saw her, he took her and lay with her by force. He was deeply attracted to Dinah the daughter of Jacob, and he loved the girl and spoke tenderly to her. So Shechem spoke to his father Hamor, saying, “Get me this young girl for a wife.” Now Jacob heard that he had defiled Dinah his daughter; but his sons were with his livestock in the field, so Jacob kept silent until they came in. Then Hamor the father of Shechem went out to Jacob to speak with him. Now the sons of Jacob came in from the field when they heard it; and the men were grieved, and they were very angry because he had done a disgraceful thing in Israel by lying with Jacob’s daughter, for such a thing ought not to be done. (Genesis 34:1–7, NASB)

With all the undeniable commonality in the name and the act, the parallel does not go much further, however. The biblical passage provides no clues as to the personality, behavior or even the looks of the character, beyond mentioning her beauty.

The question of Dina’s identity as the unapproachable virgin, however, inevitably brings along the alternative position of the seductress as well. As Sicker states, summarizing T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, “as sex became increasingly secularized, man came to think of fornication in two unnatural ways: either as a matter of male force or of female seduction. Correspondingly, our view of woman has also become bifurcated; we have inveterately represented her as the raped and abandoned virgin, on the one hand, and as the enchanting seductress, on the other” (1984: 423). The only character who could be Dina’s counterpart in the novel is Ellen, Joseph’s other significant woman. And in some ways, she fits the role rather well. As Campbell explains, describing the typical seductress, “when it suddenly dawns on us, or is forced to our attention, that everything we think or do is necessarily tainted with the odor of the flesh, then, not uncommonly, there is experienced a moment of

revulsion: life, the acts of life, the organs of life, woman in particular as the great symbol of life, become intolerable to the pure, the pure, pure soul" (2004: 112). In contrast to Dina's purity and idealized beauty, Ellen is described as someone "hefty, robust", and Joseph describes her bodily odor in particular detail when he explains that "[i]n moonlight, the fragrance of a girl's armpits is an aphrodisiac; in the morning it is a deterrent" (Koestler, 1949a: 115). Likewise, their relationship is a matter of nothing more than Joseph avoiding the threat of "running about like a rat poisoned with sex hormones" and making sure that Ellen would also not "suffer the same privation" (Koestler, 1949a: 115). Rather than romantic and beautiful, it is a matter of biological needs, taking the form of a down-to-earth, almost contractual transaction:

And yet it had all started in such a nice, enlightened and businesslike manner. No nonsense about love – no – agreed. Sympathy – yes – moderate, agreed. Mutual need, give and take, agreed. No obligations, no entries on the credit or debit columns, quits. The perfect barter system on the Schacht model. Christ, were we enlightened! (Koestler, 1949a: 114)

One can thus easily see that Ellen's existence as nothing but a sexual object does point in the direction of her character being based on the archetype of the woman as seductress.

Having pointed out earlier that Dina's is a speaking name, it is rather tempting to also see Ellen's in the same light. The name "Ellen" being a version of "Helen", the logical association would be Helen of Troy, but she does not fit the role of a seductress too easily, or at least not in the Homeric version. There, Helen is "full of self-recrimination, regret, and longing for the family and friends she left behind in Sparta" (Roisman, 2008: 129). She is a woman who eloped with Paris against her own will, who repeatedly "addresses him in a speech full of derision and contempt" (Roisman, 2008: 130) for what he did to her. This Helen is a woman who ends up in her peculiar situation simply because she "follows the dictates of love [...] whether she wants it or not" (Roisman, 2008: 130). Such a Helen could hardly have influenced the character of Ellen in *Thieves in the Night*. Her appearance in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, where she is "regarded by most as a succubus", and where some claim that "Faustus is indeed lost when he kisses Helen" (Kiessling, 1975: 206), is possibly closer to that of Ellen. But this position of Helen as a lethal attraction in Marlowe's play springs only from her status as a spirit, due to Faustus' alleged indulgence in "demoniality, that is, bodily intercourse with demons" (Greg, 1946: 106, qtd. in Kiessling, 1975: 205). This can in no way apply to the novel's Ellen, not only because of her strongly physical, dirt-bound bodily existence (as pointed out above), but also because of her position as "a mature comrade", "held in high esteem by the community" (Koestler, 1949a: 167, 114). In other words, regardless of the similarity of the name, although there may indeed be some

elements of Ellen's character shared with seductresses in general, there are no commonalities with the features of Helen of Troy.

Returning to the issue of Ellen's potential similarity to the archetype of the seductress, one has to realize that this parallel also has limitations. First of all, if she was no more than this stock character, Joseph would leave her once he realized her identity. As Campbell explains, once the protagonist recognizes the seductress as such, "[n]o longer can [he] rest in innocence with the goddess of the flesh; for she is become the queen of sin" (2004: 113). In other words, a seductress might cause complications for the protagonist, but cannot be his final haven: "[t]he seeker of the life beyond life must press beyond her, surpass the temptations of her call, and soar to the immaculate ether beyond" (Campbell, 2004: 112). Yet, Ellen ends up being exactly that haven: Joseph's partner for life, with whom he settles down and who grows on him enough to consider his feelings as close to love as life allows for him to experience:

She had looked very happy and almost pretty in the white bed with the red poppies on the bedside table. Joseph had brought them, and she had been so grateful and overjoyed that he in turn had felt moved by a mixture of pity, fondness, physical desire and the guilt of not being able to feel more for her. However, if one did not analyse this mixture too closely, it could almost pass for the real thing. (Koestler, 1949a: 341)

This is hardly an ending that one would expect from the stereotypical seductress, even if it is not perfect bliss.

Of course, not only the end result (marriage and a life together), but Ellen's very behavior throughout the whole book could be mentioned as an argument against understanding her as little more than this specific stock character. Even though the relationship of Joseph and Ellen starts out in a businesslike manner, and at first there may really not be more to it than sheer physicality, this certainly is not a situation Ellen imagines in the long run. After having had their affair for some time, she repeatedly expresses dissatisfaction with their relationship not progressing any further, leading to such a strong "self-abasement of a proud and strapping girl" that makes even Joseph, who has no interest in an emotional relationship with her, "ache inside", realizing her pain however much she tries to keep the mask of "the wounded but proud female who keeps her sufferings to herself" (Koestler, 1949a: 117, 114). Rather than being a calculating and cold woman, working on how to entrap the protagonist, she is "sobbing and biting her nails in complete misery" (Koestler, 1949a: 117). She craves sharing a life, not just a bed with Joseph: "Don't you ever want to sleep with me – I mean really to sleep, all night, side by side, and wake up in the morning together?" (Koestler, 1949a: 118). In addition, she is also jealous of Dina, the one woman who can have what she cannot:

“All right,” she said. “Save your arguments. Anyway, I know what, or who, is the cause of it all...”

I knew it too; but I didn't ask her, and she had the decency not to mention Dina. She walked out, slamming the door behind her. (Koestler, 1949a: 118)

In fact, the situation is so taxing for her that it even disturbs “her capacity for work”, leading Reuben to reason with Joseph in the name of the community (Koestler, 1949a: 164, 163–172).

In other words, rather than being stock characters, Dina and Ellen are both complex women with traumas, wishes and painful compromises. While when they first appear in the story they may have some features they share with well-known types, these initial situations only set the scene for a love triangle that serves to show the complexity of human relationships. At a climactic moment, seeing Ellen with their baby, Joseph makes the following remarks:

[...] if one did not analyse this mixture too closely, it could almost pass for the real thing. And what, after all, was the real thing? So many emotional compounds passed under that name, that this one might claim it as well as any other. Who knew whether what he felt for Dina was more real? Perhaps if Ellen had been the unattainable one and Dina the mother of the child, his feelings, too, would have been reversed. (Koestler, 1949a: 341)

The situation gets even more complex, and even less fitting into the stereotypical pattern of stock characters, when Ellen and Joseph's child gets named after the dead, and forever unattainable, Dina: “Anyway, the child was a girl and it was to be called Dina. It had been Ellen's suggestion, and it was one of those things about Ellen which went into the compound and made it more solid and adhesive” (Koestler, 1949a: 341).

2.2. The Novel's Palestinian Characters

Of course, in a book that takes place in Palestine during the British Mandate and focuses on the lives of the area's Jewish and Palestinian inhabitants, the typicality of the portrayal of the characters in terms of their belonging to one of these two categories is also worth examining. After all, it was claimed by some that “the ‘blood-and-soil’ type of racist anti-Semite would not find much to quarrel with in this book” (Holme, 1946: 3), or that in the novel, “all the Arabs are medieval, hate the Jews, and are incapable of seeing their own interests” (Glazer, 1947: 55). In other words, the specific charge of disseminating racial stereotypes is not unheard of in connection with the novel—a charge that, I hope to show in the rest of this article, is just as unfounded as the general, and related, criticism of using stock characters.

The stereotypical representation of Arabs/Muslims in European works has included, for more than a hundred years, several typical features. The use of the slash is warranted even

though the two categories are distinct, since the equation of these terms is one of the most frequent stereotypes: popular Western representation sees “all Arabs as Muslims and all Muslims as Arab” (Shaheen, 2003: 174). Further clichés include the claims that “Arabs are brute murderers, sleazy rapists, religious fanatics, oil-rich dimwits, and abusers of women” (Shaheen, 2003: 172). In fact, two typical, not always mutually exclusive, categories for portrayal are to show these characters either through “a synergy of images [that] equates Arabs from Syria to the Sudan with quintessential evil” or to represent them “as buffoons, stumbling all over themselves” (Shaheen, 2003: 176). The line could be further continued by adding that they allegedly “never ask a direct question; they steal; [and supposedly] an Arab only understands the fist; [plus] he is a double-dealer by nature”, while they are also often portrayed as people who are “compassionless, cruel to one another, mistrustful of all outsiders, and stirred to religious hysteria by the least provocation” (Orfalea, 1988: 114), and are dirty (Christison, 1987: 397).

If Koestler’s book was indeed full of stereotyped characters and was as racist as claimed by some of the reviewers, it would be logical to expect to find many, or, potentially, most of these clichés in the text. Yet, the situation is again more complex, even if some of the mentioned stereotypes can indeed be shown to appear.

It is true that there are Arabs in the book who are brutal killers. After all, Dina is killed by Issa and his two accomplices in exactly such a way:

The doctor says there were at least two at her. She must have put up a strong fight, for her finger-nails were broken and there was also blood and bits of skin under them, and there was also blood and bits of skin between her teeth. They counted twenty-seven stabs on her, none of which could have caused instantaneous death. Her nose was broken and some of her hair torn out with shreds of scalp. (Koestler, 1949a: 260)

While admittedly this is an especially brutal manner to die, this is the only scene in the whole novel where the Palestinians commit such a crime. They are otherwise variously portrayed. To mention but a few examples: Jussuf Tubashi is “anxious to prevent a stupid murder”, Issa at different points is shown as someone who repeatedly experiences the “icy ripple of fear” coming and going “with the pitiless monotony of the tide” and expecting the Jewish to kill him at any moment, while earlier he is shown as a young man who follows “instructions with frightened, shifting eyes but in respectful silence” (Koestler, 1949a: 124, 315, 27). The Mukhtar is a respected veteran who “fought as an officer against General Allenby’s forces in the first world war” and who would want the Arab Patriots “as far away as possible from the peaceful village of Kfar Tabiyeh” (Koestler, 1949a: 21, 25). The text talks of “peaceful villages” and “peaceful men”, whose “notables were polite and dignified, the mob picturesque and obsequious” (Koestler, 1949a: 26, 35, 43), to mention but a few of

the descriptions that suggests an often somewhat timid peacefulness, and not brutality or murderous intents.

Perhaps even more importantly, brutality is certainly not a characteristic feature that appears only on the side of the Palestinians. Some of the Jewish characters commit a similarly brutal murder, in retaliation for Dina's death:

The man from Beyrout suddenly jumped forward and hit him with the butt of his automatic across the face. The Mukhtar did not budge. He slowly passed his hand across his nose and mouth, looked at the blood on it and let it slowly drop; then he spat out the broken teeth. [...] The Syrian hit him again with the revolver butt, twice and with full force on the face and skull. [...] The Mukhtar raised himself and, panting, tried to crawl away on all-fours. For a minute or so the Yemenite watched him crawl blindly round in circles among the scree; then he stabbed him between the shoulders. The Mukhtar groaned and tried to crawl quicker, while the Yemenite went on stabbing him, until he collapsed on his stomach. (Koestler, 1949a: 266–267)

Likewise, although it does not take such spectacularly aggressive forms as in the case of the above two factions, the British are also shown to indulge in unnecessary violence and brutal torture:

One of our fellows, name of Benjamin Zeroni, escaped yesterday from Jerusalem prison. [...] I have spoken to him. Both his thumbs were dislocated as a result of being suspended by them for two hours. He was also beaten on the genitals, bastinadoed, and questioned while having water poured into his nostrils. (Koestler, 1949a: 293)

In other words, although brutality is present in the text, it is not something associated with the Arabs, but is rather a general feature that appears to be used, even if exceptionally, by all sides, regardless of nationality or religion.

On the other hand, such recontextualizing of a violent deed through showing that it is not only used by the Arabs cannot be postulated about the book's handling of rape, although "Arabs trying to rape, kill, or abduct fair-complexioned Western heroines is a common theme" (Shaheen, 2003: 178) in stereotypical portrayals. Yet, the book's use of this cliché in connection with a Palestinian perpetrator is not completely unambiguous, even if several reviews insist on Issa and his accomplices not only killing, but also raping Dina (cf. e.g. Chamberlain, 1946: 197; Fremantle, 1947: 494; Mortimer, 1946: 134; Pritchett, 1948: 91). Although Issa indeed refers to the fact that unlike Farid, who is "twenty and a virgin", he knows "what a woman is", and that this is because of the "Hebrew bitch", this is the only evidence supporting such an interpretation, while any mention of even the possibility of rape is curiously missing from the otherwise thorough coroner's report (Koestler, 1949a: 311, 312, 260), already cited above. In fact, while knowing "what a woman is" can in some contexts

refer to sexual intercourse, it is not the only possible meaning: Issa might simply be talking about seeing her naked. This reading is further supported by the text, since it mentions Issa thinking of Dina with “the fury of his unappeased desire” (Koestler, 1949a: 314), which can indicate that although he would have loved to have had intercourse, nothing of the sort happened.

Whether or not there was rape, it is important to mention that the incident also serves as a means to show the Palestinians in a positive light. Although his killers brutally torture him before they kill him, the Mukhtar heroically sacrifices himself to save his son’s life when he realizes that the Jewish community does not know who committed the crime (Koestler, 1949a: 266–267). Likewise, although the Mukhtar claims that Dina was “a whore” and thus no one should blame her killers (Koestler, 1949a: 267), this statement should be qualified by the fact that one cannot expect objectivity from someone who knows that the horrible deed was committed by his own son. The much more objective Arab villagers, however, are clear and strong in their disapproval: “They called the Hebrew girls whores and bitches, but they had disapproved of the hideous deeds of Issa and his accomplices” (Koestler, 1949a: 268). This is in line with the more or less general policy of the book’s Arab population towards the Jewish women, as they themselves express: “we do not want your women whose sight offends the eye” (Koestler, 1949a: 35). Rather than being a group of rapists, they are against any form of violence towards women, even if those women are considered lewd by them. In addition, their strong beliefs in the family may lead them, in extreme cases, as one could see, to sacrificing themselves in order to save other members.

The stereotype of Arab characters being “double-dealer[s] by nature” (Orfalea, 1988: 114) is only exemplified by the Mukhtar, who reluctantly supports the men of the “Syrian revolutionary Fawzi el Din Kawki” by not doing anything against the fact that “his men came regularly every other night [...] to fetch the village’s tribute to the Cause in sheep, flour and durrha”, and even turns a blind eye on their “habit of staying overnight in one hut or another”, while he is “officially as ignorant as the rest of the village” of these visits, and only admits to the authorities that there indeed was a “recent increase in nocturnal thefts” (Koestler, 1949a: 25, 26), but nothing more. He goes through with this act even though he would prefer the revolutionaries “as far away as possible from the peaceful village”, and “hope[s] to be rid for good” of them (Koestler, 1949a: 25, 264). Likewise, although he respects Fawzi’s wish that “a messenger should be sent to him at once if the Hebrews tried to take possession of the Dogs’ Hill” and sends Issa with a message, he also warns the Jewish community about the lurking danger “as a sign of his goodwill” (Koestler, 1949a: 26, 27, 36). Later, he pays a visit to the colony at its first anniversary with the intention to convince them that they “never had a better and truer friend than the Mukhtar of Kfar Tabiyeh, and that the least [they] could do to repay [their] debt to him [is] to give him, once the Hebrew State [is] established, a nice, remunerative function”, although in reality he would prefer “wiping the dogs of the Dogs’ Hill from the face of the earth” (Koestler, 1949a: 85, 27).

Yet, although the Mukhtar could be said to display a stereotypical character trait, it has already been shown that he is more complex than a stock character, thanks to his history as a respected war veteran and his heroic death. What is more, even his seeming double-dealings could be shown to be logical and necessary behavior in his situation, rather than a character flaw or the result of a lack of imagination on the part of the author. One should not forget that the Mukhtar is the leader of a village that “look[s] like an ancient ruin spread over the slope and gently crumbling away into dust”, where women have “faces which [are] withered and dumb at twenty” and have children with a “fly-ridden slimy face” and many cook and live in uncivilized conditions, “on two bricks over a fire of twigs” in “a rusty petrol tin”, and their food is a “greenish liquid” cooked out of sorrel, eaten with bread (Koestler, 1949a: 29, 24, 130, 131). As the leader of a poor and powerless community, trying to be on good terms with all of the three strong powers active in the area, pretending to be the best ally of each and keeping silent about his dealings with the others is probably more of a reasonable political strategy than anything else, and it can even prove to be the only option in such situations. That this is probably the case with the Mukhtar is supported by the text at several points. Early on, he notes that the “alternatives in store” for him were “to get either hanged by the Government or shot by the Arab Patriots in the hills” unless he succeeds in finding an intricate solution, using “extreme wisdom and caution” (Koestler, 1949a: 24). He muses about it in detail, as follows:

There was danger everywhere, and who knew Newton Effendi's game? It was evident that he wanted to avoid trouble; but on the other hand it was undeniable that the Patriots had gone too far by killing not only Hebrews but Englishmen as well, and turning against the Government itself. The whole situation had changed and a man knew no longer where he was, not even with Assistant District Commissioner Newton. And then there were the Military; they had lately started to blow up houses to punish peaceful villages like Kfar Tabiyeh against whom nothing could be proved; and they always selected the best houses in the village to be blown up, the Mukhtar's first. (Koestler, 1949a: 26)

In fact, the Mukhtar feels “like a man walking in the shadow of an evil cloud” and “never really [feels] safe” for reasons that include “the Patriots in the mountains and the Hebrews on the Dogs' Hill” (Koestler, 1949a: 124). His eventual death at the hands of one of these three factions poignantly shows that his fears and precautions were not unwarranted.

Beyond showing Arabs in clichéd roles as rapists, violent murderers and notorious double dealers, another typical way to stereotype them is to avoid showing their variety and the fact that they are often everyday people like anyone else (Shaheen, 2003: 174). This strategy, however, is demonstrably not followed by *Thieves in the Night* where there is a truly wide variety of Palestinian characters. There is Jussuf Tubashi, the “efficient District officer”, a “young man of ambitions” with a university education, and the intention to “become one of

the leaders of the nation on the path from mediaeval backwardness towards the modern corporate state” (Koestler, 1949a: 124). There is the shepherd, Walid, who is a “great pal” of Arie, his Jewish colleague, and is “a quiet and very polite boy”, and although he admires the Jewish settlement’s beautiful trees and modern technology, he still prefers his own, poorer and more traditional lifestyle because of its freedom (Koestler, 1949a: 176, 178). Beyond these polar opposites, the book also features the young intellectuals, Farid and Salla:

Farid, a dark, lanky young man, had the untidy and romantic appearance, the tweedy nonchalance and languid air of an Oxford undergraduate. He came from the oldest Arab families in Jerusalem, had been educated by an English private tutor, wrote English poetry, and articles against English Imperialism in the Arab *El Difa*. Salla, his best friend, was a round-faced dandy with a clipped blond moustache. The two of them had been planning for over a year to launch the first Arab literary weekly, but had so far been unable to find the necessary backing. (Koestler, 1949a: 310)

Another member of the Arab intelligentsia is introduced by the character of “Kamel Effendi el Shallabi, the editor of a moderate Arab weekly”, who has a tendency to be late and is “red-faced, buoyant, elegant”, and who, although supposed to hold rather moderate views based on his journal’s official position, is rather an extremist in person, unlike Farid and Salla who do not even react to Issa’s humming of “Falastin baladna, Yahud kalabna”, or the line’s open recitation (Koestler, 1949a: 208, 209, 211, 310, 312), much less share any similar views.

And although intellectuals are certainly in the limelight of Koestler’s novel, the book is certainly not restricted to them. Besides the already mentioned Walid, the book also shows Arabs in various other roles: one reads about a servant, a cook, the proprietors of a “small Arab eating-house where the food was cheap, dirty and tasty”, and even about poor housewives and mothers (Koestler, 1949a: 204, 209, 232, 24, 130–131).

3. CONCLUSION

In sum, one could say that those reviews that claim that the novel is populated by stock characters are not based on a close reading of the text itself, at least as far as female and Arab characters are considered. As it was shown above, this part of the population of the novel’s fictional universe features an impressive level of complexity and variety. In fact, the three major characters (Dina, Ellen, Mukhtar) show signs of character development and have an intricate set of psychological and contextual factors of motivation for their behavior. These findings support the claim of Sperber (1977) and Vernyik (2016) that the lesser known fiction of Koestler would deserve more academic and critical attention than it gets. At the same time,

there is admittedly a need to further analyze both this novel and those remaining to be able to properly situate and understand Koestler's fiction. This is a challenge, however, that I intend to tackle in my future articles on *Thieves in the Night* and other novels of the author.

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NOTES

- 1 Cesarani's (1998) *Arthur Koestler: The Homeless Mind*, Márton's (2006) *Koestler, a lázadó [Koestler, the revolutionary]* and Scammell's (2009) *Koestler: The Literary and Political Odyssey of a Twentieth Century Skeptic*.
- 2 Buckard's (2004) *Arthur Koestler: Ein extremes Leben 1905–1983* is a case in point in that although the title promises a biography, the book is rather a biographically informed study of Koestler's Jewish identity.
- 3 Szívós' (2006) *Koestler Arthur: Tanulmányok és esszék [Koestler Arthur: Studies and essays]* is an exception: it is a book of essays devoted to the author's literary work, ethical views and scientific writings, amongst others. Yet, it also lacks detailed analyses of specific works, and although it is not a biography, it nevertheless surveys the work from the distant perspective of the whole oeuvre. Weigel's (2009) edited book of essays, *Arthur Koestler: Ein heller Geist in dunkler Zeit*, however, is a true exception, with at least some of its articles being devoted to specific novels.
- 4 While all references in this article are to the 1949 reprint of the novel's 1946 first edition, it is worth pointing out that the book was reprinted in 1967 by Macmillan in its Danube Edition. This version might prove much easier to locate for the general reader.
- 5 One of the points that might support the claim that the critical silence was unfounded is the extraordinary popularity of the novel with the reading public. The book "sold 45,000 copies during the first four months in Britain alone, thereby doing far better than any of Koestler's previous works" (Weßel, 2014: 8).
- 6 At the same time, it is important to note that Joseph turning into a terrorist was not planned as the final outcome of the story. Koestler originally imagined the novel as the first part of a trilogy (Scammell, 2009: 279), although in the end, it remained Koestler's only fictional text about Palestine. *Promise and Fulfilment* (1949b), a non-fiction account of the struggle for a modern state of Israel, however, could be taken as a sequel, and was considered as such by Koestler himself (Hamilton, 1982: 151).
- 7 Nevertheless, while the reading public and the novel's reviewers might have had the impression that Koestler was a militant Zionist, his involvement in the movement was much more controversial and was more of a turbulent love-hate relationship. See Avishai (1990) for more information about this issue.
- 8 While the general British consensus of the novel's reception in the 1940s seemed to insist on the typicality of the novel's characters, Pritchett's (1948) discussion of Koestler's prose was a refreshing exception. It is also important to mention here that this opinion was by no means shared by the American reviewers who mostly refrained to comment on this aspect and in some cases even praised it. See Rosenfeld (1977/1946) or Wilson (1977/1946), for example.
- 9 "valódi regény, hús-vér alakokkal".

- 10 “a falu bírója hét hájjal megkent kapzsi és hazug, a jeruzsálemi kávéházakban nargilét szívó arab sznobok bloomsbury-i eredetijük halvány másolatai, a gyarmati hatalom képviselői pedig a korabeli angol szerzők regényeiből átlépett tökfilkók”.
- 11 The one notable exception is Levene’s biographically informed extended literary analysis, which claims that “[a]part from his treatment of Joseph, Koestler’s approach to the private echoes of the other chief characters is controlled and powerful” and explicitly states that there is “nothing stereotyped and vulgar about the picture of Dina [...] or the silent presence of Simeon’s sister” (1985: 104).

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