# MYTHOLOGICAL AND FOLKLORIC MOTIFS IN SYRIAN PROSE THE SHORT STORIES OF ZAKARIYYĀ TĀMIR

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The interest of Arab authors in ancient forms of artistic thinking has grown considerably in recent times and is revealed in different ways: through ethnographical studies, literary adaptations, the publication of legends and myths, and the inclusion of mythological and folkloric material in modern narrative texts. The present paper is an attempt to analyze Zakariyyā Tāmir's short stories, which are among the most outstanding products of Syrian literature, and to reveal the function of well-known motifs such as the motif of the bewitched place, the motif of the quest for treasure, the motif of the miraculous birth, and others in his works.

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It is well known that artistic maturity is a relative notion and not dependent on age. One writer may fail to achieve it during a whole lifetime of literary activity and another may show himself as a mature writer with his very first steps in literature. Among the latter we may count Zakariyyā Tāmir (b. 1931), who represents the generation of the nineteen-sixties, although he began writing short stories at the end of the fifties. He did not have any prestigious university degree but simply an abundant natural talent: as Ibrāhīm al-Aṭrash has observed, Zakariyyā Tāmir "was neither a student nor a teacher, he was simply an observer and worked as a locksmith."[1] Among his collections of short stories the first, *Ṣahīl al-jawād al-abyaḍ* (The neighing of the white horse) was published in 1960 in Beirut and the last, *Nidāʾ Nūḥ* (Noah's call), appeared in 1994 in London. Most of Zakariyyā Tāmir's works have been published several times in Syria and abroad and many have been translated into various languages.

In spite of differences in the perception and interpretation of Tāmir's writings, Syrian readers and critics have shown a unanimous appreciation of his short stories and recognized their innovativeness. Nor did interest in Tāmir's works slacken after his immigration to Great Britain

[1] Ibrāhīm al-Aṭrash, *Ittijāhāt al-qiṣṣah fī Sūriyā baʿd al-ḥarb al-ʿālamiyyah ath-thāniyah* (Damascus: Dār as-Suʾāl, 1982), 273.

in 1980. In the year 2000 the Syrian literary journal *al-Mawqif al-adabī* published five articles on Zakariyyā Tāmir's fiction in a special issue. Among them there is a paper by Najm ᶜAbd Allāh Kāẓim on the genre to which Tāmir's works belong, pointing out the economy and ambiguity of the language by which he expresses the correlation between the narrative context and its implications,[2] which is of fundamental importance for the aesthetic structure of Tāmir's short stories. Another scholar, Nādiyā Khūst, analyses *Nidāᵓ Nūḥ* in particular, and notes the psychological paradox underlying the bizarre situations depicted in his stories.[3] This paradox reveals the general qualities of Tāmir's creative technique, including the intermingling of farce and tragedy, of humor and seriousness.

In another paper in the collection, Ghassān as-Sayyid argues that the originality of Tāmir's works is revealed not so much through the personality and actions of his characters as through the author's attitude to them and the imagery he uses. He also emphasizes that Tāmir cannot be judged by the usual literary criteria, for these are of little use in interpreting ideological, political or social phenomena.[4] In his aspiration to construct a literary description of the world the Syrian writer recreates an original archetype of universal humanity.

Another contributor, ᶜAbd an-Nabī Iṣṭiyāf, is interested in the semiotic nature of art. He interprets Tāmir's short stories in accordance with a concept of fiction as a sign (*ᶜalāmah*) consisting of two components: signifier (*dāll*) and signified (*madlūl*).[5] In addition to these semantic aspects, the moral values of the work are also important. Interpretation on the ethical level reveals the underlying unity of Tāmir's writing, where the tensions between reality and literary imagery are resolved, reinforcing the artistic focus and integrity of the fiction. The dichotomy between reality and imagery brings to light the infinity of the semantic possibilities, the profundity of the literary technique, and its openness to the cultural tradition from which it springs.

Finally an article by Salmān Ḥarfūsh concentrates specifically on the connection of Tāmir's short stories with Arabic literature, both classical and folkloric, for example, *Alf laylah wa-laylah* (The Thousand and One

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[2] Najm ᶜAbd Allāh Kāẓim, "Zakariyyā Tāmir wa-tajribat al-kitābāt al-qaṣīrah," in *al-Mawqif al-adabī,* no. 352 (Damascus: Ittiḥād al-Kuttāb al-ᶜArab, 2000), 10.

[3] Nādiyā Khūst, "Qiṣaṣ Zakariyyā Tāmir al-jadīda," ibid., 33.

[4] Ghassān as-Sayyid, "al-Ightirāb fī adab Zakariyyā Tāmir," ibid. 43.

[5] ᶜAbd an-Nabī Iṣṭiyāf, "al-Qiṣṣah al-qaṣīrah jiddan," ibid., 40.

Nights), the humorous tales of Juḥā, and various religious texts.[6]

The articles we have summarized above show the considerable range of interest in Zakariyyā Tāmir. Salmān Ḥarfūsh's piece, in particular, touches on some of the questions with which we will deal in the present paper. In contrast to Ḥarfūsh, however, we are not going to analyze the character and essence of the connection of Tāmir's works with concrete texts but to identify some general features of the transformation of mythological and folkloric elements in Tāmir's short stories. Although they were written at different times and do not by any means represent a completely unified artistic approach, on the whole they display a structural and semantic coherence that is very much determined by the function of various leitmotifs drawn from the narrative tradition of ancient epic discourse. The semiotic status of these motifs naturally depends on their structural relation to other units of the text, such as plot, composition, location, and time.

Tāmir's critical attitude towards epic archetypes is inspired not only by the peculiarities of his own creative vision but also by his intention to parody the traditional narrative schemes. In many of his works the rejection of superficial credibility, the arbitrariness of the narrative process, the illogicality of causal relationships, and the implausibility of events and actions all have the effect of invoking typical mythological and folk associations that are of great importance for the function of the leitmotifs in Tāmir's artistic system.

*The bewitched place*

One of these motifs is that of the bewitched place, an element of mythological and folkloric poetics that he completely transforms. Here it is interesting to contrast Tāmir's use of this theme with another traditional motif, that of the deserted campsite, the *aṭlāl.* The *aṭlāl* motif, described by Kilpatrick as "synonymous with the recollection of past loves,"[7] goes back to the relatively recent and specific traditions of pre-Islamic poetry, while the motif of the bewitched place found in Tāmir's works is connected genetically with the much more ancient and universal topos of the accursed place in popular tales about the forces of darkness and evil. The role of the bewitched place in Tāmir's stories is determined by his choice

[6] Salmān Ḥarfūsh, "Sāḥir dimashqī wa-jaᶜbat kalimāt," ibid., 15.

[7] Hilary Kilpatrick, "Literary Creativity and the Cultural Heritage: The *Aṭlāl* in Modern Arabic Fiction," in *Tradition, Modernity, and Postmodernity in Arabic Literature,* ed. Kamal Abdel-Malek and Wael Hallaq (Leiden, Boston, Köln: Brill, 2000), 43.

of this leitmotif for the description of an imaginary space characterized by its insubstantiality, fragility, and illusoriness, which becomes the dominant spatial paradigm of the artistic model of the world recreated by this writer.

As a mythological-poetical space directly linked with primitive consciousness, the bewitched place is furnished by Tāmir with all the appearance of physical reality, even though it is only the reality of dreams and hallucinations. The unmarked boundaries between this world and that other, imaginary world, and the uncertainty of the status of this world, unprotected from the aggression of the forces of evil, are all reflected in the various spatial shifts and metamorphoses and spatial mimicry in the narrative.

Between this world and that other world there is a mythological bridge, *ṣirāṭ,* over which the believers must pass on Judgment Day. In the short story "Thalj ākhir al-layl" (Snow at the end of the night) it is depicted as a glass bridge separating Tāmir's hero from the "unknown world that is not so far away from him."[8]

In "Raḥīl ilā al-baḥr" (Journey to the sea) the *ṣirāṭ* is described in accordance with conventional Islamic belief as "the straight path, thin as a steel wire and sharp as the edge of a sword. It is situated over the bottomless pit. The virtuous person crosses it easily, but the sinner falls after his first step."[9]

The spatial milieu, where incredible plots unfold and bizarre heroes with their mysterious ability to perceive the outer world appear before us, displays an instability we normally find only in fairy stories. This is caused by the overt or concealed intervention of demons in everyday life and by the extent of their participation in events. This dynamic character of space produces a qualitative homogeneity: in the short stories any place can be bewitched—a café, a street, an outlying suburb—and the hero can be deceived or led astray anywhere, or made to see non-existent people and things.

*Devils, angels, and humans*

Tāmir invokes typical images from Islamic mythology. Among them are demons and devils: the jinn, created from the fire of hot wind and always

[8] "Thalj ākhir al-layl," in *Rabīᶜ fī ar-ramād* (London: Riad El-Rayyes Books, 1994), 16.

[9] "Raḥīl ilā al-baḥr," in *Dimashq al-ḥarāʾiq* (Damascus: Ittiḥād al-Kuttāb al-ᶜArab, 1973), 304.

changing in appearance, Iblīs, rebellious angel or one of the jinn,[10] who was cast out of heaven and who tempts people to sin, *shayṭāns,* fulfilling the wishes and orders of Iblīs, and *ᶜifrīts,* the most spiteful, guileful, and crafty jinn,[11] as well as the angels Munkar and Nakīr, who interrogate and punish the dead in their tombs.

In "Mughāmaratī al-akhīrah" (My last adventure) Tāmir's hero wanders through the streets seeking food and finally buys two eggs from which the angels Munkar and Nakīr appear and say :"We are two angels who visit the dead in the grave and demand an account of the deeds done when they were alive."[12]

According to Islamic belief, the angels Munkar and Nakīr leave righteous people alone until their resurrection and beat unbelievers for as long as God wishes. In Tāmir's story they receive the hero's confession of his sins and then vanish. An evil spirit, disguised as a rat, appears in their place. The hero strikes a bargain with the evil spirit in order to enrich himself, and it is this last adventure that leads him to the other world beyond.

In Tāmir's works, as in Islamic mythology, the jinn appear with an ever changing form, but are mainly benevolent. In "Shams li-ṣ-ṣighār" (A sun for children) a jinni named Mārid is a black cat that helps a boy who has spilt a jug of milk.[13] In "aṭ-Ṭāʾir" (The bird) three cats enter the hero's life and give him wings. "He quickly puts them on, goes up to the top of the house, spreads his wings and flies across the immense blue space."[14]

In "al-ᶜAṣāfīr" (Sparrows) the jinni appears in the form of an angel; "a man dressed in white clothes comes down from the sky,"[15] and cures Nadā, whose legs are paralyzed. In "Shams ṣaghīrah" (A small sun) the jinni appears as a sheep before Abū Fahd's eyes and promises him seven

[10] Islamic tradition remains undecided on whether Iblīs was by nature an angel or one of the jinn (EI**2**, 3:668b–69b, s.v. "Iblīs"), even though Koran 18:50 specifically calls him one of the jinn.

[11] Mikhail Piotrovsky points out that the word *ᶜafārīt* is widely used as a common name for *shayāṭīn* and *jinn*. See his article "Ифрīт" (Ifrīt), in *Ислам: Энциклопедический словарь* (Islam: Encyclopedic dictionary) (Moscow: Nauka, 1991), 117.

[12] "Mughāmaratī al-akhīrah," in *an-Numūr fī al-yawm al-ᶜāshir* (London: Riad El-Rayyes Books, 1994), 81.

[13] "Shams li-ṣ-ṣighār," in *Dimashq al-ḥarāʾiq,* 94.

[14] "aṭ-Ṭāʾir," ibid., 358.

[15] "al-ᶜAṣāfīr," in *Rabīᶜ fī ar-ramād,* 113.

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pots of gold if he allows the sheep to go free. The hero returns home and tells his wife about it. Umm Fahd believes that "devils live underground, rise up at nightfall and play around till the dawn, but that they always come back to their favorite place."[16] So she sends her husband back where he had met the jinni to obtain the promised reward. Instead of the jinni, however, he meets a drunken man who, by his appearance, is recognizable to us, in accordance with popular superstition, as a servant of the devil. After a short struggle, this diabolical creature kills Abū Fahd.

In Tāmir's fiction the characters more often meet with Iblīs than with jinn when they pass from this world into the magic one. In "Ḥaql al-banafsaj" (The field of violets) Iblīs is represented as a family man.[17] In "al-Malik" (The king) Iblīs hides inside a ball.[18] In "ᶜIbād Allāh" (Human beings), Iblīs appears frequently, complete with horns and tail, before the eyes of ᶜAbd Allāh ibn Sulaymān, who "was born barefoot, grew up barefoot, and was hastening to the grave barefoot. But the accursed devil came whispering into his ear how he might obtain shoes like everybody else wore. ᶜAbd Allāh ibn Sulaymān was tempted by these words and obeyed the devil."[19] He allows the evil spirit to beguile him and loses his orientation both in physical and moral space, and as a result he is eventually caught stealing and sentenced to death.

The characters' loss of orientation and their inability to resist the forces of evil are not only evidence of physical or emotional instability but also of a moral metamorphosis, an intellectual crisis, or a spiritual blindness. In a figurative sense both the quick and the dead can appear as devils able to injure the hero and to compel him to commit unrighteous acts. In Tāmir's deceptive space, characters are led astray because everywhere they are the victims of strong temptations—strange visions and fancies that betray the presence of evil forces.

The reference to the devil as "the enemy of humanity"[20] by the hero of "Ḥaql al-banafsaj" expresses not only the emotional reaction of Tāmir's heroes to different situations and events but also reveals their awareness of the connection between their environment and the forces of evil. That the author's heroes nevertheless seek the help of the devil is caused both

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[16] "Shams ṣaghīrah," in *Rabīᶜ fī ar-ramād,* 46.
[17] "Ḥaql al-banafsaj," in *Dimashq al-ḥarāᵓiq,* 274.
[18] "al-Malik," in *an-Numūr fī al-yawm al-ᶜāshir,* 172.
[19] "ᶜIbād Allāh," in *ar-Raᶜd* (Damascus: Maktabat an-Nūrī, 1978), 42.
[20] "Ḥaql al-banafsaj," in *Dimashq al-ḥarāᵓiq,* 273.

by the uncleanness of the space they live in and their own lost and wayward consciousness reflecting their bewitched state.

Intangible space can acquire the metamorphic characteristics of a werewolf and come to resemble the mythological netherworld: "the sky over the city was black without the moon, sun, and stars,"[21] "the birds vanished and children stopped playing in the streets."[22] Such an atmosphere of instability, vagueness and uncertainty is often evoked in Tāmir's works.

Just as a human face can change under different masks and disguises, so urban space becomes a living picture of the devil's manipulations, fluctuating not literally but figuratively. This unpredictable space is an ideal literary environment for sin and wickedness and for diabolical intervention in the destiny of the characters. There are innumerable mysterious transformations: a queen is turned into a butterfly,[23] a man into a fish swimming with the current,[24] a woman into a black snake,[25] a child into an orange tree.[26] Tāmir's short stories are full of such images and symbols drawn from archetypical plots.

Tāmir's heroes act in a state of self-deception, day-dreaming, and madness, and have the power to be mediators between this world and that other world in their head. Satanic characteristics such as envy, spite, blind fury, and rabid hate are revealed in their feelings and motives. In "Raḥīl ilā al-baḥr" the despairing hero damns his city and all its inhabitants: "Let all people of the city die, may women turn into nanny-goats, may rats crawl out of the sewers and eat babies, may the city remain without children forever!"[27] In "al-Aʿdāʾ" (The enemies) a dying man gives advice to his children and grandchildren: "Be bad and dishonest, spread disaster everywhere, and do not speak the truth even if you are threatened with the gibbet."[28]

Satanic though they are, the main characters are nevertheless in fear of punishment in a Flood (*ṭūfān*) that "will sweep away everything,"[29] and

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[21] "Ibid., 271.

[22] "al-Liḥā," in *ar-Raʿd,* 31.

[23] "al-Hazīmah," ibid., 98.

[24] "al-Farīsah," in *an-Numūr fī al-yawm al-ʻāshir,* 167.

[25] "Jūʿ," in *ar-Raʿd,* 58.

[26] "Mā ḥādatha fī al-madīnah allatī kānat nāʾimah," in *an-Numūr fī al-yawm al-ʿāshir,* 88.

[27] "Raḥīl ilā al-baḥr," in *Dimashq al-ḥarāʾiq,* 316.

[28] "al-Aʿdāʾ," in *an-Numūr fī al-yawm al-ʿāshir,* 24.

[29] "an-Nisyān," in *ar-Raʿd,* 37.

live in dread of the end of the world (*ākhir az-zamān*) when "adults and children will die, birds and flowers will perish, and houses, books, flags, desks, and photos will be destroyed."[30] "The catastrophe waits for mankind. . . . The moon, stars, and sun will disappear and the world will sink into the darkness." [31] Tāmir's bizarre heroes also believe in the Day of Judgment. In "at-Turāb lanā . . . wa-li-ṭ-ṭuyūr as-samāʾ" (The land belongs to us . . . and the sky to the birds), a scientist invents an airplane, but people accuse him of heresy and impiety: "a bird flies because God wished it and gave it wings. A man must not fly. The sky is for angels and birds. God created human beings to walk on the earth till the Day of Judgment."[32]

All Tāmir's heroes experience the same strangeness in themselves and in the urban space they inhabit. If some features of that world are revealed in the unnatural appearance of the city, the bizarre characters themselves show demonic traits, like dead people and unbelievers representing the next world. The identification of the heroes with the bewitched place is confirmed by their belief in magic and sorcery. In "Imraʾah waḥīdah" (A lonely woman) the heroine attempts to bring her husband back with the help of a sheikh.[33] In "Ḥaql al-banafsaj" the hero consults a magician in the hope of meeting his sweetheart, who "looked strange and heavenly as she came from the distant, mysterious world."[34]

Zakariyyā Tāmir emphasizes the mutual dependence of the characters upon the bewitched place and of this place upon people whose inner space is as bizarre as the external space surrounding them. Space is dynamic, and may simply disappear or turn into unreality. The existence of his heroes in the unreal world, the dreams and images created by their own vivid imagination, all confirm this: as they strive to fulfill their desires they turn into delusions of their own invention.

*The quest for treasure*

The link between the motif of the bewitched place and the motif of the quest for treasure is highly significant. The interdependence of these motifs is revealed in those short stories where the treasure is entirely imaginary and the devil's help is needed to find it. The quest is described as a contact with the beyond, as a journey down into the mythological

[30] "al-Aᶜdāʾ," in *an-Numūr fī al-yawm al-ᶜāshir,* 14.
[31] "Raḥīl ilā al-baḥr," in *Dimashq al-ḥarāʾiq,* 318.
[32] "at-Turāb lanā . . . wa-li-ṭ-ṭuyūr as-samāʾ," ibid., 57.
[33] "Imraʾah waḥīdah," ibid., 344.
[34] "Ḥaql al-banafsaj," ibid., 272.

netherworld. Tāmir's heroes do not literally look for treasure: all their misguided wanderings and their self-delusion must be perceived metaphorically.

The loss of spiritual values is proof of the falseness of the treasure that the heroes strive to obtain. In "Raḥīl ilā al-baḥr" a beautiful young woman who was thought to be an ideal wife is revealed to be a prostitute.[35] In "Mulakhkhaṣ mā jarā li-Muḥammad al-Maḥmūdī" (Summary of the events that happened to Muḥammad al-Maḥmūdī) the only treasure of the hero is a café that turns into his grave. By a twist of fate he is buried under the very table at which he liked to spend most of his time.[36]

The unreality of the treasure being sought semantically parallels the topos of the deceptive urban setting. The actions of the heroes, misled both by the optical illusions of the city space and the mirages of their own consciousness, are controlled by the spirit of evil, and there is no chance of their finding any way out of the bewitched place once they have become obsessed with it. Only by searching for a genuine treasure can they achieve an internal release from the devil's influence and return to the right way, to the truly holy space which the heroes must enter so as to escape from the false space.

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*Revival and miraculous birth*

If in "Ṣahīl al-jawād al-abyaḍ" (from the collection of the same name) the spiritual crisis leads the hero to do nothing more than think about the need to change his situation and to look for a way out of the bewitched place,[37] in "Ḥaql al-banafsaj" every effort of the hero helps him to discover the boundary between real and false space and in this way to find the path to true salvation. The hero refuses the help offered both by the magician and the devil and "realizes that he should come down from his mountain top and look for the desired object by himself."[38]

The right way is described not as a horizontal motion, which could easily turn into a vicious circle leading back to the bewitched place, but as a vertical motion, a spiritual ascent and rebirth. Tāmir makes it clear that this way requires total abandonment of the bewitched place, for only

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[35] "Raḥīl ilā al-baḥr," ibid., 215.

[36] "Mulakhkhaṣ mā jarā li-Muḥammad al-Maḥmūdī," in *an-Numūr fī al-yawm al-ʿāshir,* 122.

[37] See "Ṣahīl al-jawād al-abyaḍ," in *Ṣahīl al-jawād al-abyaḍ* (London: Riad El-Rayyes Books, 1994), 43–53.

[38] "Ḥaql al-banafsaj," in *Dimashq al-ḥarāʾiq,* 278.

this can open up the prospect of the transformation of the heroes and their renewal.

The motif of revival is also represented in other stories of Tāmir in which he introduces legendary and prominent historical figures. Among such figures are the Arab commander Ṭāriq ibn Ziyād[39] who became famous after his invasion of Andalusia in 711, ᶜUmar Khayyām,[40] the Persian poet, mathematician, and philosopher, Chinghīz Khān,[41] who established the Mongol world empire, Tamerlane,[42] founder of the Timūrid dynasty and patron of literature and art, and ᶜUmar al-Mukhtār,[43] the modern Libyan hero of the thirties, along with others who are resurrected in Tāmir's works. As a motif, their resurrection combines two themes, the mythological story of incarnation, where a person from the beyond comes into our world, loses something and returns to the other world, and the rite of initiation, in which "a man leaves for the beyond, obtains something and then returns to us."[44]

The motif of the miraculous birth, widespread in mythology and folklore, is also found in Tāmir's short stories. It becomes the point of intersection of the mythological and folkloric sources and the plot and structure of the stories. As used by Tāmir, the motif of the miraculous birth stays close to the other archetypical patterns at the core of his narrative, but he interprets it according to his own artistic view of the world, so that, like the other leitmotifs, the miraculous birth becomes a code by which he expresses a combination of structural elements and themes.

The selection of these themes is important for the organization of the semantic space in Tāmir's works, in which the motif of the miraculous birth is taken over unchanged from popular sources and ancient narratives, in which an individual does not die but merely leaves this world to appear again after rebirth. The author gives this a special relevance by posing the question of whether this sinful world is in any actual need of salvation or whether it is simply creating yet more mirages and phantoms, and, in that case, whether the hero, with his own miraculous birth, is no more than a mirage himself.

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[39] See "Alladhī aḥraqa as-sufun," in *ar-Raᶜd,* 19–24.

[40] See "Muhtamm," ibid., 25–30.

[41] See "Jinkīz Khān," in *Rabīᶜ fī ar-ramād,* 103–109.

[42] See "al-Liḥā," in *ar-Raᶜd*, 31–35.

[43] See "al-Iᶜdām," in *Dimashq al-ḥarāʾiq,* 89–94.

[44] G. A. Levinton, "Инициация и мифы" (Initiation and myths), in *Мифы народов мира: Энциклопедия* (Myths of the people of the world: Encyclopedia) (Moscow: "Sovetskaia Entsiklopediia," 1980–82.), 1:543–44.

The paradox of the bewitched urban scenario where any transformation is possible allows the writer to depict the heroes of magical birth as indeterminate figures. Indeed they have such a vague status that ambiguity is inevitable: we do not know whether they are real people or an imitation of humans created by the forces of evil for their own purposes.

In "ash-Shajarah al-khaḍrāʾ" (The green tree) the miraculously born hero emerges from a rock and then turns back into a rock,[45] confirming the connection of his birth with his destiny in the beyond. In "al-Bustān" (The garden) the motif of the miraculous birth of the heroine is not the central point of the narrative, though it remains a latent idea throughout the situations and events of the story. "Some time ago Samīḥah was a fish swimming in the sea, then she turned into a raindrop. When Sulaymān met her, she was a beautiful woman."[46]

The mention of the fish is not accidental and immediately invokes mythological associations. In many archetypical models of the tripartite universe the fish symbolizes the lower cosmic zone,[47] the "underworld" or realm of the dead, which, according to popular belief, a person must visit in order to be revived for his new life.

In "Fī yawm mariḥ" (One happy day) the hero also has a miraculous birth, though his humanity is essentially doubtful because of the baby's appearance and unnaturally rapid growth. He is put up for sale like an ordinary piece of merchandise in a shop that in various ways is clearly marked as a place of the devil. Two adults, brother and sister, buy the baby packed in a wooden box and take him home, only to witness him grow up before their eyes as quickly as in popular tales. Even in his first hours the baby shows his diabolical character and threatens to murder the brother.[48] His subsequent metamorphoses also reveal that the hero is in contact with the beyond and in alliance with the forces of evil, though this is neither confirmed nor denied explicitly. Such semantic vagueness is typical of the transformation of mythological-folkloric themes in Tāmir's short stories.

*Conclusion*

The cultural heritage of the Arabs with all its ancient layers is an inexhaustible source of literary devices for expressing contemporary ideas. The motifs discussed above represent only a part of the mythological and

[45] "ash-Shajarah al-khaḍrāʾ," in *Dimashq al-ḥarāʾiq,* 47.

[46] "al-Bustān," ibid., 9.

[47] V. N Toporov, "Рыба" (Fish), in *Мифы народов мира* 2:391.

[48] "Fī yawm mariḥ ," in *ar-Raʿd,* 108.

folkloric heritage appropriated by Zakariyyā Tāmir, but they show how he incorporates such elements into his fiction and help account for the originality of his model of the world. His works are able to cope with any content—political, philosophical, or moral—and reveal the personality of their author and the contours of his created and recreated reality. Together with Tāmir's skill in wielding the pen, his elegant style, his subtle wording, and the overall richness of his associations, the things we have mentioned are part of what has led to his reputation as one of the foremost Arabic short story writers of our time.