

Defining Identity in Relation to the 'Other' (Palestinians) in Novels Written in Hebrew by Palestinians of Israel

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Introduction

The writing in Hebrew—the language of the Israeli Jews—by Palestinians can be first traced to the 60s. It is therefore a new phenomenon which can be explained by political and historical events linked to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

With the foundation of the State of Israel in 1948, a relatively small number of Palestinians remained within the boundaries of the new State. Their condition was changed radically from being part of a large Arab society to being a sizable ethnic minority in the new Jewish state. By and large, they are and consider themselves to be Palestinians and they maintain family, cultural and political links with the Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank. However they hold Israeli citizenship. Despite the fact that they were granted citizenship and that they had representatives present in the Knesset¹ from the beginning, they were subjected to martial law from 1948 to 1966. Concretely their freedom of movement within Israel was limited and subject to state authorisation. Today the situation has changed, however they live in a complex situation (Kayyal 2008, 32).

The transformation of this group from a majority to an ethnic minority after the creation of Israel had an impact on some cultural and linguistic reference points. With time, this group became bilingual. Ami-Elad Bouskila talks about the process of Israelization of Israeli Arabs which can be explained by the demographic, economic and cultural changes and the lifting of the military regime over the Arab sector (Elad-Bouskila 1999, 38).

The Israeli Palestinian writer Emile Habibi was already noticing in 1966 that the Palestinians of Israel were becoming bilingual by adopting Hebrew. He himself wrote literary works in Arabic, however he published non-fictional essays in Hebrew because he was a political leader of the Arab-Jewish Communist Party.

Most of the Israeli Palestinian literature in Israel is published in Arabic. Its main narrative is centred on the question of the *Nakba*.² It survived and recovered despite multiple obstacles, notably, the departure of most of the intellectuals in 1948, their isolation from the Arab literature in Arab countries and the existence of poor material conditions in which this literature survived (lack of publishing houses, etc.) (Kayyal 2008, 32).

A small number of authors have published literary works, mainly verse, both in Hebrew and Arabic. There is so far only one writer, Sayed Kashua, who publishes consistently and exclusively in Hebrew. By raising the issue of cultural hybridization as a result of the linguistic and literary dualism of some Jewish and Arab writers who publish in Arabic and Hebrew, Kayyal emphasizes their role as intermediaries between both languages and both cultures (Kayyal 2008, 34).

The reception of these novels was varied. In Israel, some critics encouraged the publication of some of these novels such as *Arabesques* because of its high stylistic and linguistic quality. Others, however, dismiss the importance of these novels. Outside Israel, the majority of the Arab literary milieu ignored the existence of this writing. This can partly explain why all the novels written in Hebrew by Palestinians have still not been published in Arabic.

These novels deal with the description of the life of Palestinians in Israel trying to survive discrimination from the Jewish side of the society and demanding more integration into Israeli society.

But one wonders about the relationship to the “Familiar” Other, the Palestinian from the Territories and the Diaspora described in Hebrew, the language of the “enemy.” What is the attitude of the novels’ main characters towards this “Familiar Other?” Do they identify with them? Do they distance themselves from them?

1. Atallah Mansour—*In a New Light*

Atallah Mansour is known as the first Palestinian to have published a novel in Hebrew. He belongs to a Greek Catholic Palestinian family from Jish village.³ He was born in February 1934 in the British Mandate of Palestine and lived through the 1948 war. In order to save his only son from the political turmoil leading up to the 1948 war, his father decided to send him to a boarding school in the south of Lebanon. He became a refugee but managed to return to Israel and legalize his situation. He currently lives in Nazareth. He has been known as a journalist and a writer in Hebrew, Arabic and English since before the 1967 war, that is to say during the period of military rule of the Arab villages within Israel (1948–1966). He has worked for different newspapers such as Ha-Olam Ha-Zeh or Haaretz. He has also published an autobiographical work *Waiting for the Dawn* in 1975 during his stay at Oxford. He published his first novel in Arabic *Samira remains (Wa-Baquiyyat Samira)* in 1962 and then in 1966 he published his first and only novel in Hebrew, *In a New Light (Beor Hadach)*.

Like Yossi—the main character of the novel—Atallah Mansour experienced life on Kibbutz Shaar Ha’amakim (1951–1952) where he learnt the Hebrew language. His knowledge of Kibbutz life leads to the conclusion that the novel is autobiographical (Kayyal

2008, 39).

The account of *In a New Light* is told in the first person by the main character, Yossi. It takes place soon after the founding of the State of Israel. Yossi first lived on Kibbutz Beit-Or (house of light) but he was not satisfied with the living conditions and moved to Kibbutz Har-Or (Mountain of Light) and liked the life and the ideals of building a better society that he found there. Yossi believes in the Socialist ideals of the Kibbutz and wants to be a full member of it. He even falls in love with Rivkah, a Jewess from America who moved to help build Israel. When Rivkah falls pregnant she wants to learn more about Yossi's past and family and this leads Yossi to question his own origins and reveals that in fact he is an Arab.

Yossi is in fact Youssef, an Arab whose father was killed in mysterious circumstances when he was a young boy and was taken care of by his father's Jewish friend. His hidden past becomes known on the Kibbutz when he applies to be a full member. After investigation, the Kibbutz leaders discover his real identity. The other members, who for a time were advocating Jewish-Arab friendship, start to reject him and see him in a "New Light." They try to convince him to go back to his "people" and spread the Kibbutz ideals amongst the Arabs but Youssef fought back for his membership with the support of Rivka. This happens during an election campaign. So to avoid a political scandal of having an Arab on the Kibbutz and also in order to conceal the contradiction between their ideals of equality between Arabs and Jews and their loyalty to Zionist ideals, the Kibbutz's members decide to create a special rule to accept him called the "Golden Path." This rule states that he is neither Jew nor Arab.

In the novel, the term "Arab" is used, but "Palestinian" is never used. It is important to mention that the novel was published before the 1967 war. At the time, the Palestinian Territories didn't exist as they do today because the West Bank was part of Jordan and Gaza was administered by Egypt. Also, the book does not deal with the Palestinians from outside Israel at all.

Vis-à-vis the Arabs, Yossi/Youssef first starts by feeling very distant from them and expresses his superior feelings and arrogance toward them:

During lectures, I, for one, loved to gaze upon the lands of our neighbours beyond those of the kibbutz. I enjoyed the sight of those shapeless fields, the clusters of trees strewn here and there with pitiful haphazardness. Poor ignorant louts who know nothing about the Laws of the Universe, who always mistake the casual for the causal! But they, too, must not be left out of the scheme of things, and it is incumbent on us to bring our gospel to them whether they like it or not. (Mansour 1960, 14)

When Yossi's other identity Youssef is revealed, he starts digging into his past and

challenging his identity, but doesn't have references to construct an Arab identity. He gives in some ways clues as to why he hid the fact that he was an Arab:

Had I got a family at all? I had never thought of them. Was I afraid to think of them, as well as of other things? During my stay at Beth-Or⁴ I recalled them a few times but was ashamed of the fact. (Mansour 1960, 128)

But his intervention at the kibbutz meeting which discussed his membership shows that he definitely wants to keep a distance with his Arab side:

I would like to be a member of this Kibbutz, the same as all of you. It is true that my parents did not fast on *Yom Kippur* or light candles on *Chanukah*, and I don't know what rituals they did observe. When I was five years old my father was killed. I don't know who killed him—it might have been the English, the Arabs or the Jews. He took me with him when he went to sell eggs to the colonists. It was from that colony that I moved to Beth-Or, together with Baruch Mizrahi's daughter, and there I received my education. I remained at Beth-Or until last year and, generally speaking, got along fine with them. The only thing I did not like there was the monotony of the place. I could have stayed there as long as I wished but I didn't see eye to eye with some of the members, perhaps on account of my past. I could, of course, have moved to the city but I loved the Kibbutz life and wanted to cast my lot with the *avant garde* of the revolution. I heard good things about Har-Or and that's why I came here. I have been with you for a whole year. Of course there are still certain problems to settle but I believe that, if you only let me, I can overcome them and be like any other member. (Mansour 1960, 171)

This quote summarizes Youssef's intention. He wants to be accepted by the Jews and is ready to overcome "certain problems, which are not settled." Are these problems linked to his Arab origins? To solve this problem, the Kibbutz's members introduced a new concept that they name "the Golden Path" and which accepts him by denying both his Jewish and Arab identities. The result is that Yossi keeps his distance from the Arabs but is emptied of his Jewish identity. As he says "I was pervaded by emptiness. I saw everything in a new light." (Mansour 1960, 176)

2. Anton Shammās—*Arabesques*

Anton Shammās was born in 1950 into a Christian family in the village of Fassuta (Western Galilee). His family moved to Haifa in 1962 where he managed to attend a Jewish-Arab school and start learning Hebrew. In 1969, he moved to Jerusalem where he

earned his BA at the Hebrew University. He worked from 1975 as a television producer. He lived through the 1967 war and was shaped politically in the 1970s when he began to write articles in Hebrew on current affairs. These articles created a big controversy around the issues of the nature of the Israeli state and its identity.

He is a poet and a writer. He published verse in both Hebrew and Arabic. He is also known as the translator of Emile Habibi's novels. He wrote theatre plays both in Hebrew and Arabic. Today, Anton Shammas is a Professor of Middle Eastern literature at the University of Michigan. He has stopped publishing in Hebrew.

Arabesques is his only novel written in Hebrew. At first Anton Shammas started the writing of his novel in Arabic (1976) and then he switched from this language to Hebrew. Finally the novel was published in 1986. By the mid-80s, Israel was going through an economic crisis and had lost its "Socialist" ideals. In parallel, the Palestinian struggles of the 70s were subsumed by the Lebanese civil war and the Israeli invasion of Lebanon which was very unpopular in Israel. Many political commentators of the time observed that with the Arab population growing towards parity with the Jewish population and with most Arabs seeing Israel as inevitable and envying in many ways Israeli life, that there was a possibility for creating some sort of combined Israeli/Palestinian identity that would provide equal rights to all. Anton Shammas himself was politically for such a perspective at the time of writing the book, being for a bi-national state and opposed to the exclusive Jewish nature of Israel.

Arabesques, as the title suggests, is constructed like an Arabesque window shade with a very complicated interlocking set of characters, sub-plots, times and places. He divided his novel into chapters, some of which are named "Tale" and others "The Teller". This literary style is used to explore the complicated hybrid identities that the author can himself have. It is a semi-autobiographical novel in which the main character is himself named Anton Shammas. However he uses other characters to juxtapose other possible identities.

The novel informs us about the history of the Shammas family from the 19th century through to the 1980s with an importance given to the main Palestinian narrative which is centred on the 1948 *Nakba*. The character Anton Shammas was named after his supposedly dead cousin who it turns out later in the story is not actually dead but was instead adopted by a rich Lebanese family and was renamed Michel Abyad. Anton discovers this story and becomes curious. He therefore decides to look for his cousin and try to learn the truth about what happened. Abyad is by now a militant in the Palestinian milieu based in Beirut. His search takes us to Paris, the Territories and finally to Iowa City. He finally meets Michel Abyad who hands him a manuscript of a fictitious autobiography he has written and leaves him the option of adapting it and signing it himself but requesting that he not be erased from the Tale. This construction is a complicated way of mixing the two characters up and

blurring their identities.

The Palestinian, the missing piece of puzzle

Shammas, the main character of *Arabesques*, grew up in Fassuta village. Due to the geographic position of Fassuta, he is cut from Gaza and the West Bank but keeps some contacts with the family in Lebanon. He introduces us to Soraya Said who lives in Beitein⁵ and who used to be named Laila Khoury before she became a Muslim and married the son of a Palestinian leader of the 1936 revolt. Soraya is the only person who can inform him about his cousin Michel Abyad. The decision to go and meet Soraya Said, seems important because it sounds like a journey that will force him to deal with part of his identity that is suppressed—his “Familiar Other” identity:

Many weeks elapsed before I found the courage and took the step to break the silence I had imposed upon myself after reading about the woman with the blond hair. And so one day I found myself, the way you sometimes find yourself in dreams, on the outskirts of the village of Beitein, on the way to Silwad in the district of Ramallah. But here, too, I procrastinated, gnawed by doubts, putting reluctant heel to irresolute toe, afraid that I might stir up from the distant past the dust of memories that during the long years of her exile had been tamped firmly down into the depths of oblivion, afraid that I might with a single sharp, inquisitive stroke cut into the impacted present and release the bitterness of all those years. (Shammas 2001, 34)

Through his journey, Shammas introduces different characters among them an Israeli author, Bar-On, who is writing a novel based on Shammas the Palestinian from Israel. This allows him to explore his identity as seen by an Israeli Jew. This author decides to change the main character of his novel to that of a Palestinian from the Territories (Nablus) named Paco so that the juxtaposition between Israeli Jew and Arab Palestinian is simpler to deal with. In short, the main character Shammas doesn’t see the need to make a difference between himself as a Palestinian from Israel and the other Palestinians from the Territories, but Bar-On does:

Spotting us, Bar-On drew his companion over and challenged me in a tipsy voice: “my dear friend, you are henceforth released from the fear of my open notebook, because I found a new hero!”

Liam [*another writer*], amused by this twist of fate, asked, “But what has he done to you?” meaning me.

“That’s it,” Bar-On replied. “He hasn’t done a thing to me; that’s the problem. His

compatriot here speaks much more to my heart than he does. He forces me to respond and take a stand toward him. You have to bear in mind that he is still a pure Palestinian, whose strength resides in his simplicity and his lack of cynicism."

"I think you're just making life easy for yourself," said Liam. "You prefer your enemies simple and well defined."

"May be so," said Bar-On, "but my former hero does not define himself as my enemy, at least not in the accepted sense of the word. And that makes it hard for me. On the other hand, I feel much closer to the problems of this Palestinian. Perhaps I'll be proven wrong, but my instinct tells me I can make good use of him." (Shammas 2001, 168)

In short, this novel demonstrates the complex, hybrid nature of identity and the tensions that exist between contradictory identities. He clearly defines various tensions between his primary identity and the "Familiar Others" (Palestinians) but goes further to explore how the "Alien Other" (The Jew) sees this interrelationship of identities.

Anton Shammas considers the "Familiar Other" to be part of his identity and doesn't question it like Yossi in *In A New Light*. It is the intervention of the Israeli Jew that questions his sense of belonging to the Palestinians. This story takes place in a different period to *In a New Light*—instead of in the aftermath of the creation of Israel, it takes place in the midst of a political debate in Israel and among the Palestinians about their future. Next, we will see how a new generation explores this question through the work of Sayed Kashua.

3. Sayed Kashua—*Dancing Arabs*

Sayed Kashua was born in 1975 to a Muslim family in the Arab village of Tira, which is inside Israel, but near the West Bank. He was young during the first Intifada (1988) but was an adult during the second (2000). Today, he is a journalist for the mass circulation Hebrew daily Ha'aretz, and a writer of a popular TV sit-com called "Arab Labour." He only writes in Hebrew, as he does not master literary Arabic. To date, he has published three novels in Hebrew.⁶

The novel *Dancing Arabs* was written and published in 2002 during the second Intifada and the end of any hope amongst many Israelis and Palestinians that the Oslo Peace Accords would lead to peace. It has been translated into English, but once again, not into Arabic.

The Arab who wants to be Jewish

It is a banal story written in a simple and funny Hebrew and it had enough success that it was presented at the Israeli book festival in Paris.

The main character doesn't have a name, but all the details provided make it clearly a

semi-autobiographical novel. It's the life of a Palestinian Israeli from the age of 4 to 24 years of age. He grew up in Tira in an Arab family, but won a scholarship to a prestigious Jewish school in Jerusalem and learns and masters Hebrew. He discovers the Jewish side of society, starts hating his own Arab society and wants to be accepted and integrated as a Jew. He does everything to avoid being identified as an Arab; from the way he dresses to what language he uses. Yet despite this, he is still subjected to racism.

Despite questioning his links to Arab society, he maintains close links with his Arab family and even marries an Arab woman. The main character also has a close relationship with his family in the Territories. He is very conscious that they are different to him and his family from Tira, which is in Israel. His relationship is expressed with fear and hatred:

The grocery store was just across the way, but I preferred to run the errand as early as possible, because I didn't want to be stuck with the Gazazweh, the workers from Gaza, who showed up there every morning. I almost always did get stuck with them, though, and even the few times when I arrived early enough, I'd see them getting off their buses just as I was leaving. Their buses stopped right near the store, engines still running, and the workers would swoop down by the dozen. The store would fill up completely, with a long line outside too. I hated the Gazazweh because everyone hated them; I was afraid they'd kidnap me. They looked to me like ordinary people, and they never bothered anyone, but my grandma's stories about all the children who misbehaved, and whose parents sold them to the Gazazweh, had me really scared. (Kashua 2004, 18)

The following quote explains and summarizes his vision of the "Familiar Other." At one stage the main character is working in a bar in Jerusalem on the night of the Jewish festival of Purim.

It's the night of Purim and two Arabs are taking over the dance floor. ... They are really ugly, especially the short one with the moustache. He swivels his ass, crammed into those cloth pants of his, making a mockery not only of himself but of anyone dancing next to him—of the whole bar, especially Shadia and me. If he wasn't so clueless, he wouldn't dare to dance. Why should Arabs like him be dancing disco anyway? Don't they realize how different they are, how out of place, how ugly? (Kashua 2004, 173)

The main point is that he hates Arabs to the point of wanting to deny them the simple happiness of dancing. He wants to be accepted as a Jew by any means, but he is still rejected by the Jewish society. The more the Jewish side rejects him, the more he hates the Arabs for it.

The character of *Dancing Arabs* lived through the Intifadas which were in a sense the end of hope for a rapid and peaceful agreement between Israel and the Palestinians which would in some way have solved the conflict. In this political context, there is no more middle ground open to exploring blurred identities. The character needs to make a choice and the choice is clear: he wants to be considered Jewish.

Conclusion

By analysing these novels, we can arrive at some conclusions. First of all, this literary genre is dominated by stories that at least in form are semi-autobiographical. The main characters are clearly based on the author's own political and personal experiences. Atallah Mansour really did live on a Kibbutz. Anton Shammas names his main character after himself and gives many details of his character's family that are clearly based on his real family. He really did visit Paris and Iowa City and really did participate in a writers' conference there. Sayed Kashua really did grow up in Tira and really did go to a prestigious Jewish school in Jerusalem where he really did learn and mastered Hebrew.

Secondly, their identities are far more complex than Israeli Jew vs. Palestinian Arab. Identity is not constructed only by "Otherness" and sometimes "Otherness" isn't even clearly defined. Instead identities are constructed through multiple overlapping, contradictory sources of identity and these sources fight each other and sometimes fuse. This can lead either to emptiness (Mansour) or a schizophrenic tension (Shammas) or a desperate attempt at rejection (Kashua).

Thirdly, which component identities are used and how their tensions play out has changed from one generation to another. In the early period the Arab village identity vs. the Israeli socialist Jew bringing civilisation to the Land; later a complex interplay of multiple identities at a time when many thought a fusion of Israeli and Arab identity would be possible and then lastly, during the second Intifada, a rejection of the Arab identity as backwards and the Arabs from the Territories as even worse. That is to say that the struggle of these identities in these novels reflects the politics of the day.

Notes

- 1 Israeli Parliament.
- 2 Catastrophe, Disaster in Arabic.
- 3 Situated in the Safad district (north of Israel) and known in Hebrew as Gush Halav.
- 4 His first Kibbutz.
- 5 Palestinian town in the Ramallah district.
- 6 *Dancing Arabs* (2002), *Let it be Morning* (2006), *Second Person singular* (2010).

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