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## The Quest for Identity in Sayed Kashua's *Let It Be Morning*

Michael Keren

Israel Studies, Volume 19, Number 1, Spring 2014, pp. 126-144 (Article)

Published by Indiana University Press



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# The Quest for Identity in Sayed Kashua's *Let It Be Morning*

## INTRODUCTION

**I**N 2011, MOHAMMED SAIF-ALDEN WATTAD EXPRESSED THE IDENTITY crisis he experienced as an Arab citizen of a Jewish state:

Like a school of dolphins, most Israeli Arabs have lost their way deep in a stormy sea. One wave throws them up; another pushes them down to the bottom of the sea. They struggle day and night for their identity. They keep swimming in that stormy sea wishing for the sunny day to come, thus enjoying the glory of the sea; but the sea refuses to accept them, and the stormy waves insist to throw them out to the shore, where they get suffocated and find their death.<sup>1</sup>

These words represent the feelings of many Palestinian Arabs who, after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, found themselves within its boundaries. Having become Israeli citizens, they were always torn between their national identity as Palestinians and their identity as citizens of the sovereign state of Israel. Many national groups live as minorities within sovereign states, but the situation here has been particularly hard because of the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict and because Israel, while granting its citizens political rights, defines itself as a Jewish state, thus excluding non-Jews from the narrative developed as part of the nation-building process. That narrative views the Jews' settlement of the land of Israel since the late nineteenth century as a return to Zion and a restoration of Jewish independence, while the Palestinian narrative views Zionism as a colonial movement and Israeli independence, achieved after a war in which 700,000 Palestinians became refugees, as a *Nakba* (catastrophe). The Zionist narrative has been institutionalized in the state in a way that made it impossible for its Arab

citizens to identify with the state's hymn, flag, national holidays, and other symbols, as noted by Yitzhak Reiter:

The national goals of the state are . . . reflected very accurately in its values and symbolic representations. The state's principle values, as well as its culture, which dominate the public space, strongly express the national interests and cultural aspirations of the Jewish majority. The public atmosphere, national educational norms and reforms, and official ceremonies that have developed over the years are all built around the Jewish historical memory and accentuate a Zionist outlook that includes Diaspora heritage, the Holocaust and the revivalist movement.<sup>2</sup>

We are thus faced with a complicated situation in which Arabs living in Israel are defining their identity as citizens of the state within circumstances encouraging their exclusion from it. No wonder they have been compared to a school of dolphins lost in a stormy sea, a metaphor relating both to the overall condition of the Arab minority in Israel and to the often futile discourse held about it. In what follows, I discuss that discourse in an attempt to highlight a creative attempt by novelist Sayed Kashua to breach its boundaries.

### THE DISCOURSE ABOUT THE ARAB MINORITY IN ISRAEL

The difficulties experienced by the Arab minority in Israel have been analyzed by sociologist Sammy Smooha, who emphasized the circumstances at their core. The relations between Jews and Arabs in Israel were forged in tragic circumstances of war, destruction, evacuation, and coercion. In 1948, Smooha writes, the Arab minority unwillingly became part of the enemy and was subjected to 19 years of military rule. The Arabs and Jews saw themselves as the indigenous population and demanded almost exclusive rights over the same strip of land.

Smooha puts special emphasis on class differences; Arabs in Israel are a working class community within a middle-class society. About 90% of them live in Arab villages and towns and the other 10% live in separate neighborhoods in Jewish cities. They do not share power and suffer from discrimination in allocation of state budgets, in appointments, and in obtaining work and housing in the private sector. "To put it bluntly," he writes, "the Arab minority is a distinct national-religious-linguistic, non-assimilating and

dissident minority, whose loyalty is suspect, who is discriminated against, does not accept its situation as a decree of fate, and is enlisted in a struggle to change its status.”<sup>3</sup>

Many have shared in the portrayal of the Arab citizens of Israel as a distinct, non-assimilating, dissident minority. Shlomo Ben-Ami sees them as “Torn between their loyalty to their Palestinian brethren across the border and their Israeli citizenship;”<sup>4</sup> Joseph Ginat contends that Israel’s War of Independence has left the Arabs bitter and wishing for revenge, thus bringing about “a bitter existential struggle which has continued for many years on the background of mighty historical myths, which essentially deny the right of the Jewish state to exist;”<sup>5</sup> Raanan Cohen writes that “continuation of the present situation sharpens and deepens the Arabs’ alienation toward the State, to such an extent that it will not be long before they resort to extensive and open civil disobedience and even violence;”<sup>6</sup> Yitzhak Reiter stresses the divide between the Jewish narrative that underlines the children of Israel’s primordial right to the land and the Arabs’ view of the same land as an inheritance from their ancestors;<sup>7</sup> Lawrence Louër claims that “Arabs and Jews are not so much irreconcilable enemies, wishing to annihilate each other, as the bearers of two very different visions of what Israeli society should be.”<sup>8</sup>

Over the years, certain steps toward reconciliation between the Jewish majority and Arab minority in Israel have been taken, especially in the early 1990s when the Middle East seemed for a short while to advance toward peace. Economic conditions in Arab towns and villages improved somewhat, and the Arab communities developed effective political parties and civil society organizations. However, in October 2000 Israeli police killed 13 Arab citizens who demonstrated in support of their brethren in the Palestinian occupied territories, which caused a major setback. Disenchantment and pessimism have replaced hopes for reconciliation and the discourse about the Arab minority in Israel held by Israeli Jews and Arabs alike has been radicalized.

Hillel Frisch describes the backlash of October 2000 from the Israeli perspective: “Israel’s relationship to its Arab minority is largely informed by a sense of threat and security fears. These emanate from the strategic environment in which the dominant community is a majority within its own state yet a threatened precarious minority in the region.”<sup>9</sup> Dan Rabinowitz and Khawla Abu-Baker describe it from the Arab perspective:

The Palestinian community in Israel is a collective loaded with external pressures and fraught with inner tensions. To begin with, Palestinians are a

majority turned minority . . . . Currently numbering over a million, Palestinians now represent less than a fifth of Israel's population and are in constant search of empowerment and political expression. To complicate things further, their quest for equality and genuine inclusion in Israel takes place even as they seek a clearer role within the Palestinian fold.<sup>10</sup>

The Rabinowitz and Abu-Baker book was well received by Jewish and Arab intellectuals in Israel who were encouraged by the authors' championing of a new "Stand Tall Generation" of Arabs in Israel and their straightforward call for a new Israeli ethos that would recognize the irreconcilability of the Jewish and Palestinian narratives. "Israel reflects the national aspirations, collective memory, and cultural values of its Jewish majority," they write:

Its dominant narratives stress the legacy of the Jewish Diaspora, the Holocaust, and the rebirth of the Jewish nation through the Judaization of physical, cultural, and spiritual space. But in the experience of Palestinian citizens, Israel's ascendance, seen by its Jewish citizens as a supreme manifestation of historic justice, is associated with grave familial and communal loss.<sup>11</sup>

Rabinowitz and Abu-Baker see the solution in the abandonment of the Jewish-Zionist narrative and its replacement by "an alternative, inclusive approach to history and destiny",<sup>12</sup> which, they admit, lacks political efficacy. Their book thus joins the discourse about the Arab citizens of Israel held for years within a small circle of academics, writers, and journalists separate from the political aspirations of both peoples. The Jews could not be expected to abandon the Zionist narrative just as the Arabs could not be seen merely as seekers of Palestinian identity.

As'ad Ghanem shows that, although after the October 2000 events many Arab citizens of Israel reported feeling closer to the Palestinians on the West Bank and Gaza Strip than to the Jews in Israel, survey results indicate that most of them see their future within the state and as its citizens, distinct from other groups of the Palestinian people:

Most see their future as largely or somewhat different from that of their fellow Palestinians who live in a political entity to be established on the West Bank and Gaza Strip, or in the Palestinian Diaspora. The data indicate that most Palestinian citizens of Israel (77.2 percent) prefer to remain citizens of Israel and would not want to move to a state established alongside it and become citizens of that entity.<sup>13</sup>

A similar argument has been made by Amal Jamal who claims that although the Arab population in Israel showed a low level of trust in the system after the October 2000 events, this does not mean that all members of this community are renouncing their Israeliness. The Arab community, he argued in 2007, is rather seeking to expand the space in which to maneuver within the Israeli system. It demands collective national rights and power-sharing as well as the instrumentalization of its indigenous status, but doing so through legal means and from within the Israeli system.

Arab political conduct aims at empowering citizenship and turning it into a political formula that accommodates Palestinian national identity on the one hand and Israeli reality on the other. Israeli citizenship, although deeply criticized, is still conceived of as the best grounds on which Arabs in Israel can promote their rights.<sup>14</sup>

Jamal believes that the dialectics of the relationship between the Israeli polity and its Arab minority demand structural changes in the Israeli state in order to incorporate Arab citizens into the state's identity and structure. He also recommends that Arabs be given greater control over some aspects of their collective life and assures his readers that "a full incorporation into the state does not mean that the Jewish majority will lose its dominant status in the public sphere and in state institutions."<sup>15</sup>

Such calls for power redistribution in Israel, which would allow its Arab citizens to fulfill their group aspirations within the structure of the Jewish state, have not been widely accepted. The Jewish–Palestinian divide has rather been considered a zero sum game as demonstrated by David Grossman in *Sleeping on a Wire*, a book in which he recorded conversations he held with Jews and Arabs in Israel. At the outset, he describes his own difficulty as an Israeli Jew to open up to his fellow Arabs and make room for them. He admits that "something like a nervous security guard began running around inside me . . . just how much room to make for them? And at whose expense?"<sup>16</sup> Both his Arab and Jewish interviewees express fear that coexistence would come at an expense to them. As Grossman puts it, "The aspiration to separate unites us."<sup>17</sup> Arab intellectual and activist Azmi Bishara, for example, feels "very foreign among Israelis,"<sup>18</sup> comparing his position in the country to that of an American Indian, while Jewish novelist Sammy Michael's vision of Israel's Arabs includes their holding of a Palestinian passport. "We have still not clarified for ourselves, Arabs and Jews, the meaning and requirements of terms like 'equality', 'coexistence', and 'citizenship',"<sup>19</sup> Grossman contends, expressing his disenchantment

over the little support he detected for his own vision of the Arab minority in Israel as a national group free to pursue its national aspirations within the Jewish state.

Grossman's interviews bring to light some of the features of the discourse about the Arab minority in Israel, including what he calls "mutual evasion and abstention", (205) the division of the world into perpetrators and victims, the endless deluge of words leading nowhere, and the tendency to put forward theoretical solutions to human problems without enough sensitivity to the people affected by them. For example, the complex set of ideas and practices composing the life of an Arab citizen of the state are reduced by many, including well-meaning members of the Israeli Left, to abstract theories about indigenous identity, as if people can be defined only by their national identity. Such reductionism, which overlooks economic interests, professional aspirations, and other personal preferences, results in such reckless ideas as the offer of Palestinian passports to Israel's Arab citizens.

The following conversation recorded in the book depicts these features. It was held between novelist A. B. Yehoshua, a main figure on the Israeli Left, and Anton Shammas, a Christian Arab poet, translator, and writer, over an interview Yehoshua gave in 1986 in which he proposed a solution to the agony felt by Shammas and other Israeli Arabs about their identity:

I say to Anton Shammas—if you want your full identity, if you want to live in a country that has an independent Palestinian personality, that possesses an original Palestinian culture, rise up, take your belongings, and move 100 meters to the east, to the independent Palestinian state that will lie besides Israel.<sup>20</sup>

Shammas responded by pointing at the broader context dismissed in Yehoshua's abstraction of the Arab as an identity seeker. Using the biblical metaphor of Abraham, who is demanded to leave his country, kindred, and father's house for a God-given land in which a new identity is to emerge, he reminds Yehoshua that he, Shammas, is part of a country, kindred, and father's house he is not eager to abandon for the sake of a Yehoshua-given land. While he does not join in the sharp critique voiced against Yehoshua's statement by some intellectuals who saw it as a call for expulsion, he exposes its dividing nature: "You see Israeliness as total Jewishness," he says, "and I don't see where you fit me in. Under the rug?"<sup>21</sup> At the same time Shammas himself proposes unrealistic and reckless solutions to complex political matters, as when he advocates "the de-Judaization and de-Zionization of Israel."<sup>22</sup>

Both intellectuals engage in a long exchange of ideas in which the Jewish and Arab citizens of Israel turn into theoretical entities with no common ground and in which odd solutions that lead mainly to fatigue are proposed. As Shammas says at one point about the conversation, “It is the best prescription for killing time and raising the blood pressure.”<sup>23</sup> Grossman’s summary of the debate captures the nature of the entire discourse about the subject:

The two of them continue to circle within a circular wall, unable to find the proper distance from which they can relate to each other, one to the identity-in-formation of the other, bewildering each other like magnetic poles.<sup>24</sup>

Sayed Kashua’s writings represent an effort to cope with that circular wall by constructing an identity that is not based only on abstractions but accounts for his aspirations as an individual, by refusing to divide the world into “us” and “them”, by exposing the absurdity of proposals such as Yehoshua’s 100-meter move, and by his straightforward observations of a complex political reality. Let me now show how this is done.

## UNDERSTANDING KASHUA

Some of the reasons for Kashua’s attempts to breach the boundaries of the reductionist, dichotomous discourse about the Arab minority in Israel may lie in his life story. Kashua was born in 1975 to a Sunni Muslim Arab family in the village of Tira in central Israel, part of the so called “Triangle” region in which many of Israel’s Arabs live. His father, a member of the extreme left-wing group Matzpen, was detained for two years after the explosion of a bomb in the Hebrew University’s cafeteria in 1969. At the age of 15 the boy was accepted to the Israel Arts and Science Academy in Jerusalem, a prestigious secondary boarding school for gifted students attended by very few Arabs, and after graduation he studied philosophy and sociology at the Hebrew University. He began a successful career as a columnist, first for a local Jerusalem paper and later for the liberal daily *Ha’aretz*. His weekly column in *Ha’aretz*, in which he portrays himself with wit and humor as an anti-hero within a Jewish society, a prime time TV sitcom titled “Arab Labor” he created, and best-selling novels *Dancing Arabs* (2002), *Let it be Morning* (2004), and *Second Person Singular* (2010), make him one of Israel’s most celebrated writers today. He writes in Hebrew and lives with his wife and children in an upscale Jewish neighborhood in Jerusalem. His celebrity



status as a Hebrew writer has raised accusations of his alleged betrayal of the Palestinian cause.<sup>25</sup>

Kashua, however, cannot be seen as advancing or betraying any such cause; his work is marked first and above all by the blurring of common narratives. This is why scholars trying to relate his work to given narratives have mostly failed. In a chapter titled "The No-Man's-Land of the Israeli Palestinian", for example, Karen Grumberg describes Kashua's literary characters as located in a "social, cultural, and spatial in-betweenness."<sup>26</sup> She views the confusion of these characters about their identity as a form of paralysis, failing to account for the possibility that their identity as Palestinians in a Jewish state is a category in itself that can be seen as authentic as any other category. "This confused and confusing identity," she writes, "suspended between a clearly Israeli one and a clearly Palestinian one, gives rise to a new identity that is not so much a hybrid but more a superficial collage of various components identified with 'authentic' Palestinian and Jewish Israeli identity."<sup>27</sup>

Grumberg therefore misses the deep irony in Kashua's novel *Let It Be Morning*, in which he brings Yehoshua's idea of transferring an Arab-Israeli village to a Palestinian state *ad absurdum* by allowing it to materialize. In her analysis, the villagers respond to this new development with acquiescence because of their eagerness to participate in "an authentic Palestinian narrative."<sup>28</sup> Not only does the text not support that interpretation, Kashua's writings defy any such fixed categories.

In an article titled "The Jewish Works of Sayed Kashua: Subversive or Subordinate?", Adia Mendelson-Maoz and Liat Steir-Livny deal with the difficulty to classify an Arab who writes in Hebrew within the common typology of "Hebrew" vs. "Palestinian". The difficulty is solved by placing Kashua in another fixed category, that of the post-colonial writer whose characters imitate the colonists' gaze either as a form of subordination or of subversion. There is no question in their minds about the author's intentions:

Writing in Hebrew clearly positions Kashua at a post-colonial juncture. To speak a certain language implies acceptance of a particular culture and reality . . . As part of the attempt to approach the majority, Kashua consciously chooses to play the post-colonial game, which features the adaptation of Jewish stereotypes and images.<sup>29</sup>

The two scholars do not even consider the possibility that having been educated in a Hebrew-speaking environment, Hebrew has become

the language Kashua feels comfortable to use and that his writings stem as much from literary inspiration and sharp-eyed observations of reality as from a conscious choice to play the “post-colonial game”. Thus, when Mendelson-Maoz and Steir-Livny identify what, to them, seem like Holocaust themes in Kashua’s writings, they attribute them to a conscious attempt by the author “to produce a comparison between Jewish and Arab victimization and national traumas.”<sup>30</sup> This contention misses Kashua’s refusal to divide the world into perpetrators and victims and to consider the condition of Arabs in Israel only from the perspective of victimhood.

A more convincing interpretation of Kashua’s writings is provided by Batya Shimoni in “Shaping Israeli-Arab Identity in Hebrew Words: The Case of Sayed Kashua”. She realizes that Kashua’s literary works are more nuanced than the socio-historical discourse about Palestinian identity. While that discourse focuses mainly on shifts between the “Israelization” and “Palestinization of Arabs living in Israel”, Kashua adds a bold and innovative perspective by throwing into the cauldron of identities the Jewish-Zionist component and its dominance in shaping the identities of the Arabs in Israel. “Socio-historical discussions usually present this component as a national-political factor preventing Arabs from being citizens of equal status in light of Israel’s definition as a Jewish state,” she writes, noting, however, that as a writer, “Kashua has the freedom to deal with the influence of the Jewish identity over the complex combinations among identities of Israeli Arabs.”<sup>31</sup> Thus, Kashua does not just place his characters in a “no-man’s-land” between their Israeli and Palestinian identities but examines the option of another identity—that of the “Jewish Arab”—which is so foreign to the discourse that even Shimoni, who consummately exposes it, cannot help interpreting its literary articulation as subversive.

Whether or not one accepts that interpretation, the Jewish Arabs in Kashua’s writings are characters who not only represent conflicting national symbols within Israeli society but also incorporate broader elements of that society. For example, in one of Kashua’s *Ha’aretz* columns, the narrator, filled with national pride on *Nakba* Day (the day in which the Palestinian catastrophe of 1948 is commemorated), puts on traditional Arab dress and ventures to take his children out to the wild. He ends up, however, at McDonald’s and Home Depot and watches with great pride the *Nakba* Day events on HD television, his pride stemming from the VIP status granted him by the cable company. This satiric tale is more than just a subversive statement; we are faced with an author’s search for a peaceful and dignified life amidst the blend of national aspirations, ethnic strife, racism, violence,

materialism, technological progress, corporate trickery, greed, and many other features of Israeli society, and many other societies, in the twenty-first century. *Let it be Morning* allows a closer look at that search and points at the fresh alternative provided by Kashua to the discourse presently held about his fate.

*LET IT BE MORNING*<sup>32</sup>

The book is written, like Kashua's other works, in the first person singular. It begins with the narrator's return to his parents' house in the village in which he was born. Lying in his old bed in the children's room left untouched since he and his two brothers left, he may be seen as fulfilling his indigenous identity, a wish many intellectuals from Rousseau on would expect him to have, but it is not this narrator's wish. He goes back home because of the difficulty to live as an Arab in a Jewish society, but the room in which everything has been frozen in place does not spark the sense of a "state of nature". He rather understands the Heraclitean truth that the old room is no longer the one he left, for the world is in flux. As he puts it, "I'm going home, to a new place." (16)

The returnee, who has a new house built for him and his family near his parents' home in the village, has no illusions about it. It might be nice to have a home of his own, he thinks, but the house is none but a hideout: "I could easily disappear, easily fix my life in such a way that nobody will notice I've come back to this lousy village. At least I have a big house to bury myself in." (11) He returns to his birthplace because he had run out of steam in his efforts to make a life for himself in the big city. He is employed as a journalist in a Hebrew newspaper but his daily encounters took their toll, leaving him with a sense of apprehension.

The October 2000 events were a turning point in this regard. "Ever since those days, something has been broken, something has died." (19) These two days, he feels, caused the delegitimizing of the Arab citizens of Israel whose citizenship has been repudiated. They also served to stoke fires of vindictiveness among Jews that resulted in graffiti calling for the deportation of Arabs. As a journalist, the narrator was less concerned with such graffiti than with the difficulty to find his place in society. The privilege of criticizing government policy, for example, has become exclusively a Jewish prerogative, while criticism on his part made him liable to be seen as a journalist calling for the annihilation of the Zionist state.

The author vividly depicts the relations between a member of the Arab minority and his Jewish colleagues in a professional environment in which the political tensions affecting them result in political correctness.

I tried to survive. I'd always been a survivor. I knew how to adapt to my surroundings, working and doing what I wanted. Except that ever since those two bitter days in October, the task of survival had become tougher. I had to be twice as careful, to listen to quips and jabs by colleagues who'd never spoken to me like that before. I smiled when the secretary asked, almost every morning, 'So, did you throw any stones in the entrance?' (20–21)

The narrator returns to his village in a futile attempt to seek security, comfort, and dignity. "I needed to return to a place, however small it might be, where Arabs didn't have to hide." (21) His return, however, is not cheerful because not only the narrator but even his wife, who is portrayed in the best tradition of Kashua's writings as a non-reflective down-to-earth person, hates the village. Nothing raises indigenous sentiments more than music, but the journalist seeking refuge in his birthplace cannot stand the nerve-wracking Egyptian music accompanied by the sound of drums and mechanical clapping he hears on the street, or the songs on the Arab music channels broadcast via the many satellite dishes on every roof.

The songs come as a shock to me . . . all of them seem the same and sound the same, about love, mostly, the same words, changing only slightly from one song to the next, the same rhymes, the same annoying melody, a pounding beat that I don't like at all. (31–32)

Contrary to the common image of Al Jazeera as representing freedom of speech in the Arab world, he resents the media network that broadcasts news the Arab world is used to hearing, and likes to hear. He notices it includes no mention of Arab leaders, refrains from investigative reporting about rulers, and does not upset anyone. Nor does he enjoy scenes associated with Arab villages such as the sight of old people sitting at the entrance to the village mosque, rolling their Arab tobacco and licking it tight, huddling there together all day waiting for the next prayer hour. Passing by a group of housewives, he feels only resentment toward them. He is particularly furious about the violence spread in Arab villages for which the Israeli authorities, who take a hands-off approach toward this spreading phenomenon, may be partly blamed but which is disturbing nevertheless. Here, for example, is one description given by his aunts over tea:

By the time the tea arrives, I have heard more stories—about usurious moneylenders using thugs who don't think twice about shooting anyone who's behind on his payments, about a whole army of criminals who exact protection payments from businesses and rape the wife of anyone who turns them down, or force them out of their vehicle in the middle of the village and confiscate it in broad daylight like the tax authorities, and about one poor guy, owner of a grocery store, who balked and dared to cross them. His store was sprayed with submachine-gun fire and now he pays them like everyone else does. (39)

The novel takes a sharp turn when one day a police roadblock is set up at the village entrance, tanks are surrounding it, and the residents, citizens in a sovereign state, find themselves behind a barbed wire with no idea what has happened. From here on, we are faced with an existential tale of life managed in the shade of mythological tanks. Like the residents of Oran in Albert Camus's *The Plague* who have to cope with a mysterious plague affecting their city, Kashua leads us for many pages through the efforts made by the residents of the besieged Arab village to survive.

The initial response is one of disbelief, as the scene is familiar from other regions like Tulkarm in the occupied territories but is inconceivable within Israel's boundaries. "The soldiers must have confused us with Tulkarm', someone blurts out, and manages to elicit some laughter." (53) Belonging to a democratic state, the narrator's father looks for a good reason for the siege, as punitive action in a democracy is not arbitrary but related to the rule of law. He therefore speculates that the Americans must have thrown Israel some important information about an operation in Syria, and that Israel probably wants to make sure that life inside the country remains calm. While such speculations seem pathetic in light of the absolute power the author attributes to the silent soldiers on the tanks, which erases any chance that the rule of law had anything to do with the curfew, the father keeps rationalizing. "Very soon, when they realize we haven't done anything wrong, they'll get out, the way they always do." (94–95)

Responses by radical elements are no less pathetic. Here, for example, is the ironic description of one procession organized in response to the siege by political activists in the village:

The Islamic Movement activists lead the way, followed by the pan-Arabists, then the Communists, each group shouting different slogans . . . the Muslims are shouting "*Allahu akbar*", and "*Khaybar khaybar, ya Yahud*", and that the army of Muhammad will soon be back. The Communists are singing songs

of solidarity and support of the Communist Youth Movement and the pan-Arabists are praising Nasser. (121–2)

The narrator is also not impressed by a procession of armed men with *keffiyehs* masking their heads and weapons held high, a well-known means of exhibiting strength in the Middle East, as the face coverings are not enough to conceal the men's identities. He knows them to be simple criminals. "The pitiful scene of drug dealers and thieves roaming the village streets like some kind of new heroes can only mean bad news" (203), he mutters. So much for the book's treatment of the "Stand Tall Generation" mentioned before. The narrator does not attribute much power to that generation even within the boundaries of the village. The main response to the siege is decided by the village elders who have no difficulty in securing the young people's cooperation.

Assuming that the siege is caused by illegal workers from the occupied territories who found refuge in the village, a decision is made to round them up and hand them over to the authorities. The illegal workers are rounded up, loaded on three buses, and brought to the village gate where the mayor is waving a white flag. In a scene resembling an ancient sacrifice to the gods, a plank is put on the barbed wire, one of the illegal workers is forced to climb up the plank, and as he staggers across he takes a bullet and drops to the ground. As if this scene is not cruel enough, Kashua makes the mayor and his aides decide to try again "apparently convincing themselves that the soldiers had only shot because they thought one of the workers was hiding explosives under his clothing." (158)

This is a tale of confrontation between unequal powers in which the perpetrators and victims are clearly defined, but the author adds a third dimension to that divide, which complicates the picture.

The new turn of events scares me at first, then makes me happy for a few minutes. I'll finally have a good story, I think . . . I'm right on the spot, after all, in the heart of the story—a journalist and a resident of the besieged village. I might even get asked to appear on TV. (55)

The change of narrative from victim to journalist may be horrifying to the reader in light of the gravity of the situation, but it represents a refusal by the author to adhere to a shared narrative of victimhood, a tendency he attributes not only to his narrator but also to other young, educated Israeli Arabs in the story, such as a bank clerk with rectangular glasses and an official black suit complete with white kerchief. She expresses her wish that

the Palestinians in the occupied territories simply leave her alone. "Don't we have enough problems already? They should leave us alone. We don't need to take part in this war." (73)

This approach may seem like a copout; it clearly does not fit the expectation advanced in learned treaties and popular culture that indigenous minorities unite against their perceived perpetrators. Kashua, however, provides a more nuanced perspective. As an incumbent of the Arab minority in Israel he articulates the increasing resentment toward that minority, which many Jews see as a "fifth column" threatening the Jewish fiber of the state, but he does not accept the return to the roots as a viable solution. Just like Zionism, which failed in fulfilling its original goal of giving shelter to persecuted Jews, the return to the village does not grant the narrator peace and security. When things turn really bad, he hates himself for having thought that coming back would solve anything.

As an individual of multiple identities—Palestinian Arab, Muslim, husband, father, educated young man, striving journalist, Israeli citizen, incumbent of the modern world, Kashua is unwilling to define his narrator by a one-dimensional attribute and turn him into a poster child of the Palestinian revolution. At the same time, the novel expresses great agony over the impossibility to realize those multiple identities as a non-Jew in the Jewish nation-state.

This barrier is often attributed to the insistence of the Israel Ministry of Education to emphasize the Zionist narrative over the Palestinian narrative in Arab schools. Kashua gets around this problem by exposing the actual consequences of such an educational policy. When the narrator visits his wife, a geography teacher, in school, he finds her sitting on a chair under one of the trees planted on Jewish Arbor Day, teaching the same material about the *halutzim* (Jewish pioneers) he himself was taught twenty or thirty years ago. "She writes the words on the blackboard—*swamps, eucalyptus trees, diseases, mosquitoes, children dying, sand, desert.*" (82) He doubts, however, whether the children even have an idea who those *halutzim* were.

I had never understood they were Jewish immigrants. It was never stated in so many words. I was convinced they were wise heroes that all of us ought to admire because they invented important things like netting for windows and doors, to keep out the poisonous mosquitoes which used to kill babies. (83)

This is an important paragraph reflecting what can be labeled a post-modern approach to the narratives dividing Israeli society. It hints at the possibility of the Zionist and Palestinian narratives loosening up, merging,

and reconciling. Yet while in the contemporary world conflicting narratives can be expected to loosen up, merge, and reconcile, this is not happening in Israel where the narratives of the past are piously adhered to by both Jews and Arabs. The adherence to outdated dichotomous notions, which makes it impossible for Arabs to feel part of the Jewish state, is attributed in this novel not only to Jewish extremists who write anti-Arab graffiti on walls, or to organizers of armed processions in Arab villages, but to the failure of Israelis in general to understand the complexity of the situation and thus realize the recklessness of the ideas about its solution floating around in the public space. This comes to bear at the end of the novel when the tanks disappear and a historical peace treaty between Israel and Palestine is announced. According to the treaty, most of the Jewish settlements in Palestinian territory will be dismantled and Israeli lands will be handed over to the Palestinians in return for those that will be annexed to Israel.

The narrator's response to the announcement is enthusiastic, as many of the barriers to realizing his multiple identities in Israel, such as the suspicions felt toward Arab citizens of the state, would now be lifted. But he then finds out that his village has been transferred to the Palestinian territory as part of the peace agreement. His quest for identity throughout his life is shut off. His entire being as a person whose life is devoted to a search for a place in a society that he is part and parcel of in spite of the barriers it set for him is ignored.

Kashua would probably not be surprised that the shocking ending of the novel, in which a whole generation of Arab citizens of Israel is denied its quest for a multifaceted identity, may not be understood by many, including well-intentioned souls on the Israeli left. This is hinted at in the scene in which the narrator who first disbelieves the news finds out that the village has indeed been transferred to the State of Palestine and listens to the chatter on TV where a representative of the Israeli left has this to say: "This is a decisive and vital step for the democracy of the State of Israel. We have been freed of the curse of occupation and created clear boundaries for our tiny country." (264) In other words, the narrator, who like the author is an individual of multiple identities—Palestinian Arab, Muslim, husband, father, educated young man, striving journalist, Israeli citizen, and incumbent of the modern world—has once again been subjected to the rhetoric turning him into an indigenous entity free to pursue its one-dimensional identity across the border.



## CONCLUSION

The present discourse about the Arab minority in Israel is largely inspired by the intellectual tradition set by literary critic Edward Said. In his 1994 collection of essays, *Representations of the Intellectual*, Said criticizes the common view of the public intellectual as bound neither by national boundaries nor by ethnic identity. By nature of belonging to a particular language community, writes Said, the intellectual is bound by its constraints, and since one of the main functions of language is to preserve the status quo, and to make certain that things go smoothly, unchanged, and unchallenged, "The mind is numbed and remains inactive while language that has the effect of background music in a supermarket washes over consciousness, seducing it into passive acceptance of unexamined ideas and sentiments."<sup>33</sup>

Said therefore offers the intellectual a choice: "either to side with the weaker, the less well represented, the forgotten or ignored, or to side with the more powerful."<sup>34</sup> Intellectuals are distinguished by their siding with the victims. Following Gramsci's view of social reality as divided between rulers and ruled, Said considers it the intellectual's task to show "how the group is a constructed, manufactured, even in some cases invented object, with a history and conquest behind it"<sup>35</sup> and "to consider stability as a state of emergency threatening the less fortunate with the danger of complete extinction, and take into account the experience of subordination itself, as well as the memory of forgotten voices and persons."<sup>36</sup>

Said then goes a step further, demanding that the concern for the victims in one's own society be turned into a universal concern.

To this terribly important task of representing the collective suffering of your own people, testifying to its travails, reasserting its enduring presence, reinforcing its memory, there must be added something else, which only an intellectual, I believe, has the obligation to fulfill . . . For the intellectual the task, I believe, is explicitly to universalize the crisis, to give greater human scope to what a particular race or nation suffered, to associate that experience with the sufferings of others.<sup>37</sup>

This approach leads to a change in the role of intellectuals: they are now being politicized, becoming actors in what Robert Meister called "the politics of victimhood".<sup>38</sup> The politics of victimhood refers to the intellectual determining in any given situation who is the perpetrator and who is the victim and taking it from there. This is where the intellectual

discourse about the Arab minority in Israel largely stands and where Kashua's contribution to that discourse comes in.

Kashua's writings include strong statements about the vulnerability of the Arab minority in Israel, the arbitrariness with which it is treated, and the failure of the Jewish nation-state to construct itself as an inclusive community allowing both the majority and the minority to flourish. They also point at the futility of solutions brought up in the discourse about the Arabs in Israel. But as he enlightens us on these issues, Kashua refrains from the politics of victimhood epitomizing much of the intellectual discourse about the Arab-Israeli conflict, in which the world is divided into perpetrators and victims with each of these categories applied to one party in the conflict. The multifaceted nature of the parties, and of the individuals composing them, is often ignored. This reductionist, dichotomous approach results in seemingly righteous ideas that are all but reckless.

Kashua's contribution lies in his refusal to adhere to dichotomous narratives in a postmodern world and view the plight of the Arab citizens of Israel merely from the perspective of the victim. This point is particularly salient in *Let it Be Morning* whose protagonist, an Arab citizen of Israel, is situated in a village surrounded by tanks but is given more agency and power than the politics of victimhood would allow. Rather than expecting him to play the role of the victimized member of an indigenous minority, the protagonist is portrayed as a sovereign person who is capable of choosing his way freely and independently.

By so doing, Kashua depicts an issue that often gets lost in the Israeli discourse, the issue of shared responsibility. The model of the young Arab emerging from this novel does indeed belong to a new "stand-tall generation" that is marked, however, not by its success in turning past victims into present perpetrators but by giving rise to a cohort of individuals unwilling to yield their multi-faceted identity to outdated narratives and, as they steer their way freely and creatively within the hard conditions prevailing in the country, they willingly share in the responsibility for the construction of new, conciliatory relations between the Jewish majority and Arab minority in Israel.

## NOTES

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4. In Ra'anana Cohen, *Strangers in their Homeland: A Critical Study of Israel's Arab Citizen* (Brighton, 2008).
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6. *Ibid.*, 2.
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19. *Ibid.*, 204–5.
20. Quoted in Grossman, *Sleeping on a Wire*, 250.
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30. *Ibid.*, 117.
31. Batya Shimoni, "Shaping Israeli-Arab Identity in Hebrew Words: The Case of Sayed Kashua," *Israel Studies* 18.1 (2013): 148.
32. Sayed Kashua, *Let it be Morning*, trans. Miriam Shlesinger (New York, 2006). All quotations are from this English edition, with page numbers in parentheses.

33. Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York, 2004), 27–8.
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35. *Ibid.*, 33.
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37. *Ibid.*, 44.
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