



Is perfect “Passing” possible? nationalism and gender in the Writings of Sayed Kashua

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ABSTRACT

The essay addresses a central aspect in the writings of the Israeli-Palestinian writer, scriptwriter and journalist, Sayed Kashua: the passion of his main characters, all Israeli-Arabs, to assimilate into Jewish culture and pass as Jews. It argues that narratives of “passing”, even when dealing with the crossing of racial, national or social lines, are necessarily tied to gender models. Literature and history are full of stories of “passing”, and all of them, including Kashua’s, depict a craving to pass that shows an affinity to forceful binary heteronormative ideals of manhood and womanhood. The essay offers an analysis of the narrative of “passing” in Kashua’s third novel, *Second Person Singular* (2010). It points to the successful “passing” of the protagonist, Amir, and examines the psycho-political implications of this success by comparing it with other protagonists in Kashua’s earlier writing, who all failed to pass as Jewish-Israelis.

KEYWORDS

Sayed Kashua; Hebrew literature; passing; Arabs; Jews; masculinity; Israel; nationalism

Sayed Kashua is an acclaimed Israeli writer, journalist and scriptwriter. A genuine celebrity, he is in fact the only Israeli-Arab who has been broadly accepted by the Jewish-Israeli mainstream.¹ For more than ten years now, he has written a weekly satirical column for the weekend supplement of the daily newspaper *Haaretz*, affiliated with Israel’s neoliberal left.² This column deals with Kashua’s everyday life, his relationships with his wife and children, and his ongoing clashes with Israeli “identity politics” and the nation’s establishment as well as with the global trend of anti-Islamism. The successful TV sitcom he wrote, *Arab Labor*, was broadcast to high ratings in prime time for four seasons on channel 2, the most popular channel in Israel.³ In 2015, *The Scriptwriter*, another highly acclaimed TV series created by Kashua, aired, this time not as a comedy but a dark drama.

Kashua has also been hugely successful as a novelist. To date, he has published four novels: *Dancing Arabs* in 2002, *Let It Be Morning* in 2004, *Second Person Singular* in 2010 and *Track Changes* in 2017. Bestsellers in Israel, his books have been translated into French, English, Spanish, Arabic, Italian and other languages. Kashua has been nominated for and has been awarded many literary awards in Israel and worldwide.⁴ In 2014, he immigrated with his family to the United States, where he now teaches at the University of Illinois.

Most Israeli-Jews critics regard Kashua’s literary writings appreciatively, yet at least some of them ignore or diminish the centrality of his sarcastic criticism towards Israel’s

politics of exclusion.⁵ The Arab-Israeli public in Israel, on the other hand, treats Kashua with suspicion. Their critique has focused mostly but not exclusively on *Arab Labor*. They accuse Kashua of portraying the Arabs in a ludicrous light.⁶ This stark difference within Israeli society between the Jewish and Arab attitudes towards Kashua's writing is in itself troublesome. A superficial reading of his books might support the allegedly necessary conclusion that Kashua is showing an exaggerated will to comply with the demands of the Jewish-Israeli mainstream. The question then arises: is Kashua a writer who, corroborating the values of the national and social order in Israel, evokes disagreement from the politically conscious Arab – and Jewish leftist – public, or, rather, does his work intentionally and provocatively challenge this specific audience. Might it be that Kashua confronts his readers and spectators with their rooted conditioning vis-à-vis the dichotomy between Arab and white-Jewish identity and forces them to reexamine the assumptions of this conditioning? This paper aims, as its starting point, to follow and analyze the major aspects of Kashua's writing that set this mechanism of confrontation in motion.

As the title of this paper suggests, the issue of "Passing" is central to this analysis. I am not the first to argue that almost all of Kashua's characters, the literary and the scripted ones, share the same declared wish: to assimilate into Israeli society and to be considered "normal Israelis." Similar observations appear in many academic and non-academic references to his work.⁷ My intention is to examine further the intricacy of the wish to pass by discussing the segmentation of the different representations of it, according to the extent to which the wish is realized.

"Passing" has been widely discussed in the academic realm over the past two decades, and has been researched and deliberated from various historical and cultural standpoints, regarding race, ethnicity, nationalism, class, gender and sexual orientation and identity.⁸ This paper examines Kashua's delving into the paradoxical nature of identity categories relevant to Israeli society and their binary structure. The discussion focuses mainly on Kashua's third novel, *Second Person Singular* and points at the ways in which the wish to pass as white, Jewish heteronormative and sophisticated men is narrated and criticized.

Philip Brian Harper observed and pointed at the troubling silence on sexuality and gender within the academic discourse on race and within African American Studies in particular. Inspired by his observation, I argue that even when dealing with the crossing of national or social lines – as Kashua's writings do – the narratives inevitably involve a craving "to pass" that shows an affinity (either subversive or not) with forceful binary heteronormative ideals of manhood and womanhood. The second part of this paper focuses on a specific angle within the discourse of "passing" in Kashua's writings:⁹ the inherent interrelations between narratives of national, social, and ethnic "passing" and those of sexuality and gender. Although scholars have paid considerable attention to national and social "passing" in Kashua's writing, the complexity of gender issues in relation to race and nationality has mostly not been addressed.¹⁰

Passing and privileges: the question of motivation

The term "passing" commonly refers to the process in which a person adopts a public identity that he or she was not born into or is not "entitled" to, according to the hegemonic order. This term bears affinity to personal maneuvers such as camouflage, dress-up, performance and impersonation. History and literature are full of true and fictitious stories of

“passing” that have emerged at different times within various contexts.¹¹ Usually, those narratives reveal that the yearning for personal freedom, safety, mobility, financial opportunity and education is what propelled men and women – at least those whose physical characteristics allowed them to do so – to adopt a different public identity from the one they had been born into. “Passing” is thus primarily a practice of survival performed by subjects who dare to challenge natural and supposedly unchangeable “basic facts” regarding their identity, in order to save themselves from oppression, enslavement and violence and advance towards a better future.

Although the motivation to “pass” is obvious and is related to the desire to acquire privileges, when one delves into specific narratives, the picture that emerges is usually more complex. The underlying assumption in different narratives describing “passing” is that within racial, ethnic, sexual and gender identities there are identified and marked lines; otherwise, the need to pass from one identity to another would not have arisen. Yet these lines can be crossed and these seemingly distinct identities can indeed be interchanged, undermining their exclusivity. Thus, the term “passing” and the physical, psychological and mental practices indicated by this term expose a maze of paradoxes. “Passing” implies an acceptance of dichotomist distributions even as it undermines them, attempting to challenge and even emasculate them from within.

“How the hell can they tell?”: to pass as Jewish

Indeed, the yearning of Israeli Arabs to “pass” as Jews and to assimilate into Jewish-Israeli culture is a central theme and a major strategy of the narrators and the plots in Kashua’s writings. All the main protagonists in Kashua’s texts – on television and in his novels – and even Kashua’s own persona as he portrays himself in his weekly newspaper column are Israeli-Arabs who have an awareness of, and a ridiculously blunt desire to fit in with, Israeli-Jewish society and to integrate into it in a complete, obvious manner. Furthermore, all of Kashua’s male protagonists aspire to shed their Arab identity or, at the very least, to blur it. Numerous episodes, sentences, paragraphs and story lines in support of this argument are scattered throughout Kashua’s texts. A selection of some obvious and major examples include the following:

In the pilot episode of *Arab Labor*, Amjad, the protagonist, a journalist who writes in Hebrew, is driving with his wife and daughter from their home on the outskirts of Jerusalem towards the Jewish parts of the city. To approach their destination, they must pass through a checkpoint manned by police officers and soldiers who are waving down some of the cars for random routine inspections. As they near the checkpoint, Amjad orders his wife and daughter to speak Hebrew “without any [Arabic] accent!” He switches the radio channel to a Hebrew-speaking one, hoping he will be able – literally – to “pass” the checkpoint without being pulled over. After all, he is an Israeli citizen and his car carries yellow (Israeli) license plates, unlike those belonging to Palestinians who live within the Palestinian Authority territories. Despite the normative appearance he attempts to project, the police officer pulls Amjad over, examines his documents and proceeds to check his trunk for any concealed ammunition. “How the hell can they tell?” a disheartened Amjad asks his amused wife. “Do we look different? I spend all my money at ‘Castro’ [an Israeli clothing store] and ‘Zara.’ I listen to the Israeli IDF radio channel. How can they tell the difference?” Later in the episode, Amjad’s friend, Meir, a Jewish colleague at the

newspaper, will give him the answer. It's all due to Amjad's car, he shares his experience as an IDF National Guard trooper. The Subaru Amjad drives is considered "an Arab vehicle."

Similarly, the teenage protagonist in Kashua's first novel *Dancing Arabs* (2002) finds it hard to understand the vast ramifications of his being labeled as an Arab. As Kashua did in his youth, he attends a Jewish boarding school for gifted students in Jerusalem. The plot follows him as he falls in love with his Jewish classmate, Naomi, who reciprocates his feelings but also sets an endpoint for their relationship: the end of high school. In fact, it is Naomi's mother who sets the schedule for her daughter's emotional life. She does not mind that her daughter has an Arab boyfriend as long as they are classmates, but, she states, there is no place for such a relationship in the "real world": "That's what her mother wanted. She said boarding school was a world apart, and as long as we were there she didn't mind that her daughter had an Arab boyfriend. She said she had nothing against me, except it was too bad my name wasn't Reuben or David."¹² The forced breakup with Naomi, and the protagonist's belated awareness that Naomi herself shares her mother's opinion, so depresses him that he is driven to attempt suicide. He learns that his efforts to "pass" as a western Jew – that is, as a white, universal, unlabelled individual according to hegemonic codes in Israel – have failed and will always fail. Even so, he continues to hope that his Arabic identity is vague, insignificant, indistinct: "It must be my wife. She's somewhat Arab. Sometimes, when we go to a shopping mall or places like that, I hope people will assume she's Moroccan or Iraqi, and that I'm a western Jew who likes eastern women."¹³ In one of the most sarcastic and ironic parts of the novel, the following realization suddenly dawns on him:

On Independence Day, my wife didn't feel well, and I took her to the hospital. Camouflage efforts that had lasted for years were shattered in an instant. The soldiers at the entrance to the village asked me to stop by the side of the road. Me they're stopping? The youngest Arab ever to learn to pronounce a p? I have almost no accent. You can't tell by looking at me. I've got sideburns and Coke-bottle sunglasses. Even the Arabs mistake me for a Jew.¹⁴

The nameless teenage protagonist has now become an adult man who goes through life with a pronounced sense of personal failure. Eventually he moves back to his birthplace, the Arab town of Tirah, which represents, from the viewpoint of the hegemonic Jewish Israeli, his allegedly "natural place."

Another nameless protagonist, this time of Kashua's second novel, *Let It Be Morning* (2004), harbors a similar burning desire to belong to the neoliberal-bourgeois-sophisticated clique affiliated with the Israeli political left, as the protagonist mentioned above. He, too, ends up back in his native village after giving up on his attempts to integrate. The turning point for the worst in his life revolves around the events that the mainstream Israeli media and the Jewish public designated as the "October 2000 riots": a series of demonstrations held in Arab villages and cities in Israel in solidarity with Palestinians in the occupied territories.¹⁵ During the demonstrations, thirteen Arab-Israeli citizens were shot dead by Israeli police forces. The Israeli Prime Minister, Ehud Barak, appointed an official Committee of Examination to examine the clashes with the security forces and investigate what had happened in the events up to and including the violence. The families of the Arab victims, as well as the High Follow-up Committee for Arab Citizens in Israel (comprising Arab members of Parliament, mayors and other leaders), expressed deep concerns regarding the committee's mandate. Their concerns materialized after the Or Commission

submitted its findings and dismissed all the police officers involved of any direct responsibility for the deadly outcome of the events.¹⁶

In the midst of all this Kashua situates his protagonist, a journalist covering the demonstrations for the Hebrew paper he works for. Focusing on the Arab experience of the events, he thus loses his credibility in the eyes of his editors and colleagues:

I can recall the day when I was sent to cover the Arab demonstrations in Wadi Ara after the cabinet members put in an appearance at the al-Aqsa Mosque. I must have been the only journalist on the scene working for an Israeli paper, since as an Arab I had no trouble getting into the villages and standing around with the demonstrators, the only journalist who was actually standing on the side that the police and soldiers were aiming their guns at. [...] I was the only journalist who saw the fear in the eyes of the veiled women whose hearts would skip a beat every time someone was brought in, who would cry every time a shot was heard. I was there, and I knew that nobody had expected the police to react so harshly, so relentlessly. Like me, the demonstrators had always thought of themselves as citizens of Israel, and never imagined they would be shot at for demonstrating or for blocking an intersection. Two days and more than a dozen casualties later, the riots were over. I went from funeral to funeral, from mourner to mourner, interviewing parents as they wept and assigned blame and expressed their horror. Then things calmed down. No more tires were burned in intersections, there were no more rallies, no more funerals, and life seemed to be going back to normal. No more spontaneous outbursts like the ones that had cost the locals so dearly. If only it could really have been over in two days – but no, nothing has gone back to what it was before. Ever since those days, something has been broken, something has died. Two days of demonstrations had been enough for the state to delegitimize its Arab population, to repudiate their citizenship. Two days that only served to stoke the Jewish fires of vindictiveness. Those two days had changed my life [...] The report I submitted about those two days of demonstrations was the first to be changed beyond recognition.¹⁷

As a direct outcome of his reporting on these events, the protagonist loses his secure status with the newspaper and is demoted from a salaried employee to a freelance stringer. Being, as he describes himself, a survivor, he tries to adapt to the new rules, but he eventually realizes that he has been brought to the verge of financial catastrophe, and decides to move back to his native village (while hiding his real situation from his wife and family). Nevertheless, even in his hometown, Kashua's melancholic protagonist suffers from the same discomfitures which had afflicted him in the Jewish city and his workplace: a deep sense of alienation, accompanied by revulsion and estrangement. The long years he has spent in the world beyond his childhood village have caused him to forget the local codes and norms of conduct. The protagonist's observations of his relatives and neighbors are deeply critical and denigrating. Through his eyes, the Arab village seems to be an ex-territory, a closed world on the outskirts of Israeli society. He portrays the village as a conservative, ultra-religious and patriarchal place, a community that is harsh towards women and towards Palestinians from the occupied territories, who serve as "cutters of wood and drawers of water" for the Israeli-Arabs. Thus, Kashua's uprooted protagonist ends up doomed to live between two worlds – Jewish and Arab – as an outsider to both.

Ironically, Kashua's protagonist in *Let it be Morning* resonates with the grim destinies of uprooted Jewish protagonists during the revival era ["Hatchiya"] of Hebrew Literature.¹⁸ The common plot of this literature follow the process of exclusion of the protagonists who are marginalized in their native communities but unable to integrate into the modern European non-Jews societies.¹⁹ Likewise, Kashua's Arab protagonist's attempt

to “pass” in the Jewish world as a serious professional journalist fails, and he realizes, returning to his hometown, that he can never really go home again: he will never be able to conform to the place he moved away from so many years ago. The protagonist’s constant tendencies of self-criticism and self-affliction are also in affinity with the prototypical male main character of the proto-Zionist narratives and their generic trajectory of development and growth. But although these similarities may stimulate empathy with Kashua’s Arab protagonist, they also evoke embarrassment and discomfort in the face of this commutative dynamic, which posits its Hebrew readers, once members of the same national community as the “underdog” protagonists, as now being on the same side as the holders of sovereign power, who cruelly reject the Arab for being an Arab.

Failing to pass as a critical mechanism

Hochberg has provided a detailed discussion of “passing” in Kashua’s first two novels. Her claim is that the protagonists recurring failure to pass is the most important aspect of the novels. Underlining the subversive, censorious role given to the failure to masquerade and pass, Hochberg argues that missing the failure’s political implications has led to a misunderstanding of Kashua’s radicalism. That Kashua’s characters knock on the doors of hegemonic Israel only to be repeatedly rejected exposes the violent fundamentals lying at the core of the politics of Israeli identities. Hochberg discusses Kashua’s writings in conjunction with other works of literature by Arab writers whose protagonists are also Israeli-Arabs, she arrives at the conclusion that the characters in their writings too, possess a yearning to “pass” as Jews or at least as Israelis.²⁰ Yet, in Kashua’s works, which comes later than the works of the other authors she discusses, the failure to pass is caused by the weight of national and racial stereotypes: “‘Passing’ is indeed a central theme in *Dancing Arabs*,” she argues, “but it is primarily through repeated descriptions of ‘passing’ that fail to pass that Kashua dramatizes the impossibility of being an Israeli Arab. Examples of such failed ‘passing’ are numerous.”²¹ Hochberg asserts that the failure to “pass” is in fact the narratological and political mechanisms that Kashua uses to expose his critique of the Israeli social and political order:

Kashua invites us critically to rethink this context through the very impossibility manifested in the figure of the Israeli Arab. Indeed, if Kashua’s texts emphasize, as I have suggested, the limits of masquerade and “passing” as viable political instruments for fighting discrimination, they do so only by further calling attention to the violence involved in uncritically internalizing the very illusion of a real unmediated and unmasked identity, itself carried through the promise of a coherent and authentic national subjectivity: Israeli, Palestinian, Arab, or Jewish. It is precisely this illusion, I suggest, that Kashua’s overtly sarcastic and provocative writings target and aim to deflate.²²

Hochberg’s persuasive conclusions serve as the backdrop for my analysis of Kashua’s third novel, whose protagonist succeeds, for the first time in Kashua’s works, to fulfil his burning passion to “pass.” Unlike his previous scripted heroes and literary protagonists, Amir, a social worker by trade who tells his story in the first person, succeeds in “passing” as a Jew of European origin. How can we make sense of this success? How may we read it, considering the ironic, subversive and sarcastic role given to the recurring *failures* of “passing” in Kashua’s earlier works?

The embarrassment and unease when reading Amir's openly declared passion to pass, along with its perfect attainment, is the "punctum" I intend to contemplate, and to further question, when discussing this book. The "punctum," to use the term coined by Roland Barthes in a different context, that of photography, may be explored here as an event that disrupts the interpretive mechanism of a work of art.²³ I wish to regard it as an occurrence, which pierces the serene "Studium" that generally exists between the interpretive process of a work of art and our understandings of it, based on the world depicted in the work, in a manner that does not allow us fully to hang onto our previous comprehensions.²⁴

In Kashua's earlier work, the failure of his protagonists to pass as Jews repeatedly exposed the fragility of Jewish-Israeli identity, which necessitates an Arab "other" in order to define itself. Kashua's fictional characters who wish to deviate from their "natural" place, only to be forcefully returned to it, raised a mirror to Israeli hegemony by exposing the gap between the neoliberal self-image of the Jewish-Israeli political left, which considers itself open and pluralistic, and its basic requisite of exclusiveness. Does the perfect "passing" of Kashua's protagonist in his third novel indicate that Kashua is indeed guilty of conceding part of his critical point of view in favour of flattering his Hebrew readers?

Passing and confessing as contradictory forces

Amir is the first main protagonist in Kashua's novels who owns a name, i.e. has agency, or at least aspires to have one. He earns his living as a caregiver for a Jewish teenager, Yonatan, whose suicide attempt has left him a vegetable. Incidentally, the reasons for the suicide attempt remain secret, leading me to believe that this omission allots the suicide the symbolic form of an emptying out of the life forces of a privileged, satiated Jewish youth.²⁵ Gradually, Amir begins to take on Yonatan's identity, personality, and fields of interests and finally even his name. He listens to Yonatan's music, reads his books and teaches himself to use Yonatan's camera. Through this latter effort, Amir discovers a love for photography, applies to the prestigious Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design under Yonatan's name, is admitted to the academy and transforms himself from an Arab social worker into a Jewish artist. This process is actively encouraged by Ruchaleh, Yonatan's mother, who takes Amir under her wing.

The desire to assimilate and fully adopt a Jewish, western identity is linked to Amir's appeal to belong to the unmarked, to those whose "discursive transparency," to use Homi Bhabha's words, is a form of privilege rather than of oppression. According to Bhabha:

One of Foucault's most enduring arguments is that the place of power is always somehow invisible, a tyranny of the transparent. Recent work on the experience of "whiteness" – a burgeoning topic in cultural studies – makes the Foucauldian line practically axiomatic. The critique of whiteness, whether from literary studies, labor history, autobiography, or sociology, attempts to displace the normativity of the white position by seeing it as a strategy of authority rather than an authentic or essential "identity".²⁶

Amir's passion to pass as a "normative white," as one who belongs with those who integrate freely and naturally within social and cultural positions, is thus a longing towards a

privileged stance. However, his efforts to force his way to a more privileged position is not merely a theme, which occupies the plot and fuels the narrative towards its end. Kashua writes in Hebrew, which is the language of the sovereign community his protagonist aspires to gain access to and earn recognition from. His Hebrew (the writer's as well as his character's) is lucid, accessible and clear; it supports the perfect "passing" of Amir by embodying it and thus blurring the distinction between the writer and his hero. Consequentially, at least potentially, Amir's successful "passing" as a western Jewish young man is liable to reassure Hebrew readers of their superiority. One might even claim that rather than critically confronting the politics that pushes Arabs to masquerade, instead he celebrates the successful camouflage of his own person. Ironically, when Amir, disguised as Yonatan, takes the application exams to Bezalel, he overhears that Arab candidates are prioritized, as the institution needs them to show its political progressiveness: "this is Bezalel. They'd kill to have an Arab in the program."²⁷ Nevertheless, Amir/Yonatan insists on being "unmarked." He wants to be accepted to this school as a neurotic Jew rather than as a "pet Arab."

His scheme succeeds and no one suspects he is not whom he claims to be. However, Amir chooses to reveal his story to the lawyer who is the novel's second main protagonist. Amir's need to confess to a stranger whom he recognizes as an Arab is a dramatic turning point in the plot, after which the readers must reread the whole novel in light of the passionate confession of Amir-who-became-Yonatan. Even though this confession takes place only in the novel's closing chapter, its opening words, "Yonatan is dead. I buried him a week ago," echoes the beginning point of Amir's story, indicating the circular motion of the process. Amir's story about becoming Yonatan, which unfolds in parallel to the lawyer's story, is in fact the story as Amir/Yonatan chooses to impart it to the lawyer:

I wanted to tell someone everything that I had been through during these past years—the lies, the impersonations. To tell all, from the day I graduated and arrived at the house on Scout Street. All the things I couldn't tell my mother or Noa or anyone else in the world. And maybe I also felt that he would understand. I fought back the sob welling up inside me, took a deep breath, and started from the beginning.

"Yonatan's dead," I said. "I buried him a week ago."

Yonatan, the vegetable, is buried under Amir's name. Accordingly, his death can now be perceived as a tragic and symbolic expression of the "uncanny." This addresses the possibility that Amir's opportunity to fulfil his creativity requires that he bury parts of his past. However, Amir/Yonatan's desire to share his story with the Arab lawyer runs contrary to this conclusion. Amir "comes out" of the coffin/closet. His confession violated his perfect "passing," as it exposes the journey from Jaljulia to the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, using narrative to undermine the polarity of the change. Amir is revealed anew, and his story is perceived as part of a dialogue, which involves communication and reflection. Through this act of narration the binary version of the story of becoming Yonatan is revealed as a painful, complicated, non-linear process with middle stages and a dynamic of progress and retraction. Putting this process into words as he discloses it to the lawyer situates Amir's past in his present. In other words, by turning the lawyer into a recipient of his story, Amir/Yonatan disrupts the perfect execution of "passing" which until then had been a secret requiring concealment. The narrative Amir imparts

is the story of flawless “passing” and at the same time its violation; the burial of the past has been breached.

Why the lawyer? The allegorical implications of the chosen addressee

The lawyer is the second and the nameless protagonist of this novel. His professional title serves as a substitute for a name, and as such, it lends itself almost inevitably to allegorical implications. In this sense, he might be described as representing a type who wishes to “enter” the social codes and to decipher the founding principles – the social laws – of belonging to the norm and thus embody those codes and norms. Like many other Kashua characters, he too aspires to pass as a western, sophisticated, P.C. and non-Arab man. Accordingly, he relocates his law-office to the Jewish side of Jerusalem. He also adopts habits he considers to be the “right ones,” like eating sushi, drinking espresso, reading the “right kind” of literature and expressing pluralistic views on homosexuality: “in public the lawyer had never said anything against homosexuality and, in fact, took pains to publicly say that every person is free to choose whomever he or she wants to spend their lives with.”²⁸

His efforts to pass as progressive and liberal even about sexual preferences, come to a standstill when he finds a note in his wife’s handwriting, addressed to another man:

He flipped through the pages, taking pleasure in the gentle breeze and the familiar scent they produced. He reached page 102, where the story ended, and just as he was about to shut the book a small white note fell from the pages. The lawyer started to smile as he read the note, written in his wife’s hand, in Arabic. *I waited for you, but you didn’t come. I hope everything’s all right. I wanted to thank you for last night. It was wonderful. Call me tomorrow?*²⁹

His reaction exposes in him a primitive, murderous, patriarchal side. He loses control and desires to kill his wife in revenge:

The lawyer leaped out of his daughter’s bed to kill his wife. He’d stab the bitch, cut her throat, gouge out her eyes, butcher her body. Or maybe he’d strangle her. He’d sit on her stomach, straddle her, pin her to the bed, and wrap his fingers around her throat, thumbs pushing deep into the flesh.³⁰

After gaining back some measure of control, he confronts his wife and learns that eight years ago, long before she had even met him, she had worked with Amir in The East Jerusalem outpatient substance-abuse treatment centre run by the Ministry of Social Affairs.³¹ She and Amir had gone on a single date, and then Amir had vanished from their workplace and from her life for good. She had left him the note the morning after the date. He read the note but never answered it. The lawyer is still not satisfied by his wife’s explanation. It puzzles him that the note, in Arabic and in his wife’s handwriting, fell out of a book he bought from a second-hand bookshop and had previously been owned by someone named “Yonatan.”³² In his anxious mode, he is certain the note testifies that his wife is having an affair with the notes’ addressee. He manages to track down Amir but he still wonders whom the previous owner of the book, Yonatan and how he is related to Amir and to his wife.

On his way to meet Amir, he fantasizes that Amir and Yonatan are actually a gay couple:

He had seemingly forgotten about his wife's involvement in the matter and now only sought to find out who Yonatan was, who Amir was, what the two had to do with each other, and how the whole thing had happened. It's possible that the lawyer was tickled by the notion that Amir and Yonatan were actually a couple. If that turned out to be the case, he'd be delighted. If it turned out that his wife, before he had come along, had been in love with a gay man, it would make him the happiest person in the world. In his mind the old picture of the tough, tall, muscular Arab with the giant cock turned into one of a dainty little porcelain-faced faggot dancing with his wife at the party.³³

It seems that underneath the image of a successful lawyer lies an anxious man, uncertain of his masculinity, who is being persecuted by an exaggerated, parodic yet clearly orientalist image of an Arab man with a huge cock whom he fears has had a sexual encounter with his (not yet then) wife. The counter-image he produces in his fantasy is of Amir as a weak gay man designed to reaffirm his own "straight" and "normative" identity and to disguise the non-normative aspects of his sexuality. The nature of his fantasy indicates the strengths and the depth of binary gender oppositions in his mind and personality, taking precedence over any other aspects of his identity.

Unlike Amir, the lawyer represses his shaky confidence in his sexual attractiveness. Yet the opening pages of the novel provide a glimpse into his fragility. That he never spends nights besides his wife is the first sign of it. He prefers to surrender his place in bed to his children and to spend his nights in his little daughter's room, where he feels safe, surrounded by children's toys and dolls. His sexual experiences, we later understand, are scarce, and the whole issue of sexual interaction is frightening to and confusing for him. During intercourse with his wife, compulsive thoughts about his grandfather's dead body suddenly appear in his mind, detaches him from the present act and revile an unconscious connection between sexuality and death as well as between intimacy and the abjection of a dead body: "They kissed quickly and without passion, and the lawyer set himself to the task at hand. It would be wrong to say that the lawyer did not enjoy sex, but there was something about it that always bothered him."³⁴ While having sex with his wife, "he remembered his grandfather's wrinkled, flaccid penis and the white sheets with which the men wrapped him as they called out 'Allahu Akbar' [...]. He recalled the sound the body had made upon impact, and realized that he had just given his wife her first orgasm."³⁵

On the face of it, the lawyer, who demands answers from Amir to his paranoid (sexual) anxieties, is the one who disrupts Amir's perfect "passing" and pushes him to confess. Even so, Amir's choice to cooperate with him drives from his intuitive hunch "that he [the lawyer] would understand." This intuition is not entirely meaningless or arbitrary. It stems from a shared experience of belonging to a minority group of Israeli-Arabs, and thus recognizing in the other one's own longing to pass. Amir hardly knows the lawyer, but by the time the two men actually meet and their stories intersect, the readers come to realize that they share more than just their Arab origins and their common aspiration to assimilate into Jewish-Israeli society. The unsettling presence of their heterosexual-yet-weak masculine self-image creates the ground for their communication and bonding: Amir is a gentle and shy person who tends to blush easily. In his only date with Leila, the lawyer's wife-to-be, she rightly observes this: "I blushed and felt my face burn and hated myself for it, wanting to run away. 'You're so shy', Leila said, smiling. Where the hell did she get that from? [...] 'You're different from all of the rest

of the guys in the office’.”³⁶ The lawyer performs as a tougher man than Amir yet we know by now he prefers to sleep in kid’s size bed, surrounded by furry doles rather than sleeping by his wife’s side. The hunting image of Yonatan/Amir in the lawyer’s mind before they meet, as a “tough, tall, muscular Arab with the giant cock”,³⁷ illustrate his self-image, as Amir’s, is of a not tough enough, not tall enough and not muscular enough man.

Passing and gender: a queer perspective

As Hines stresses in the introduction to her study, the development of queer theory and gender studies during the 1990’s has opened the way for the appearance of academic writings by transgender people about themselves. The change of climate enabled transgender identities and transgender culture to be understood and discussed not as form of pathology or cooperation with patriarchy and straight culture, but rather as a threat to it. A queer perspective on “passing” allowed conceiving transgender bodies as performative actualizations of the gender spectrum, jolting the essences of dominant and privileged identities that strive for transparency and stability.

Apparently, chasm in yawned between transsexuals and transgender “passing” and the national “passing” as Kashua’s protagonists perform it. While Amir and the lawyer wish to disavow their origins and conceal it, transsexual people courageously follow their inner sense of “true identity” and express it. Nonetheless, employing the intuition that every “passing” contains aspects related to gender and sexuality another dimension can now be added to Amir’s passion to “pass,” undermining his seemingly natural pertinence to the hetero-normative masculine narrative, and the binary conception of national identities within Israeli society.

Amir was raised in a family that experienced expulsion and ostracism: his mother raised him alone, assisted only by one neighbour, after escaping from Tirah to Jaljulia following the death of her husband, when Amir was a mere infant. His father’s family had demanded the young widow marry the father’s younger brother in order to maintain her honour, but she refused to do so. By breaking the rules of what was deemed acceptable for a woman in her society, the mother was sentenced to a life of distance and solitude, but she managed to extract her son, Amir, from the patriarchal family tradition and its boundaries. Chodorow and Benjamin have suggested, through their different theoretical concepts, that masculine gender identity in modern western patriarchal societies is realized through detachment: men detach themselves from their infantile identifications with their mothers to become proper-masculine-enough-man.³⁸ However, in Amir’s case, such detachment is dramatically postponed until a much later phase in life due to specific circumstances and to his mother’s refusal to obey her gender roll according to tradition. Similarly, Ruchaleh, the mother of Yonatan, adopts Amir and breaks the rules of accepted behaviour, making Amir/Yonatan the son of at least two non-conforming mothers:³⁹

It took me a long time to understand Ruchaleh, or rather, to trust her. [Says Amir]: I gathered from our conversations that she had nothing but scorn for tradition, nationalism, religion, roots, roots trips, and sentences like “He who has no past, has no future.” She believed that the Arabs did a bad job of impersonating the Zionists, who did a bad job of impersonating the European nationalists of the early twentieth century. Nor did she believe in identity, certainly not the local nationalistic version of it. She said that man was only smart if he was

able to shed his identity. “Skin color is a little hard to shed,” she said, “it’s true. But the DNA of your social class is even harder to get rid of.”⁴⁰

Her discovery that Amir had been using Yonatan’s identity she terms her “organ donation”:

“It’s like an organ donation,” is what Ruchaleh had said when she found out I was using Yonatan’s identity. I realized then that she had known about it for months. “Why would I have a problem with it?” she said, shrugging. “Maybe the authorities have some issues, but it’s no harm done to me or my son.” [...] Around here, identity is like one of the organs of the body and yours is faulty. You might as well admit it, being an Arab is not exactly the peak of human aspiration,” she said, laughing, and I could tell from the tone of her voice that she had not meant to offend me. “And what you have here,” she continued, “is an organ donation that could very well save your life.” I don’t think Ruchaleh was trying to convince me of anything then. She could already tell how badly I yearned for it. I think all she wanted to do was to make clear that if there was going to be any trouble, it would not be from her.⁴¹

Amir’s life was saved by his being introduced into the world of art. His “passing” is the step he takes towards having the opportunity to learn and deal with art from a seemingly unmarked stance. In the show he exhibits at the end of his second year, he displays photos of children working as haulers at the Jerusalem market, work that earns him the title of “social photographer.” However, his professors at the art academy cannot fathom why he insists on black-and-white photos, some attributing this to rigidity on his part. Only by taking into consideration Yonatan/Amir’s double identity is his persistence in doing so conceivable. The black-and-white portraits display a spectrum of wealth and variety located amid the black and white, thus allowing a third space (to cite the words of Bhabha) to emerge from within the faces in the photographs: “What we need is a way of looking that restores a third dimension to hard-set profiles; a way of writing that makes black and white come alive in a shared text; a way of talking, of moving back and forth along the tongue, to bring language to a space of community and conversation that is never simply white and never singly black.”⁴²

Blurring polarized identities is a process that takes place not only in the fictitious lives depicted in Kashua’s novels, but also in his own presence in Israeli national-cultural life. Kashua’s persona does not easily settle into a defined identity polarity, and thus it challenges his audience, Jewish and Arab alike, to realize the potential – spooky to most – diffusion among identities which are widely accepted as being exclusive, natural, stable, inborn and unalterable. Like the anxiety brought up by transgenderism, which exposes the gender spectrum’s fluidity, Kashua and his characters who pass between worlds provoke anxiety in the face of a stranger, or “the other,” that penetrates the seemingly stable national and racial identity, while at the same time they prompt bewilderment in the face of the affliction to the self-image of the Israeli liberal mainstream, which believes itself to be open and tolerant. It seems as if for Kashua the constant dynamic movement, which threatens the distinct outline of normative dominant identities, is a given situation. Movement towards “passing” is not necessarily a matter of choice or control. Choice and control are possible only with regard to a readiness to acknowledge – or not acknowledge – the existence of an assimilation wish, and then to face the political and mental consequences of this movement to the fabricated consolidation of normative identity.

Notes

1. Although prior to Kashua other Israeli-Arab writers, such as Emile Habibi, Anton Shamas, Taha Muhammad Ali, Siham Daoud, Salman Masalha and Naim Araidi, entered the domain of Hebrew Literature and gained recognition as poets and writers of prose, they did not integrate into the mainstream of popular Israeli culture. Likewise, Israeli Arabs who are part of the popular culture as actors, musicians and participants in reality TV shows, such as Norman Issa, Mira Awad and Leena Makhoul, do not “hold the rope at both ends,” as Kashua does, as both a writer of literature and as part of the entertainment industry.
2. Kashua’s *Ben-Haaretz* – a collection of his weekly columns – was published in Hebrew in 2014. The English translation by Ralph Mandel, *Native: Dispatches from an Israeli-Palestinian Life*, was released in 2016 by Grove Press in New York.
3. The pilot episode aired in November 2007. The last season (so far) aired in July 2013. For detailed data regarding ratings share, see: Livny-Steir and Maoz-Mendelson, “Hybridity in Israeli Television,” 40.
4. Detailed information regarding Kashua’s translations and publishers and an updated list of the awards given to Kashua’s books is available on web site of The Institute for the Translation of Hebrew Literature (ITHL).
5. Gil Hochberg refers to a few of the critics who were not able to discern this. See: Hochberg, “To Be or Not to Be,” 69.
6. In an interview with Neri Livne, “The Wandering Arab” (published in *Haaretz*, 08.01.2004), Kashua expressed his frustration at the way the Israeli-Arabs reacted to his literary writings. An illustration of a critical sentiment towards Kashua can be found in Hunida Ghanem, “What is the color of Arab?,” 84.
7. See for instance: Harris, “Hebraizing the Arab-Israeli,” 35–58; Hochberg, “To Be or not to Be”; Mendelson-Maoz and Steir-Livny, “The Jewish Works of Sayed Kashua,” 107–29.
8. The term “passing” dates back to the nineteenth century, relating to issues dealing with race. It was first used when describing the experiences of those Africans brought to the Western World as slaves or their descendants who managed – sometimes over a long period, sometimes for shorter episodes – to escape their subjugation and “pass” as white. They were able to integrate into white society and thus travel freely from place to place in various geographical spaces. For preliminary remarks on the discourse and genealogy of “passing” as a historical phenomenon and a philosophical concept, see the introduction in Ginsberg *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*. For more on racial “passing”, see the papers collected in part 2 of Ginsberg’s volume, entitled “The (re)construction of Race,” 57–100, and in part 3, entitled “Blackness and the White Imagination,” 103–77; Sollors, “Passing; or Sacrificing”; and Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile*.
9. Harper, “The Evidence,” 641–57.
10. See note 7 above.
11. Among the most famous of these narratives: Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles*; Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*; Moore, *The Singular Life of Albert Nobbs*; Larsen, *Passing*; Singer, “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy”.
12. Kashua, *Dancing Arabs*, 122.
13. *Ibid.*, 148.
14. *Ibid.*, 202.
15. Prior to the events, Israeli army and security forces in the occupied territories killed and injured scores of Palestinians who were involved in the “al-Aqsa Intifada,” which had broken out in early October 2000. The immediate trigger for this round of violence was a visit made by Ariel Sharon, the head of the opposition party in Israel at the time, to the Temple Mount. His visit was seen by Palestinians as highly provocative. A few month earlier, in July 2000, the Camp David summit between Israel and the Palestinians under American patronage had reached a dead end, causing disappointment on the Palestinian side and a significant fracturing of the Palestinian leadership.

16. For the full version of the Or Commission report, see: http://elyon1.court.gov.il/heb/veadot/or/inside_index.htm (issued: August 2003; Accessed: November 2017).
For a fundamental analysis of the events from the standpoint of the Arab-Israeli side, see the report written by Marwan Dalal under the supervision of “Adalah: The Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel,” which was published in July 2003: <https://www.adalah.org/en/content/view/7409> (accessed November 2017).
17. Kashua, *Let It Be Morning*, 18–9.
18. The concept “Revival era” relates to Hebrew Literature written around the turn of the twentieth century, in texts by authors such as Berkovich, Bialik, Shufman, Baron and Berdichevsky.
19. The protagonist’s grave criticism towards Arab society, written in the Hebrew language, exposes Hebrew readers to the “dirty laundry” of his native Arab culture and thus runs the risk of reviving prejudices against Arabs. Even so, by criticizing the Arab society through the eyes of his uprooted character, Kashua earns the trust of his readers and forces them to reflect on his no-less-harsh descriptions of hostile, patronizing Jewish society and Israel’s national establishment. As the narrative moves in unexpected, seemingly implausible directions, as in the possible dystopic expulsion of all Israeli-Arabs from the state of Israel and a revocation of their citizenship, the reliability of the protagonist becomes a crucial issue.
20. Among them are novels and shorter texts by Mansour, *In a New Light*, Kanafani, “Return to Haifa,”; Habibi, *The Secret Life of Saeed the Pessoptimist*, and Shammas, *Arabesques*.
21. Hochberg, “To Be or Not to Be,” 75.
22. *Ibid.*
23. In *Camera Lucida*, Barth distinguishes between two different modes of attributing meaning to photographs: an intellectual mode and a more experiential and transformative mode. He conceptualizes these differences by ascribing to them the terms “Studium” and “Punctum”, See Barth, *ibid.*, 25–35.
24. *Ibid.*
25. In that respect, Yonatan might be considered a successor of two young and central protagonists of Israeli literature, who actively promoted their own untimely deaths: Uri, in the novel *he walked through the fields*, by Shamir, first published in Hebrew in 1948, and Gideon Shenhav in the short story by Oz, “Way of the Wind,” first published in Hebrew in 1965. Even though the reasons for Yonatan’s act are, as noted, missing, we cannot ignore that he was on the verge of his compulsory enlistment in the army. Shamir’s and Oz’s protagonist each died after enlistment in the Palmah (Uri) and in the IDF (Gideon).
26. Bhabha, “The White stuff,” 21.
27. Kashua, *Second Person Singular*, 2369 of 4043.
28. *Ibid.*, 3891 of 4043.
29. *Ibid.*, 588 of 4043.
30. *Ibid.*, 592 of 4043.
31. *Ibid.*, 2728 of 4043
32. Ironically, the book the lawyer is reading when the note falls out of it is Tolstoy’s *The Kreutzer Sonata*, in which a jealous husband murders his wife after catching her with her lover. The analogy between Tolstoy’s character of Pozdnyshev and the lawyer subverts the common Jewish-Israeli tendency to attribute these murderous impulses to the lawyer’s “authentic” primitive Arab nature, exposed despite his attempts to disguise it. As Tolstoy’s novella reminds us, affects such as possessiveness, violence and jealousy are no more Arab than they are Russian, and so the association between a specific mode of behaviour and a specific national “nature” is shown to be based on racist stereotypical perceptions.
33. Kashua, *Second Person Singular*, 3886 of 4043.
34. *Ibid.*, 526 of 4043.
35. *Ibid.*, 544 of 4043.
36. *Ibid.*, 1346–53 of 4043.
37. *Ibid.*, 3890 of 4043.

38. Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*; Benjamin, *Shadow of the Other*.
39. A third, non-conformist – yet ultra-religious – mother-figure in Amir’s writings is his and his mother’s old neighbour in Jaljulia, Um Bassem.
40. Kashua, *Second Person Singular*, 3396 of 4043.
41. *Ibid.*, 3402 of 4043.
42. Bhabha, “The White Stuff,” 24.

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