

BOOK REVIEW

Kashua, Sayed. *Dancing Arabs*. Translated from the Hebrew by Miriam Shlesinger New York: Grove Press, 2004, 227 pages. Paper \$12.00

Reviewed by **Magid Shihade**

Published first in Hebrew in 2002, the novel is divided into five parts, each containing different stories. Each story features the protagonist speaking through a different character and focuses on a certain person, event, incident, or time period.

Dancing Arabs is dancing between identities and within history. It is dancing through the bitter history of one's self, one's community, and one's people. It is about how things turned out for the Palestinians and how it is to live as a Palestinian under a hostile political system and Jewish Zionist culture. It is written with humor and without self-righteousness.

The author writes about life in Tira—an Arab Palestinian village in the Galilee, with intimate stories of childhood, adulthood, and parenthood. The novel is about the Palestinian community in general.

The novel begins with a story about the narrator's. At the start of the novel, his grandmother tells him about objects she kept in the cupboard where she hid old photos, newspapers clips and documents. His grandmother is the only person idealized in the novel. She is an orphan, who got married and had four children and whose husband died in the war of 1948 while fighting the Zionists. She then worked as a fruit picker to raise her children. Idealizing his grandmother reflects the narrator's view of the female role in the family. She is the oldest, most respected and most powerful person in the family; it is a view of Arab women rarely heard in the West.

The author narrates many stories, often making blunt statements and expressing his feelings about the situation in the country through someone else's voice, like his father's, or his grandmother's. He does that while appearing cynical, often distancing himself from the utterances of those voices. This is a

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way of writing under censorship. This is a tool that most Palestinian writers and poets in Israel have been using since the time of Mahmoud Darwish and Emile Habibi. The tone is not only cynical, but is also full of humor as the author expresses views and feelings, pretending not to be serious to avoid punishment or censure.

The novel reads like a sociopolitical history without idealization. It is about the life of the author's father and family during the military rule of intense administrative detentions, restrictions on movement, civil and political suppression by the state, land expropriations, limitations on civil and political rights and on the expression of their cultural and national identity. It is about the events in Palestine from the British Mandate till the Oslo period. This is a history narrated through the voice of a working-class family that is trying to make it through a life of hell.

The narrative is about a child coming of age as a Palestinian citizen of Israel. As the situation itself, he is full of contradictions. The narrator's grandfather died fighting the Zionists in 1948, and his father was jailed for bombing the cafeteria at the Hebrew University. After elementary school in his village, the narrator (who is nameless) attends a Jewish boarding high school on a scholarship. Whether in his own Palestinian Arab society or in the new Jewish environment, he always feels out of place.

He struggles with the complexity of the situation for Palestinians in Israel, his upbringing in a conservative society and his exposure to a liberal Jewish environment at an elite Jewish boarding school. He also struggles with the racism he faced at school by Jewish students, the pressure of studies at that school, and his falling in love with a Jewish girl who leaves him because her mother does not approve of an Arab Palestinian boyfriend. The latter event leaves him in deep depression: "She told me her mother had said she'd rather have a lesbian for a daughter than one who hangs out with Arabs" (p.124).

As other Palestinians, the narrator goes through different experiences that politicize him. While riding the bus home from Jerusalem to visit his family, the bus stops at a roadblock near the Tel Aviv Airport. Israeli soldiers get on the bus and ask him to step out. They search and interrogate him. This is an example of how Palestinians in Israel are politicized by the actions of state authorities. As Samih Al-Qassim put it, this is their way of telling you: "You are suspect, you do not belong;" you are "*persona non-grata*."

Alienation by the state leads Palestinian citizens to wish all ills on Israel. The narrator describes the events during the First Iraq War in 1991, where Israel was equipped with Patriot missiles that were supposed to destroy the approaching Iraqi missiles:

... My mother told me that my father and brothers would go outdoors to see if there were any missiles in the air...Nobody stayed indoors. People went out, to make sure the Patriot missiles weren't working. Our neighbor started shouting for the missiles to come. It was as if they were trying

to guide them past the Patriots. 'Nooooo.....left....that's right. Yeah! His children applauded, and the women went lulululu the way they did at weddings' ... (p.108).

His experience at the boarding school makes him realize the limitations one faces just for being an Arab--a Palestinian. He realizes that there are two categories of citizenship when it comes to the Palestinians in Israel:

"In the twelfth grade, the kids in my class... were taken to all sorts of installations and training camps, and I received a bus pass and a ticket to the Israel Museum. Sometimes soldiers in uniform came to our school to talk with the students, and I wasn't allowed to take part...In the twelfth grade I understood that I wouldn't be a pilot even if I wanted to be..." (Pp. 117-118).

Narrating these incidents, shows how critical the author is of the state. Yet, he is also critical of his own society and life in the village: boredom, restriction on women, restriction on men, and the pressure to conform. This is reflected in his harsh social, religious, and class critique of Arab society. Feeling family and social pressure, he finally goes to the university to study social work. While there, he meets and marries a Palestinian refugee whose family resides in his village.

The novel also shows the changes that are taking place in village life and generational differences. The posters people hang on the walls of their homes are also descriptive of the competing ideologies and chaos among the youth:

...walls with red scarves of the Hapo'el soccer team [Jewish], and with pictures of the Chicago Bulls, Michael Jackson, Fairuz, and Lenin, and with the Land Day posters, like the one of a man sitting under an olive tree holding his blond grandson, who's covered in *Kafiyeh*, and the inscription WE'RE STAYING PUT" (p.216).

He expresses the lack of security that people feel in the village because of a rise in crime (p.214). He also illustrates the fear that Palestinians in Israel feel about their collective future as a people:

Mother says they're liable to load each village onto different truck, and we'll wind up being taken from Beit Safafa to Jordan. The people of Tira will be taken to Lebanon. Mother says we've to make sure that the whole family is on the same truck" (p.224).

The novel ends with the narrator's going back to the village with his wife and child to visit his family. At night, he hears his grandmother throwing up in the shower. He asks her:

What's the matter, Grandma? I ask... 'Go back to sleep, *habibi*, It's like this every day'. I hug her and kiss her head, trying not to cry. She hides her eyes now behind her white scarf and says it isn't death that makes her cry. Not at all. She's tired already, and she doesn't want to be a burden to Mother and Father anymore. She says the only reason she's crying is that she used to think she'd be buried in her own land. 'Do you remember where the key to the cupboard is?' And we both cry together (pp. 226-227).

The novel is worth reading because it is written in a local native voice about the 1948 Palestinians, which is something we rarely hear. When such novels exist, often it is not Palestinians who have written them. Thus, the Palestinians remain mostly voiceless. In general, such novels often deal with personal and family issues and hardly take on the task of speaking about an entire community or people. This is what distinguishes this work from many others.