

## MINORITARIAN INTERVENTIONS AND NATIONAL IDENTITY: READING OZ WITH KASHUA

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The “other” is never outside or beyond us; it emerges forcefully, within cultural discourse, when we think we speak most intimately and indigenously “between ourselves” (Homi Bhabha)

This article attempts to read Amos Oz’s celebrated autobiography, *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, with Sayed Kashua’s autobiographical texts *Dancing Arabs* and *Let it be Morning*, as well as his television sitcom *Arab Labor*. Differences between the two authors are immediately apparent. More than perhaps any other writer, Oz represents the Zionist core of the political and literary establishment in Israel, as his autobiographical novel depicts one of the most important families in the early Israeli intelligentsia. Conversely, Kashua is a Palestinian Israeli and thus part of the most marginalized minority in Israeli society.<sup>1</sup> I would like to complicate this picture of center and periphery by bringing out the major writer in Kashua and the minor writer in Oz. It is also my intention to expose the complimentary and reciprocal relations between the positions that they occupy. Thus, the article attempts to argue against a simple one-to-one correspondence between the centrality or marginality of an author’s political position and the centrality or marginality of his or her literary endeavors. In addition, both writers mobilize their own minority narrative and appeal to the traditional minority position of Judaism to bring about positive transformation.

Amos Oz inhabits a special place in Hebrew literature. The most influential Hebrew writer in contemporary Israel and the best-selling Israeli author abroad, he is also a very influential political essayist and commentator. A certain constituency in Israel has a particularly special affinity with Oz as a writer.<sup>2</sup> They enjoy his novels, of course, but, more importantly, see him as

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<sup>1</sup> Moshe Halbertal has grouped Israeli society into five “tribes”: the ultraorthodox sector, the Mizrahim, the secular Israelis who emigrated from the former Soviet Union, the religious Zionists (whom he lumps together), and the Arab Israelis. The latter occupy the most marginalized and threatened position in society. See M. Halbertal, “Israel as a Jewish and Democratic State” (Jerusalem: Mandel Foundation, 2008). Online: <https://www1.mandelfoundation.org.il/News/Pages/HalbertalAddressesJCCA.aspx>.

<sup>2</sup> Yigal Schwartz has characterized this constituency as secular men and women aged 45 to 65 who were born in Israel and whose parents emigrated from Poland and Russia between the world wars. Most of them live in kibbutzim or in well-established cities such as Tel Aviv and Givatayim. See Y. Schwartz, ““You Entered an Enchanted Palace and Released It from the Spell”: *A Tale of Love and Darkness* as a Cult-Novel,” *Israel: Studies in Zionism and the State of Israel: History, Society, Culture* 7 (2005): 173–211.

one who articulates a responsible political position on the affairs of the day. After the publication of his autobiography, *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, the connection has become even more personal. For the constituency in question, mainly middle-aged Ashkenazim, Oz represents one of their own—or, perhaps more precisely, an idealized image of themselves. Besides his considerable literary talent, Oz's public success is thus due to the way in which he embodied the ideals of both the new Jew and the romantic humanist. Both a good-looking kibbutznik and a soldier, tough on the outside and sensitive on the inside, Oz projects a public image that functions almost as the Lacanian imaginary, tying together the chaotic, mutually exclusive attributes of Israeli identity—its militarism and humanism—into one cohesive whole. It is exactly this persona that his critics react against. There are, of course, several reasons why many intellectuals are critical of Oz—including differences in political orientation, jealousy, Oedipal aggression, and literary rivalry tied to inter-generational strife. However, the most principled of the critiques leveled against him hinges on way the public image of Oz embodies classical Zionism.

Even so, Oz's writings both transcend and challenge this image. As the most talented articulator of Zionism, he can use his authority to rewrite this discourse. In *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, Oz implicitly responds to various critiques of Zionism. He shows the national narrative to be highly ambivalent and heterogeneous, its interpretation an ongoing process with no stable or fixed meaning. The book thus reconstitutes and reinterprets the meaning of Zionism right under the noses of his more traditional readership. Oz's interpretative intervention tries to release and transform the denials and excessive energy associated with the Zionist identity of his readership while simultaneously explaining this identity to readers outside of Israel.

In a way, then, Oz deconstructs the traditional Zionist narrative. According to its classical version, idealistic youths immigrated to Palestine where they were quickly transformed into productive and pragmatic agriculturalists and warriors. Oz describes his early responses to this myth in a subtly ironic way:

I pictured these pioneers as strong, serious, self-contained people.... They were capable of loneliness and introspection, of living outdoors, sleeping in tents, doing hard labor.... they could ride wild horses or wide-track tractors; they spoke Arabic, knew every cave and wadi, had a way with pistols and grenades, yet read poetry and philosophy; they were large men with inquiring minds and hidden feelings.... They are stamping their mark on the landscape and on history, they are plowing fields and vineyards, they are writing a new song, they

pick up their guns, mount their horses, and shoot back at the Arab marauders: they take our miserable human clay and mold it into a fighting nation.<sup>3</sup>

Committed as he is to Israel's security, Oz wants to effect a change in identity. The heroic masculine ideal has become rigid and non-productive—compulsively and impotently discharging violence with no end in sight.<sup>4</sup> In response, Oz strives to revise the traditional narratives of Israeli nation-building. The conventional story of heroic transformation instead becomes one of immigration and dislocation, with Oz's parents and acquaintances portrayed as displaced persons and refugees. The Jerusalem of his childhood is filled with heterogeneity of different religions and races, with the lower middle class predominating socioeconomically: "Most of our neighbors were petty clerks, small retailers, bank tellers, cinema ticket sellers, schoolteachers, dispensers of private lessons, or dentists."<sup>5</sup> His father is a weak, effeminate Jewish intellectual working as a librarian and making revisionist speeches about a new, muscled Judaism materializing in Palestine. His mother is not Zionist at all, and remains so hostile to her surroundings that eventually she commits suicide. Amos himself almost perfectly displays the characteristics of the new Jew. After the death of his mother, he leaves Jerusalem and his father at fifteen, moving to a kibbutz. This Oedipal rebellion constitutes an implicit fulfillment of the father's Zionist ideal: in rebelling against him, Amos is acting out his Zionist wishes. However, in the kibbutz Oz represents himself as marginal—still the weak Jewish intellectual among the boys. The author who took an important part in building the classical image of masculine Zionism thus decenters himself in his autobiography, suggesting that the ideal of the Sabra—the perfect native-born Israeli—was a construct of his parents' generation which their daughters and especially sons were asked to embody whether they liked it or not.

More concretely, by presenting both the ideological image and the reality underlying it, Oz's portrayal of his family deconstructs the dichotomy between the old and new Jew, the opposition between diaspora and homeland. Interestingly, this split is affirmed both by classical Zionism and by its more recent critiques inside and outside Israel, which either uphold Diaspora culture (e.g., Daniel Boyarin) or nostalgically yearn for the moral innocence of Jews before they had a state. In short, both classical Zionists and recent critics

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<sup>3</sup> A. Oz, *A Tale of Love and Darkness* (New York: Harcourt, 2003), pp. 5–6.

<sup>4</sup> Many contemporary narrations of Israel in literature and cinema include this theme, among them the relatively recent films *Munich*, *Waltz with Bashir*, *Walk on Water*, and *Bastards*.

<sup>5</sup> A. Oz, *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, p. 16.

recognize the splits in question but disagree on the evaluation of the two categories. By contrast, Oz challenges the dichotomy itself while moving beyond classic Zionism. He shows both the continuity between the old and new Jew and the hybridity inherent in the latter.

It is important to underline that this dichotomy has deep roots not only in the history of Zionism but also in individual psychology. For instance, Melanie Klein's psychoanalysis examines the psychological dimensions of splitting—a psychological defense of sorts in which an object of desire (usually the mother) is divided into two fictional objects, one exclusively positive and the other exclusively negative. Frustration with, or rejection by, the object of desire leads to an attempt to safeguard its wholesome pure goodness by projecting its negative attributes onto a separate, often non-existent object.<sup>6</sup> This theory can illuminate many of the ideological tensions that characterize Jewish history. It is possible to hypothesize that the frustration stemming from years of social exclusion from Gentile society created a variety of positive/negative splits within Jewish culture (enlightened/unenlightened, assimilated/unassimilated, socialist/bourgeois, Zionist/Diasporic, etc.). In short, a multiplicity of “good” and “bad” Jews emerged, with the division between Zionist and Diasporic Jews being but one of the many.

Interestingly, according to Klein's theory, it is regressive for adults to insist on such divisions. Eventually, the young child should transition to a mature “depressive” stage where the desired object becomes whole, the negative mixing with the positive (which somehow survives in diminished form). That, I suggest, is the mature nationalist position of Oz's *Tale of Love and Darkness*.<sup>7</sup> As stated, Oz most forcefully depicts this position by making his parents' story one of immigration and displacement rather than repatriation (*aliyah*).<sup>8</sup> In the book, they are poor and often miserable migrants rather than

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<sup>6</sup> According to Klein, the breast-fed infant is often frustrated by the way in which nursing occurs. In a defensive reaction to this frustration, she splits the breast into “good” and “bad” manifestations. In creating the “bad” breast, the baby protects the wholeness and goodness of the breast that feeds her from frustration, aggression, and disappointment. This distinction underlies dichotomies of good and bad from which much of the person's thinking proceeds. See M. Klein, *The Collected Writings of Melanie Klein. Vol. 1: Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works, 1921–1945* (London: Hogarth, 1975).

<sup>7</sup> This position can be contrasted to the one still articulated by A. B. Yehoshua who insists on the classical Zionist position of negating the Diaspora. See R. Blumenfeld, “A. B. Yehoshua: Americans, Unlike Israelis, Are Only Partially Jews,” *Haaretz*, March 18, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> While I discern Oz's disenchantment with the *aliyah* narrative and its “deflation” to that of immigration, Mendelson-Maoz, by contrast, sees a dialectical relationship between the two using Foucault's distinction between utopian and heterotopian spaces. See A. Mendelson-Maoz, “Amos Oz's *A Tale of Love and Darkness* within the Framework of Immigration Narratives in Modern Hebrew Literature,” *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 1 (2010): 71–78.

cheerful pioneers who transform themselves and their country. The new Jew becomes a fantastic projection not dissimilar to the wishes of immigrants the world over who hope that their children will embody the ideals and success of the new country. Oz thus works to free his readers from an ideologically rigid identity, enabling them to see themselves as a nation of immigrants.

Moreover, he also challenges the way that his audience may perceive his own persona.<sup>9</sup> Oz does not lead the readership to believe that there was some authentic, “real” self beneath his projection as the quintessential new Jew. There is no heroism of the boy as a young man or an artist; in contrast to Hebrew modernists of the earlier generation, there is no self-aggrandizement, no cult of the writer as a unique individual. Oz ironically discusses the way in which his family situation has “constructed” his personality. Indeed, he often presents himself as an over-socialized young boy, relating in detail the powerful ideological inculcation he received as a child—the way he was interpolated as part bookworm, part masculine Zionist, politicized, and turned into a representative of the nation. In this way, Oz’s autobiography enables us to see how the author and political persona were socially constructed.

As we have seen, Oz is a representative of Zionist discourse who also works to revise key aspects of this discourse, altering what Zionism means right under the noses of his classic readership. I would like to further examine the revision toward which he works. To reiterate, Oz attempts to rethink historical splits and accept fragility, finitude, and compassion. It is the portrayal of his parents as displaced persons in Palestine (rather than pioneers) that opens up a progressive space to reinterpret the historical origins of the nation, to soften the rigid compulsiveness of the mythic Zionist fantasy, and to make discursive room within the literary imaginary for other displaced persons (which may then, perhaps, create real room for them as well). As a refuge for the displaced, the Israeli state becomes something both lesser and greater. On the one hand, the state loses its ideological and almost messianic furor, since it no longer promises transformation and total self-fulfillment. On the other hand, it comes to offer shelter and a provisional home for the displaced. The ecstatic response to the book—essentially, a kind of “Yes, this is me and these

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<sup>9</sup> Eran Kaplan reads the novel as deconstructing the Sabra in order to tell the specific story of Oz’s own group—the secular Ashkenazim who have turned from a dominant group in Israel to one among many competing factions. While seemingly persuasive, this argument underemphasizes the fact the Oz is also writing for a global audience that does not differentiate between Israel’s different “tribes” (see n. 1 above) and is more familiar with a “general” Jewishness. See E. Kaplan “Amos Oz’s *A Tale of Love and Darkness* and the Sabra Myth,” *Jewish Social Studies* 14 (2007): 119–143.

are my parents”—confirms that the latter depiction resonated with its audience at a deeply personal level.<sup>10</sup>

I would now like to compare Oz's intervention to that of Sayed Kashua. Born in 1975 in Tira (the so-called Triangle region of Israel populated mostly by Arabs), Kashua was admitted to a prestigious boarding school in Jerusalem (the Arts and Science Academy) and later studied sociology and philosophy at Hebrew University. Currently, he writes satiric columns in Hebrew for *Haaretz* newspaper. Kashua is the author of three novels and a sitcom television series dealing with the lives of Palestinian Israelis. He once claimed that his Arabic was not good enough and that since the literary and cultural marketplace is dominated in Israel by Hebrew, it makes practical sense for him to write in the latter language. Due to his literary fame, Kashua has become a well-known public figure. His novels have been praised by the press, and his prime-time television show, *Arab Labor*, has received top ratings. Kashua's writings have been translated into many languages, and he was recently awarded the Prime Minister's Prize for Hebrew authors.

Kashua's narratives usually revolve around the history and life of three consecutive generations of Israeli Arabs. First, there is his grandparents' generation which experienced and fought in the 1948 war and which is attached to land, largely through agriculture. Next, Sayed's parents lived primarily under military administration in the post-1948 context. Finally, his own generation emerged around the 1970s, when Israeli Arabs could move freely within the country and were undergoing a process of Israelization.

The first book published by Kashua, *Dancing Arabs*, is a collection of personal narratives that follows the protagonist from childhood to adulthood.<sup>11</sup> It dwells on the experiences of growing up in Tira, Sayed's time at the boarding school, the difficulties of integrating into Jewish Israeli society, and, finally, on the return to his boyhood village. Interestingly, both Oz's *A Tale of Love and Darkness* and Kashua's *Dancing Arabs* begin with descriptions of their family's house, its minute size symbolizing the smallness of their respective nations.

In the novel *Let It Be Morning*, Kashua depicts the near future or a kind of fictional present.<sup>12</sup> It is the story of an Arab-Israeli reporter who decides to move back to his village after ten years spent in Jewish Israel. The second intifada reduces the market for his articles, and those that he manages to publish are heavily edited. Worse yet, rent becomes prohibitively expensive. After

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<sup>10</sup> See Y. Schwartz, ““You Entered an Enchanted Palace,”” pp. 190–195.

<sup>11</sup> S. Kashua, *Dancing Arabs* (New York: Grove Press, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> S. Kashua, *Let It Be Morning* (New York: Black Cat, 2006).

“No Arabs equals peace and security” is spray-painted on his wall, the protagonist feels that it is better to return home. He discovers, however, that although everything in his room has remained the same, it now carries new meaning: “I don’t really feel like I’m going back to a familiar place. I’m going home to a new place.”<sup>13</sup> Home—that is, the village—is dangerous: crime is rampant and gangs kill bystanders. The experience is truly uncanny, since even the protagonist’s home has been transformed to a place where he is further marginalized.

Unlike other Palestinian writers, Kashua does not offer a national narrative. There is no glorious past in Jaffa, like the one depicted by Sari Nusseibeh’s autobiography, no tales of the grandfather and great-grandfather interwoven with the everyday trials and tribulations of the people.<sup>14</sup> In fact, the national narrative is lacking in his depiction of both the Palestinians and the Israelis. This is an important contrast between Kashua and Oz: the former does not perceive the Jewish national story with an ironic empathy, since he does not fully perceive this nation—only its soldiers. Jewish nationalism in *Let It Be Morning* is an inexplicable, Kafkaesque force. However, although the two authors differ in their representations of the nation, both feel themselves displaced and marginal. For Oz, awareness of marginality is often present during his early life, as he feels that “real” life goes on elsewhere, in Tel-Aviv or on the kibbutz. This feeling manifests itself explicitly in professional frustration, as well as implicitly in sexual fantasies. For instance, in imagining one of those faraway places, Oz explicitly links the image of the new Jew with sexual liberation or promiscuity:

It was not only the world at large that was a long way away: even the Land of Israel was pretty far off. Somewhere over the hills and far away, a new breed of heroic Jews was springing up, a tanned, tough, silent, practical breed of men, totally unlike the Jews of the Diaspora, totally unlike the residents of Kerem Avraham. Courageous, rugged pioneers, who had succeeded in making friends with the darkness of night, and had overstepped every limit, too, as regards relations between a boy and a girl and vice versa. They were not ashamed of anything. Grandpa Alexander once said: “They think in the future it’s going to be so simple a boy will be able to go up to a girl and just ask for it, or maybe the girls won’t even wait to be approached, but will go and ask the boys for it, like asking a glass of water.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> S. Kashua, *Let It Be Morning*, p. 12.

<sup>14</sup> S. Nusseibeh, *Once upon a Country: A Palestinian Life* (with A. David; New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).

<sup>15</sup> S. Nusseibeh, *Once upon a Country*, p. 5.

Additionally, Oz's home neighborhood, Kerem Avraham, is also perceived as limiting his professional ambitions, which could not be realized in this provincial setting. He runs into a paradox: success is impossible without a move to the center of Israeli society, but without success there are no means for such a move. Oz consciously solves this quandary when he "discovers" and adopts the writing of Sherwood Anderson and, later on, Anton Chekhov, both of which "released his writing hand." He chooses, quite deliberately, a provincial literature that paradoxically aims at revealing human universals. Ultimately, then, Oz tells the audience that there is no real center, as his book seems to suggest that despite being a world-renowned author, he is nevertheless at the periphery; moreover, the Zionist center was itself an apparition. The novel thus redeems existence on the margins of society. As a writer, Oz reaches the conclusion that the world revolves around the hand that writes: the writing hand is the center of the world.

Kashua also engages with feelings of marginality but differs from Oz in his main emphases. For Kashua, it is not that "real life" prevails in some distant center but that he is subject to a myriad of forces mysterious to him. If Oz is correct in repeatedly claiming that his neighborhood "definitely belonged to Chekhov," then Sayed's surely belongs to Kafka. While Oz deals with the frustrations, compromises, and unfulfilled longings of life, Sayed portrays life's vicissitudes as wholly opaque and inexplicable. If Oz deals with the political as construction of the subject and as psychological compensation, Kashua depicts subjects whose identities are hollowed by their political environment. In these representations, both writers come to embody specific political subjectivities. Like Oz, Kashua is essentially a "political" representative—not of a beleaguered nation, but of indigenous national minority. This partially explains their differences and hidden affinities. Oz relates the difficulties, discrimination, and violence that his ancestors in Europe faced as a Jewish minority. However, when he turns to a description of his parents' generation in Palestine, the story understandably begins to portray the vicissitudes of relocation, becoming comparable in this respect to Jewish American narratives of immigration.<sup>16</sup> Conversely, Kashua focuses his work on the subjective effects of violence and the opaque processes of structural exclusion.

Yet, although the political contexts of their respective groups are different, both Sayed and Amos undergo a similar process of acculturation in which they

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<sup>16</sup> Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*, originally published in 1934, comes to mind as a natural point of reference: see H. Roth, *Call It Sleep* (New York: Picador, 2005).



try to mimic the dominant group. The latter's maturation is supposed to embody the Zionist transformation from a sensitive, learned, effeminate cosmopolitan Jew of the Diaspora to the masculine Israeli, but in truth he oscillates between the two. He asserts himself mainly by leaving his father and the still very shtetl-like Jewish milieu of Jerusalem for the kibbutz. As a young man, Sayed also moves away from his family. Here, the motive is upward mobility, capitalizing on his high achievement on state tests to attend an elite boarding school in Jerusalem. Both imitate the dominant groups in their new surroundings (the kibbutz and the boarding school) and develop complex identities as both insiders and outsiders. The personas that they projected to the dominant groups eventually morphed into their mature public personae—stable, likeable public faces that conceal more personal, ambiguous, and ambivalent undercurrents. As Oz himself shows in *A Tale of Love and Darkness* and *Under This Blazing Light*, beneath the projected charm of Israel as a young and vigorous country there lingers both an intense longing for Europe and an early anxiety about being peripheral and derivative.<sup>17</sup> He thus maintains that the concern over being or becoming periphery exists in the self-affirming context of Jewish nationalism and Israeli culture. Or, to be more exact, Oz conveys the fluctuations of self-love and self-deprecation that still reveal themselves as a legacy of a hated “chosen” people that also aspires to normalcy.

In another similarity, both Oz and Kashua try to intervene in mainstream culture with a progressive approach but have to wear masks. Oz's feelings with regard to periphery are later reaffirmed on the plane of political ideology (rather than in geographical or spatial terms). With the prolongation of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the marginalization of the peace camp, Oz is faced with the tension of maintaining a confident Zionist persona for the outside world while at the same time relating what he feels and thinks as a critical intellectual. Conversely, Kashua's position is much more difficult—perhaps to the point of being almost unsustainable.<sup>18</sup> While Oz appears relatively sure of his beliefs, Kashua must acrobatically maneuver his public persona and wear even more masks. To be likable to his Israeli audience, he essentially tells them, “Look how much I am like you.” Like Woody Allen's Zelig who blends perfectly with his surroundings or like Franz Fanon's African man who dons a white mask, both Kashua and his characters perfectly perform Israeli-ness. Oz also received training in such performance: he calls his child self the

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<sup>17</sup> A. Oz, *Under This Blazing Light* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>18</sup> As I was working on this article in early July 2014, Kashua stated in a *Haaretz* column—responding to anti-Arab violence in Israel—that he will immigrate to the United States, never to return (S. Kashua, “Why Sayed Kashua Is Leaving Jerusalem and Never Coming Back,” *Haaretz*, July 4, 2014).

“little spokesman” and, while assuming this role, relegates his doubts to other characters.<sup>19</sup> Still, even *A Tale of Love and Darkness* is narrated in an elegiac tone. After all, it is a story of a now bygone era, an account representing not only the author’s experience but also that of the nation. Oz explicitly ponders his own construction and socialization as a new Hebrew man while knowing that this identity is essentially a thing of the past.

Kashua also questions his early willingness to assimilate to Jewish Israeli culture; at key points, the excessive zeal toward assimilation turns into a “tragedy of identity.” This tragedy reveals itself when the protagonist begins to resemble the figure of the “sad clown” who figuratively says to the audience, “Look what you make me do, look what you make me go through.” Kashua reaffirms Israeli identity by longing for full integration but also signals that this identity is in many ways exclusively Jewish. It is as though his writings are saying, “We will assimilate if you only let us.” Kashua’s stance thus flatters the Israeli audience while at the same time causing discomfort with its contradictions. This stance covertly touches a major Zionist narrative, the one best articulated by Herzl himself—the story of a failed attempt to assimilate into what was perceived as a superior culture. Formerly, the Jewish audience conceived itself as a minority and was accustomed to an inferior but (now) symbiotic relationship with the West. In Israel, it finds itself in the position of a powerful majority.

In a way, Oz also wanted to “assimilate” during his youth. Relocation from a revisionist family living in a shtetl-like Jerusalem neighborhood to a kibbutz was a shift to the ideological center during the early 1950s, when the Mapai party and the Zionist left as a whole were at their height of power. Center and periphery are a key theme in *A Tale of Love and Darkness* because the young Amos had the feeling that Israel as a whole was peripheral, not a place that allowed one to write major literature. The move to the kibbutz is covered several times in the text, with each iteration emphasizing different aspects of Oz’s maturation and his construction as an Israeli.

Another important rite of passage in Oz’s book can also provide insight into both the persona of Amos and the construction of the national narrative. The parents decide to go on a vacation, leaving the young Amos with his uncle and aunt. At this time, the son of an important Arab businessman is arrested for stealing an envelope with money or shares. Since the accused swears that

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<sup>19</sup> Fima is one such character who articulates his overarching doubts: see A. Oz, *Fima* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1994).

he mailed the envelope but simply lost the receipt, his father turns in desperation to the postmaster general asking to renew the search for the lost item. Amos's uncle, who works at the post office, investigates the matter, discovers that one of the employees has stolen the letter, and returns it to the businessman whose son is released as a result. To express his gratitude, the businessman invites the whole family to his house. This scene allows Amos to compare and contrast his life with that of a respected and Europeanized Arab family. In the yard, he meets a young Arab girl who asks if there is poetry in Hebrew. Indignant, Amos delivers a lecture that demonstrates his knowledge of nationalist Hebrew authors. Next, the girl dares him to climb a tall mulberry tree, which he does with great pride. Caught in the tree, Amos finds a heavy rusty chain with a heavy iron ball attached to its end; he starts swinging the chain but it slips and falls—just missing a little boy's head but brutally crushing his foot. Amos is rushed out of the house, never to see the Arab girl again.

This scene stands out in Oz's text, since on the spectrum from faithful autobiography to pure fiction it clearly tends toward the latter.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, many other stories in the book clearly represent literary reworking of the author's actual memories, including those of his first sexual experience and his mother's suicide.<sup>21</sup> But while these stories are adaptations of biographical material, the episode with the Arab girl is different; it verges on a political parable told in realistic style. Why does the scene seem so fictional, so symbolic as to smack of an allegory rather than a portrayal of reality? The answer lies in the way it perfectly meets a political necessity. Like most authors of his generation, Oz spent his childhood without a single Arab acquaintance.<sup>22</sup> However, since his autobiography is designed as both a personal and national account, he needed a personification of the Arab Other in the text. Put differently, Oz was apparently unwilling to write what literary critics have called "a narrative with no natives."<sup>23</sup> Because the book is centered in part on the 1948 war, it had to include Arab characters to be accepted by the readers as

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<sup>20</sup> My suspicion that the scene was wholly fictional was confirmed when I asked Amos Oz's daughter, Fania Salzberger-Oz, about it: she said that her father calls the book a novel. Indeed, Oz encourages the audience to focus on the space between the text and the reader, not between the text and its author. Moreover, during her childhood, Oz told his children most of the stories included in the book, but not this particular one.

<sup>21</sup> Oz offers a profoundly moving account of the hours before his mother's suicide. He depicts her walking the rainy streets of Jerusalem, projecting her emotions on the neglected surroundings. Here, Oz draws from Russian literary tradition; there is the sense of homage to Tolstoy, especially his account of Anna Karenina's death.

<sup>22</sup> Apart from a few special schools in Jerusalem, public education in Israel is segregated along linguistic and religious lines. This means that Oz probably did not encounter Arabic-speaking peers during his childhood.

<sup>23</sup> For example, see Y. Laor, *Narrative with no Natives: Essays on Israeli Literature* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1995).

representative of the national experience. If native Arabs were not present in the actual life of the young Amos, imagination had to come into play, creating them so as to tell a comprehensive story of Israel. Through this projection, Oz can also take upon himself the “sins” of the nation but with the qualification that these sins were unintentional, that they resulted from the carelessness of a child who wanted to show his virility. Thus, Jewish nationalism is, according to Oz, the doctrine of a weak, fragile, traumatized people trying to rehabilitate itself. He asks the audience to see through the macho bravado in some manifestations of Israeli behavior and discern fragility and weakness at its core. Overall, Oz also uses political parable in order to claim that the negative consequences of Zionism were unintentional. Though wholly fictional, the discussed scene undergirds the core political implications of Oz’s autobiographical narrative, condensing his perspective on the seminal events that have come to shape the conflict between Jews and Palestinians in Israel.

This scene can be compared to an episode from Kashua’s satirical sitcom *Arab Labor* that was the first Israeli television series devoted to the lives of the country’s Arab minority. In the first episodes, Amjad and Bushra live in an Arab village on the outskirts of Jerusalem with their two young children. Bushra is a social worker, pragmatic in terms of professional integration in Israeli society but resistant to Israelization.<sup>24</sup> Amjad’s character, based on Kashua himself, is a journalist who works for a liberal Israeli newspaper. He tries his best to assimilate into Jewish Israeli culture—assuming Israeliness in his dress, choice of car, accent, and so on—with amusing and ironic results.

At one point, a Jewish Israeli mother of a child from the mixed Arab-Jewish kindergarten attended by the daughter of Bushra and Amjad invites the family to celebrate Passover. Amjad considers participating in the Seder, viewing this as a milestone of his integration into Ashkenazi high society. What he fails to realize, however, is that this is a ritual where religion and nation fuse most powerfully, where the central story of the nation is recounted and thus re-vitalized. Hence, while celebrating freedom as a core Jewish value, it also reproduces the patterns of inclusion and exclusion; the forces of revolutionary liberation are the very ones that create a distinction between those who belong to the redeemed group and those who do not.<sup>25</sup> While Amjad is invited to the Seder and does his best to fit in, the ceremony highlights the boundaries that keep him out. He carefully emulates other participants, putting

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<sup>24</sup> For Israelization as a key phenomenon in Sayed, see A. Mendelson-Maoz and L. Steir-Livny, “The Jewish Works of Sayed Kashua: Subversive or Subordinate?” *Israel Studies Review* 26 (2011): 123.

<sup>25</sup> See A. Ofengenden, “Monotheism, the Incomplete Revolution: Narrating the Event in Freud’s and Assmann’s Moses,” *Symploke* 23 (2015): 291–307.

on a skullcap and trying to read in liturgical intonation. Personifying the wise son of the haggadic tradition, he asks the right questions: Why do we eat hard-boiled eggs? What is the *haroseth*? The answers that he receives are arbitrary or paternalistic, with layered meanings.

For example, Amjad is told that *haroseth* represents mortar since “the Israelites worked in construction.” The use of the modern word “construction” for the building of the pyramids is a clear anachronism that already carries racist and patronizing connotations, as the interlocutor assumes that Amjad would not understand a more precise term. More deeply, however, the statement can also symbolize the vicissitudes of fate. In the past, the Israelites worked “in construction” for the Egyptians (today, mostly Arabs); now, the Israeli Jews have the Palestinians (also mostly Arabs) as minimum wage laborers who do most of the construction work for them. This example shows how the presence of an excluded minority transforms the meaning of the Seder. Additionally, traditional statements made during the Seder often make psychological sense from the perspective of a persecuted minority, but become highly problematic when coming from a majority that holds state power (especially those calling for divine vengeance, like “pour your wrath on the Gentiles”). It follows, then, that Amjad’s presence at the Seder conveys the importance of using the tradition itself to re-interpret original texts while re-figuring collective identity. More precisely, the scene indicates the way in which a culture must change once it occupies a dominant or majority position in society.

Indeed, as far as Kashua is concerned, the rich resources of the Jewish tradition can be helpful in overcoming these seemingly intractable issues. Instead of articulating a false universalism, he seems to be calling for solidarity among minorities—an appeal that, in fact, is deeply embedded in the cultural repertoire of Jewish Israeli culture. His protagonists display an uncanny resemblance to the characters populating late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Jewish literature—tragi-comic Jews who attempted to assimilate into Gentile society. In arguably the most classical expression of this trend, Herzl’s play *Das Neue Ghetto*, the failure to do so is a central theme. Kashua’s texts thus stand in an elaborate intertextual relationship with Jewish culture in Diasporic Western European context.<sup>26</sup> There is something ironic, paradoxical, and even comic about trying to assimilate into Zionist society, which is itself predicated on the failure to assimilate. Attempts of Palestinians to integrate into Israeli culture are the attempts of a minority to adopt the culture of

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<sup>26</sup> T. Herzl, *Gesammelte zionistische Werke, 5. Das neue Ghetto, Altneuland* (Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag, 1935).

another minority. Here, the very word “assimilation” becomes problematized. It is usually taken to symbolize a particularity or specialness that becomes homogenized, swallowed by the greater universal whole. In the Seder scene, however, the Jewish attendees are presented with an uncanny doubling of their original minoritarian identity. Afterwards, as the couple gets ready to go to bed, the following conversation ensues:

Amjad: From now on, no more blood, no sheep, no grill. From now on, new rules. For your information, that’s why they always win.

Bushra: What’s that got to do with it?

Amjad: I’ll tell you. These things start with little things. Not big things. On holidays they all sit together, sing the same songs, recite the same prayers, read the same stories. If we ever want to be human beings, we should learn from them. Can’t we sit quietly together? Just family, without blood, or grill, no smell of roasting and dirt?<sup>27</sup>

This scene perfectly exemplifies Gilles Deleuze’s concept of minor literature.<sup>28</sup> Politics and power relations are inserted painfully into everyday life.

Moreover, in this conversation, Amjad makes a false equivalence between the relations of dominance that derive from material and military power and those that stem from interactions between cultures. He idealizes Passover as displaying a spiritualized unity that he sees as the ultimate cause for Jewish success in establishing control. Amjad’s simultaneous veneration of the powerful other and negation of his own cultural background smacks of the self-hatred that results whenever a subordinate culture or class exists under a dominating socialization system.<sup>29</sup>

At the same time, Amjad’s idealization of Jewish unity and spirituality is tongue-in-cheek, since it also contains a powerful allusion to the fraught relationship between Judaism and Christianity. Many Jews who were intent on assimilating through conversion saw Christians as more unified and especially more spiritual. Christianity itself propagated a view of Judaism as divisive and carnal—one that many Jews internalized. Paul’s foundational statements, attempting to “sublate” Judaism, are pregnant with rhetoric of unity and transcendence of the physical. Regarding the former, Paul claims, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor

<sup>27</sup> *Arab Labor*, Season 1, episode 5, 2007; translation mine.

<sup>28</sup> Deleuze’s concept of minor literature is thoroughly political: “Its cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics. The individual concern thus becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating in it” (G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, “What Is a Minor Literature?” *Mississippi Review* 11 [1983]: 17).

<sup>29</sup> For the classic Jewish case, see S. Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28). As for the latter, he states: “A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code” (Rom 2:28–29). These sentiments have resounded through the centuries, establishing the way in which Christianity saw Judaism. Because of the extreme inequalities between the two religions, many Jews have adopted this perspective as well.

Overall, Kashua makes use of his audience’s sensitivity to its earlier minoritarian existence in order to make a complex statement on the way in which a minority almost always projects unity and greater spirituality on a major culture—even if that culture, in this case Judaism, is “known” for being bodily, particularistic, and polemical. Paradoxically, Amjad’s enthusiasm about assimilation causes the viewers to negate what he affirms. He seems to ask them to transcend the specifics of their respective cultures and pay greater attention to the power relationships between them. Kashua does not critique Judaism as such, only a form of Judaism that has come to serve as a state religion. His critique is directed at the way in which power corrupts culture and erodes the potential for intercultural relationships. Kashua thus targets the way in which a dominant culture presents itself as more natural, stronger, and more unified than the fractured, partially erased minority cultures that are uncertain even of themselves. In essence, then, he rearticulates the split Oz attempts to negate. That is, Oz presents a dichotomy between Jewish culture as it existed in the Diaspora and Jewish culture as a state apparatus. Similarly but from a different angle, Kashua displays the unsuitable role of a state culture that Judaism has acquired in Israel. In both cases, the implied way out is de-territorialization and diasporization of Jewish culture.<sup>30</sup>

Despite being radically different in perspective, Kashua’s and Oz’s interventions share a fundamental similarity. Both authors employ autobiography to show how identity is shaped and constructed in Israel. They also use their personal histories in order to intervene in sensitive but powerful ways into entrenched mainstream conceptions. Through his historical text, Oz aims to focus the readers’ attention on their past as marginal immigrants rather than as pioneers, soldiers, or state builders. He renders palpable for the audience his own minority status as a Jew and his peripheral position in relation to the project of creating a new Jew. In contrast, Kashua does not perceive Jewish

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<sup>30</sup> For a theoretical take on the same project from a religious Jewish perspective, see D. Boyarin and J. Boyarin, “Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity,” *Critical Inquiry* 19 (1993): 693–725.

Israelis as a minority, nor as former immigrants, but as a majority possessing many praiseworthy qualities but simultaneously threatening the identity of the Arab minority in Israel. Both writers mobilize their own minority narrative as individuals and appeal to Judaism as a creatively textual minority culture. They call upon this minority tradition to bring positive transformation to the Israeli society.