

BEING ARAB, PALESTINIAN,
ISRAELI, AND JEW?
Sayed Kashua's 'Arab Labor' and the Challenge
to Coexist in Israel
Andrea Pizzinato*

Abstract

In 2007, the first season of the sitcom 'Arab Labor' (in Hebrew: 'Avodah 'Aravit) was screened on primetime Israeli television. Most of the actors playing in the series are Palestinian, dialogues are mostly in Arabic, and the series is the first Israeli-Palestinian sitcom to bring the perspective of Palestinians in Israel to the general Israeli public. Its creator, Sayed Kashua, is a well-known Palestinian writer and journalist who was born and long lived in Israel, before moving to the United States. All of the above has represented a change in the place of Palestinian citizens within Israeli television, ensuring them renewed visibility among the Israeli-Jewish public. This contribution focuses on the first season of Arab Labor and conceptualizes it as a creative-subversive play that underscores the liminal condition of Palestinians in Israel, divided as they are between their social, cultural and national Arab-Palestinian heritage and their Israeli citizenship. By exploring some main characters, episodes, and cross-cut themes, it highlights the innovative power of Kashua's representation of the entangled Arab-Palestinian identity in Israel. Through irony and sarcasm, Kashua lowers the tones of the political debate and stages stereotypical representations that Jews have of Arabs and vice versa, highlighting the inconsistency of these clichés and ridiculing them. The paper argues that Kashua's creative resistance discourse (Goren 2014) on Arab-Palestinian citizens strives to spotlight the illusory character of exclusivist, supposedly pure imposed ethnonational identities, which ever fail to account for the complex entanglement of factors that contribute to shape hyphenated, fragmented identities, such as that of Palestinians in Israel. In order to present this argument, the article (1) sketches a historical background of Israel's Palestinian history until the early 2000s and of Arab-Jewish relations in Israel; (2) it discusses relevant characters, episodes and cross-cut themes of the sitcom; (3) finally, it contextualizes Arab Labor into the wider artistic profile of Sayed Kashua.

Keywords: Palestinian citizens of Israel, identity politics, ethnonationalism, Israel, Palestinian identity.

* Geneva Graduate Institute

“Who am I? What am I? Am I Arab? Am I Israeli? Do they want me to stay? Do they want to throw me out? Where do I belong?”

“I am sure I am an Arab, but all I know is here [in Israel, *Ed*]”.
(Amjad – Episode 7, *Loyalty*, Arab Labor, 1st season)

In 2007, the first season of the sitcom ‘Arab Labor’ was screened on Israeli television. For the first time, an Israeli-Palestinian series focusing on the life of Palestinian citizens of Israel was aired on a national TV for the general Israeli public.¹ Arab Labor’s cast is mainly composed by Palestinian-in-Israel actors, Arabic is the main spoken language, and the series is created by Sayed Kashua (Hebraized name of Sayyid Qashū‘a), a well-known Palestinian writer and journalist born in Israel. All of the above represented a change in the place of Palestinian citizens within Israeli television, ensuring them new visibility in the Israeli-Jewish public, and, to some extent, in the Israel public discourse. Most importantly, Arab Labor – reflecting its creator’s prevalent trait – makes extensive use of irony and sarcasm as powerful tools to demystify the harshest, most exclusivist attitudes expressed in the Zionist and in the Palestinian narratives, envisioning a new way to look at Arab-Jewish coexistence in Israel. Spectators, mostly Jews, are led into the daily life of the ‘Aliyan family, and follow its interactions with Palestinians and Jews, introducing them to the paradoxes that characterize Palestinian existence in the Jewish state. The focus of attention in the series is the turbulent life of Amjad ‘Aliyan, a 35-year-old journalist who works for an Israeli leftist newspaper, which recalls exactly Kashua’s experience as a columnist for Haaretz. Even more so, Amjad, as much as Kashua, is trapped in an identity crisis. He wants to get rid of his ‘Arabness’ and fit into Jewish society, particularly in the Ashkenazi élite whose habits and lifestyle he admires.

This article focuses on the first season of Arab Labor and conceptualizes it as a creative-subversive play that underscores the liminality of Palestinians in Israel. By exploring some main characters, episodes, and cross-cut themes, it underlines the innovative power of Kashua’s representation of what mainstream Jewish public opinion labels ‘Israeli Arabs’, complexifying this already multifaceted identity. Throughout the series, some paradoxical situations highlight the contradictions that

1 Adiel Mendelson-Maoz and Liat Steir-Livny, “Hybridity in Israeli Television – ‘Arab Labour’, the First Arab-Israeli Sitcom,” *Misgerot Media* 6 (2011): 37-38 [Hebrew].

Palestinian citizens experience in Israel, divided as they are between their social, cultural and national Arab-Palestinian heritage and their Israeli citizenship. Furthermore, the paper aims to contextualize Arab Labor within the broader artistic-journalistic work of Sayed Kashua, a true literary personality in Israel. But first, in order to appreciate the contingency and power of Kashua's satire, I will sketch out a historical background of Israel's Palestinians until the early 2000s and of Arab-Jewish relations in Israel.

Palestinians in Israel: backdrop of a difficult cohabitation

After the 1948 war for Palestine, around 150,000 Palestinians remained in their homeland, many of them being internally displaced. Since the establishment of Israel as a Jewish state in 1948, non-Jewish communities were formally granted citizenship, including full equality of social and political rights, regardless of their religion, 'race', and sex². The Declaration of Independence ensured them freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture, and invited Arab citizens of the newborn country "to preserve peace and participate in the upbuilding of the State on the basis of full and equal citizenship and due representation in all its provisional and permanent institutions."³ Nevertheless, a military administration (*mimshal tzvai*) governed Arab citizens from 1948 to 1966, severely restricting their freedom of movement, expression, social and economic life. The security apparatus was thought to best control the lives of what was (and to some extent, still is) perceived as a potential 'fifth column' of the state, internal enemies that could subvert its foundations from within.

After the end of the military rule (1966), Palestinians could acquire civil freedom, and started to integrate into Jewish society more effectively. At the same time, Israel's territorial expansion that followed the 1967 war enabled Israel's Palestinians to travel in the occupied West Bank and Gaza, increasing their connectedness to Palestinian identity and national heritage. However, simultaneously, Israel's Palestinian citizens realized their distinctiveness from the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, as they enjoyed better socio-economic status (in terms of education, health-care, social welfare) and wider, though not complete, civil and political

2 "Declaration of Independence," *The Knesset*, <https://m.knesset.gov.il/en/about/pages/declaration.aspx> (last consulted: 5 January 2022).

3 *Ibid.*

rights. In fact, in theory, Israeli Palestinians have enjoyed a formal status of citizens in the Jewish state since its very foundation. Nevertheless, even after the end of the military rule, they have suffered from incomplete citizenship rights, due to persisting discrimination in key sectors such as access to state budgets, allocations, education, labor market and housing⁴. Furthermore, they have lacked substantial representation in parliamentary politics, partly due to an increasingly Jewish connotation of state institutions. This contributed to fuel the perception of a marginalized, second-class minority in Israel's Palestinian community. Moreover, they were perceived as 'brothers apart', too 'Israelized', and suspected to collaborate with the Israeli enemy by Palestinians in the Territories and in the Arab world⁵. Thus, paradoxically, "the very contingent of Palestinians that managed to remain *in situ* in the homeland found itself physically disconnected and morally excommunicated from the center of gravity of national crystallization."⁶

This tormented condition of double marginality was nothing but reinforced throughout the Oslo peace process, which contributed to make Palestinian citizens of Israel feel like a 'trapped minority.'⁷ The Oslo reconciliation process further aggravated the isolation of Palestinians within the Green Line and increased their exclusion from the Palestinian community that lived across the border. According to the agreements' logic, it was assumed that Palestinian claims of nationality would have been fulfilled by the creation of a Palestinian Authority (and state) in the West Bank and Gaza, but no resolution was deliberated for Israel's own Palestinian national minority. According to Palestinian scholar and former politician 'Azmi Bishara, the Oslo accords brought about a 'Kurdization' of the Palestinian national question, since they confined the issue of Palestinian nationhood uniquely to OPT Palestinians, whereas Palestinians in Israel or in other nation-states had to be considered minorities of those same respective countries.⁸

4 "Discrimination against Palestinian citizens of Israel," *Adalah*, <https://www.adalah.org/en/tag/index/517> (last consulted: 11 January 2022).

5 Maha Nassar, *Brothers Apart. Palestinian Citizens of Israel and the Arab World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), 3-4.

6 Dan Rabinowitz, "The Palestinian Citizens of Israel. The Concept of Trapped Minority and the Discourse of Transnationalism in Anthropology," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 24, no. 1 (2001): 74.

7 *Ibid.*

8 Abigail Fraser and Avi Shabat, "Between Nationalism and Liberalism: The Political Thought of Azmi Bishara," in *The Israeli Palestinians. An Arab Minority in the Jewish State*, ed. Alexander Bligh (London/Portland: Frank Cass, 2003), 17.

The violent confrontations that took place in early October 2000 between the Israeli police and Palestinian demonstrators in northern Israel marked a further turning point in Jewish-Arab relations within the Jewish State. Protests arose among Israel's Palestinian population at the outbreak of the al-Aqsa intifada (2000-2005) and ended with thirteen Palestinian citizens killed by police shooting⁹. During the October events, Israel's Palestinian citizens expressed their solidarity with Palestinians in the Occupied Territories but also denounced their second-class condition as Israel's citizens, demanding substantial improvement in their civil-political status.

Israeli police life fire on Palestinian protesters exacerbated the perception of marginalization in this community.¹⁰ This was fueled by a public discourse in the Hebrew media describing the 'Arab sector' (*migzar 'aravi*) as disloyal and subversive. An official commission of inquiry, the Or Commission, was appointed by the government to shed light on the events' dynamics and mass mobilization of the 'Arab sector.'¹¹ To some extent, the commission's official report, published in 2003, recognized the causes of Palestinian discontent in Israel and institutionally addressed them for the first time in Israeli statehood.¹² However, the failure to prosecute the officers deemed responsible for the killing of unarmed citizens increased the perception of a different, unequal treatment in Israel's own Palestinian community.

From this yet concise historical background, a quite troubled image of cohabitation between Arab-Palestinians and Jews in Israel emerges. In fact, according to a significative number of Israeli and Palestinian scholars, Israeli society has grown increasingly more divided along ethnonational lines over the years.¹³ This conceptual framework has taken the name of

9 Shourideh Molavi, *Stateless Citizenship: The Palestinian-Arab Citizens of Israel* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2013), 67-68.

10 Ilan Pappé, *The Forgotten Palestinians. A History of the Palestinians in Israel* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2011), 237.

11 Theodor Or and Elie Rekhess, "State Commission of Inquiry into the Events of October 2000: A Retrospective," *Israel Studies* 11, no. 2 (2006): 23-53; Yoav Peled, "Restoring Ethnic Democracy: The Or Commission and Palestinian Citizenship in Israel," *Citizenship Studies* 9, no. 1 (2005): 89-105.

12 Or and Rekhess, "State Commission," 24-29.

13 Sammy Smooha, "Index of Arab-Jewish Relations in Israel 2003-2009" (Haifa: The Jewish-Arab Center, University of Haifa, 2010): 7. The following are some of the scholars, both Israeli and Palestinian, representative of this approach, as cited in Smooha, "Index" (*endnote 3*): Elie Rekhess, "The Evolvement of an Arab-Palestinian National Minority in Israel," *Israel Studies* 12, no. 3 (Fall 2007):

‘mutual alienation theory’. It holds that Jewish media, mainstream governmental discourse and public opinion perceive Arabs as an increasingly radicalized minority, which has undergone Palestinization and Islamization since the late 1960s. Alongside that, Palestinians believe that Jewish public and establishment are becoming more uncompromising and exclusionary, due to an assertive rise of ultra-nationalist and religious rightwing parties.¹⁴

However, in its ‘Index of Arab-Jewish Relations in Israel (2003-2009)’, Israeli sociologist Sammi Smootha proposes an alternative, concurring framework to conceptualize inter-community relations from 1976 to 2008. He argues that, in the long run, a mutual rapprochement has taken place between Jews and Palestinians, preventing mutual confrontation and violence¹⁵. This thesis is not as simplistic, or naïve, as it might sound, for it acknowledges the discriminations that Palestinians suffer from at various levels within Israel. Smootha contends that:

Israelization makes Arabs bilingual and bicultural and adds the Hebrew language and Hebrew culture to their repertoire. Israeli Arabs [...] are increasingly binding their fate and future with Israel and conceiving of Israel as their home country. They take Jews as their reference group and wish to achieve the same standards, services, and treatment. They abide by democratic rules for effecting change in Israeli society and avoid violence. Israelization renders Arabs impatient with discrimination and exclusion and drives them to lead a serious fight for change.¹⁶

The seemingly contradictory condition embodied in Israel’s Palestinians constitutes the hallmark of their uniqueness, suspended as they are between their Arab-Palestinian heritage and Israeli citizenship, which requires them to speak fluent Hebrew and manage Jewish culture. This conflicted identity is experienced by Palestinian citizens in a variety of original, ever-changing ways, and never without tension. For that matter, Palestinian novelists, poets and filmmakers have contributed to portray and unravel the multifaceted expressions of Palestinian identity in Israel¹⁷. Among these authors,

1-28; Dan Rabinowitz and Khawla Abu-Baker, *Coffins on Our Shoulders: The Experience of the Palestinian Citizens of Israel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Oren Yiftachel and As’ad Ghanem, “Understanding ‘Ethnocratic’ Regimes: The Politics of Seizing Contested Territories,” *Political Geography* 23, no. 6 (August 2004): 647-76.

14 Smootha, “Index of Arab-Jewish Relations in Israel 2003-2009,” 8.

15 *Ibid.*

16 *Op. cit.*, 8-9.

17 For an overview of Palestinian fiction and poetry in Israel, see: Makhoul, Manar H. *Palestinian Citizens in Israel: A History Through Fiction, 1948-2010*. Edinburgh,

Sayed Kashua's early 2000s work emblematically provides an original, thought-provoking insight into the (self)-representation of Palestinian citizens' condition in Israel, as well as into their daily identity struggle and their relationship with Jewish fellow citizens. Henceforth, his most popular TV production will be the core-subject of the following discussion.

Challenging the rules of the game: the sitcom 'Arab Labor'

Arab Labor is a comedy drama series aired on Israeli primetime TV (Channel 2, Keshet) for four seasons, with more than forty episodes in total. It is the first Israeli TV series created by a Palestinian citizen, namely Sayed Kashua, which offers insights into Palestinian citizens' issues and hardships in Israel. Its first season was broadcast in 2007, and subsequent seasons appeared in 2008, 2012 and 2013. For the purpose of this discussion, I will specifically focus on the first season, namely on its nine episodes plus the final one,¹⁸ aired on Israel's Independence Day.

The series' title itself prefigures the sarcastic and irreverent character of the whole sitcom. *'Avodah 'Aravit* in Hebrew is a colloquial, pejorative expression that denotes unreliable and substandard work, presumably carried out by Arabs; this slang idiom additionally mocks the slogan of Zionist pioneers in twentieth-century Yishuv, who encouraged new *'olim* and Jewish landlords to replace Arab workers with Jewish labor (*'avodah 'ivrit*), embracing a productive role in the taming of their (new) land.¹⁹

Arab Labor is unprecedented for many different reasons. As noted above, it is the first Israeli television space that focused on, and gave voice to, Palestinian citizens. Theretofore, they were absent or underrepresented in Israeli television, and, when represented, they were too often associated with negative stereotypes²⁰. Furthermore, dialogues in the series are mainly in Arabic (with Hebrew subtitles), and the cast is primarily composed by Palestinian actors. This is groundbreaking, insofar as many Palestinian

Edinburgh University Press, 2020; Aqsous, Sadia. *Derrière l'hébreu, l'arabe. Le roman palestinien en hébreu (1966-2017)*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2022.

18 The Car, The Sheep, Kindergarten, Kidnapping, Passover, Reserve Duty, Loyalty, Crime on the Border, Meeting the Parents; Independence Day.

19 Shiri Goren, "Arab Labor, Jewish Humor: Memory, Identity, and Creative Resistance on Israeli Prime-Time Television," *Jewish Social Studies* 25, no. 2 (2020): 110; Judit Druks, "Passing as... in Arab Labor by Sayed Kashua on Israeli TV," *Third Text* 34, no. 2 (2020): 313.

20 Steir-Livny and Mendelson-Maoz, "From the Margins to Prime Time," 81.

characters used to be played by Mizrahi Jews in Israeli television, as much as Jewish actors played Arab characters in Israeli cinema until the 1980s.²¹ Moreover, the reception of the series in the Israeli Jewish public was greatly beyond expectations.²²

The series portrays the everyday life of a secular middle-class Palestinian family in Israel, the 'Aliyan, and revolves around the life of Amjad (played by Norman Issa), a 35-year-old journalist who makes every surrealist attempt possible in order to pass as a Jew. He is married to Bushra (Clara Khoury), a Palestinian woman and social worker by profession, who makes fun of the tragicomic situations in which her husband is continuously entangled. Contrary to Amjad, she is proud of her Arab-Palestinian identity, but she can also be quite flexible, as her perfect Hebrew and her 'Western outfit' makes her easily fit into Jewish society. Amjad and Bushra are parents of a young daughter, Maya (Fatma Yihye), and, in the first season's last episode, Bushra gives birth to their first male child, whose name is at the center of a dispute between them and Amjad's parents. Abu-Amjad (Salim Dau), the protagonist's father, is a retired former employee of the Ministry of Education, who places his economic interests before any ideological conjecture; he is very harsh to his son, particularly to his non-Arab-like behavior (e.g., he wears seatbelt while driving!), and he is sometimes ready to cheat on him, if necessity requires it or if he can speculate on his son's troubles. Umm-Amjad (Salwa Nakra), Amjad's mother, embodies the calm and caring housewife who is at peace with her traditional Palestinian identity; throughout the series, she represents a voice of sanity and good-sense opinion, counterbalancing her husband's instability.

The vicissitudes of the 'Aliyan family intertwine with other external characters. Meir (Mariano Idelmann) is a Jewish photographer and Amjad's colleague at the local newspaper. He accompanies Amjad in his integration into Jewish society in a comic way. He is the caricatural figure of an average Israeli: direct, impulsive, and with stereotypes about Arabs. Nevertheless, he is ready to partially put them aside when he falls in love with Amal (Mira 'Awad), a Palestinian attorney who graduated from Boston and who now works for a civil rights organization in Israel. She is entirely devoted to her Palestinianness, both in her job, defending Palestinian legal rights in court, and in her private life, where she denounces every form of discrimination she experiences as a Palestinian. The relationship between

21 Ella Shohat, "The Return of the Repressed: The Palestinian Wave in Recent Israeli Cinema," in *Israeli Cinema. East/West and the Politics of Representation*, ed. Ella Shohat (IB Tauris: London, 2010), 225.

22 Goren, "Arab Labor, Jewish Humor," 111.

Meir and Amal is animated by constant squabbles and misunderstandings, as they are repeatedly confronted with the respective misrepresentations attributed to their own collectives. At the same time, they form a mixed couple, a rare occurrence in Israeli society.

According to Marcelle Kosman, *'Avodah 'Aravit* has some nation-building potential that operates at two levels²³. On the one hand, the series makes Palestinians visible in mainstream Israeli television, pulling them out of a halo of negative stereotypes and their repeated association with criminality, violence or terrorism on TV news. On the other, the sitcom makes the visibility of Palestinians normative.²⁴ Thus, in Arab Labor Palestinian citizens overcome their marginalization from Israeli TV, while Israeli-Jewish viewers are confronted with the representation of their Arab fellow citizens, but also with their troubled existence in a state that disowns their history and identity claims.

Not less importantly, starting from the early 2000s, some TV dramas in Israel have started to portray the life of Israeli family.²⁵ Examples of this trend were *Meorav Yerushalmi* ("Jerusalem Mix"), broadcast in 2003, which gives insights into the life of an Orthodox Jewish family; the series *Srugim* ("Crocheted"), aired 2008-2012, which revolves around the daily routine of religious Zionists, the title referring to the knitted skull-cap (*kippah srugah*) that traditional religious Jews use to wear. "A Touch Away" (*Merhaq Negi 'ah*), aired in 2006, deals with a Russian immigrant who falls in love with a Haredi girl from Bnei Brak, an ultra-Orthodox municipality near Tel Aviv. Now, all of these TV series represented symbolic spaces where Israeli identity was negotiated and contended.²⁶ Thus, to some extent, Arab Labor fills the vacancy left in Israel's primetime TV by representing the daily life of an Arab-Palestinian family. Although the focus on the nuclear family has recently become less frequent in sitcoms, in *'Avodah 'Aravit* it serves precisely to normalize the image of Palestinian citizens in Israeli society, by portraying the everyday routine of a common Arab-Muslim family away from terrorism and violence.²⁷

Furthermore, by choosing the genre of sitcom, Kashua lowers the tones of the political discussion and, through his well-known sarcastic attitude,

23 Marcelle Kosman, "Comic Relief: The Ethical Intervention of *'Avodah 'Aravit* (Arab Labor) in Political Discourses of Israel–Palestine," *Comedy Studies* 6, no. 1 (2015): 20.

24 *Ibid.*

25 Goren, "Arab Labor, Jewish Humor," 111.

26 Miri Talmon, "A Touch Away from Cultural Others: Negotiating Israeli Jewish Identity on Television," *Shofar* 31, no. 2 (2013): 55.

27 Kosman, "Comic Relief," 24.

he leads his viewers through stereotypical representations that Jews have of Arabs and vice versa. The paradoxical situations that the series' characters repeatedly come across serve to highlight the inconsistency of these stereotypes, ridiculing them. In doing so, the sitcom envisions a radically different kind of discourse, insofar as it displays on screen the conflicts arising from Arab-Jewish cohabitation in Israel through humor and frivolity.²⁸ Ultimately, representing the daily vicissitudes of mostly Arab characters, with their shortcomings, contradictions, and hilarious relations with fellow Jews, should supposedly bring Arab-Palestinian narrative(s) closer to the Israeli Jewish audience, against a widespread media discourse that portrays Arabs as internal enemies. Through the apparently subdued tones of comedy, Kashua intends to offer a sharp critique of the dominant security-centered discourse on Palestinians in Israel, by prospecting the very possibility of cohabitation or, at least, reciprocal acceptance. Therein, Arab Labor constitutes but a tiny step in the 'normalization' of the contested (or ignored) presence of Palestinians in Israeli public sphere.

Amjad's quest for (Jewish-Israeli) identity

The undisputed protagonist of the series, and Kashua's main focus of attention, is Amjad 'Aliyan. He is a Palestinian citizen who works as a journalist for an Israeli newspaper, exactly as Sayed Kashua, his creator, did. Above all, Amjad strives to lead a normal life. However, his pursuit of normality always leads him to grotesque situations.

Every morning, Amjad is asked by Israeli police to provide his identity card when crossing the checkpoint by car. This happens despite his attempts to conceal his Arab identity: he wears 'Western' clothes, he listens to the IDF radio station, and of course avoids speaking Arabic. In order not to arouse suspicion, he also instructs his daughter to please the policeman by politely saying in Hebrew *boqer tov, adoni*, "Good morning, Sir", whereas she eventually greets him in a mocking tone, in Arabic – *sabah al-khayr, ya bulis* ("Good morning, policeman"). He later asks his Jewish colleague Me'ir why he cannot pass as a Jew and eventually discovers that it is because only Arabs drive Subarus. Then, his new Rover, a perfect Jewish-style car, allows him to avoid police control at the checkpoint, assuring him a warm waving from the policeman.

28 Kosman, "Comic Relief," 20.

The protagonist's desire of assimilation is also well reflected in the third episode (*The Kindergarten*), when he looks for a kindergarten that can accommodate his daughter. Amjad desires a better education for Maya than the one provided by his parents Abu- and Umm-Amjad at home. Amjad's quest for a kindergarten suitable for Maya in Jerusalem becomes a sarcastic exploration of the diverse and fragmented education system in Israel, but also a hard confrontation with the segregationist reality of Jewish schools (and society) for Palestinians.

At first, in order to avoid any confrontation with the Jewish school system, Maya is enrolled in a Muslim kindergarten, where, in his father's view, repetition of the Qur'an is supposed to train her mnemonic skills. But after he realizes that Maya has started to think and behave in an ultraconservative manner, he moves her to *Gan Ha-Shalom*, the 'Kindergarten of Peace'. The parents' meeting with the director Sigalit reveals the anti-Arab attitude of this secular school which, at least from its evocative name, is supposed to be open-minded and inclusive. Sigalit is initially deceived by the assonance of the surname 'Aliyan with the much more Jewish-sounding surname Elian, so at first she thinks she has to do with a Jewish family. But, as soon as she realizes her misunderstanding, she makes everything in order to prevent Amjad and Bushra from enrolling their daughter in her school. The director underlines that *Gan Ha-Shalom* puts a lot of emphasis on Jewish tradition and Israeli national identity in its educational mission, by teaching stories about Biblical prophets (Abraham, Isaac, Moses) and by encouraging loyalty to state symbols. Amjad reassures Sigalit in that all of the Jewish prophets are also recognized in the Muslim tradition, and in that the 'Aliyan family is most loyal to the state of Israel and its national symbols. Even when the director states that children there play at killing Arabs, Amjad minimizes it by replying they are still young, and they have to get used to coexistence since early childhood. Contrary to Amjad's optimism about Arab-Jewish cohabitation, Sigalit's speech reveals Kashua's critique of Israeli-Zionist secular leftists, who present themselves as tireless supporters of peace and cohabitation, yet they believe in it only "to a certain extent."

After this and the third vain attempt with an anthroposophical-inspired school, Amjad and his wife end up at a Jewish liberal reform kindergarten. Its director reassures Maya's parents in that she will not be the only girl different from the others, because in their school there is also a disabled girl. This tragicomic response spotlights the perceived and embodied distance between Arabs and Jews in Israel, and, despite attempts made by Palestinians to integrate into the system, it reveals its ultimate inaccessibility, the impossibility to overcome racial, ethnonational boundaries. Even Amjad's

last attempt at a bilingual kindergarten turns out to be a failure, revealing Kashua's dubious attitude towards mixed schools. There, teachers speak both Hebrew and Arabic, both holidays are celebrated, and both national narratives are respected. Nonetheless, this alleged exaltation of coexistence ultimately takes on caricatural tones, as when the two teachers speak in unison, alternating between Arabic and Hebrew in an unnatural, unplausible way.²⁹ Ultimately, Amjad's unsuccessful adventures through various kindergartens suggest the hyper-fragmentation and incommunicability of a school system that is designed to divide rather than unite the diverse 'tribes of Israel', as noted in a famous speech by former Israeli President Reuven Rivlin.³⁰ As per Rivlin's allocution, the 'tribe' of Arab citizens is not really part of the game. Thus, the creation of a new Israeli identity and order should supposedly overcome societal (and school system) fragmentation that exist between secular, Orthodox and national-religious Jewish communities as well as between Jews and Arabs.³¹

However, as evident throughout the series, Amjad tries hard to fit into Jewish society, looking like a real assimilated Arab. In this regard, he perfectly embodies what much of the Israeli establishment refers to as 'good Arab' ('*aravi tov*)³². Since early statehood, Israeli government and security forces have fostered collaboration with members of the Arab community, coopting some of them through privileges in return for security assistance³³. In the TV series, Amjad as well is hired by the Shin Bet and invited to cooperate with Jewish security agencies, providing information on 'strange movements' within his neighborhood. After all, marshalling 'good Arabs', docile and submissive loyal citizens, has long been a strategy for governmental bodies meant to normalize the presence of Palestinian-Arabs within the state and, ultimately, to better control a sector considered to be potentially subversive. However, the Shin Bet eventually gets tired of the useless information provided by Amjad, who is definitely not perceived as a danger, nor helpful, for Israeli security, so their infructuous collaboration

29 Kashua further addressed some of these issues in his latest TV comedy series "Madrasa" (2023), located in a bilingual high school in Jerusalem.

30 Reuven Rivlin, President of the state of Israel at the 15th Annual Herzliya Conference. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hmRDrH5VcNY> (last consulted: 10 January 2022).

31 *Ibid.*

32 Amal Jamal, "Manufacturing 'Quiet Arabs' in Israel: Ethnicity, Media Frames and Soft Power," *Government and Opposition* 48, no. 2 (2013): 245-264.

33 See: Hillel, Cohen. *Good Arabs: The Israeli Security Agencies and the Israeli Arabs, 1948-1967*. Berkley, California: University of California Press, 2010.

rapidly comes to an end. As such, this episode reveals Kashua's critique of the suspicion and surveillance discourse imposed on Israel's Arab citizens. Amjad's harmlessness and inoffensiveness serve to expose the paradoxes of the security-focused approach that shapes much of the relationship between Israel's establishment and its own Palestinian community.

Jewish society lifestyle, and particularly the habits of the Ashkenazi elite, keeps exerting a great fascination on Amjad. This is well evidenced in the fifth episode of the series (*Passover*), when Amjad and his family are invited by some Ashkenazi Jewish friends to the Seder dinner, the Jewish festival *par excellence*. Wearing kippah, singing traditional religious songs and eating traditional Jewish food makes Amjad feel truly part of the other's community, however temporary and illusory this sensation is. To reciprocate his Jewish guests for this embracing experience, he will invite them to a surrealist traditional Palestinian dinner, enacted with the help of his parents, as to show that Palestinians as well have strong traditional habits and festivals to celebrate, some sort of 'Muslim Passover'. As it would appear from this scene, Amjad is portrayed as suffering from an inferiority complex towards the Jewish culture he wants to adopt for himself and his family at all costs.

For that matter, Amjad's hopeful struggle to integrate into Jewish society and his willingness to look like a Jew resembles much that of his creator and the protagonists of his novels. Sayed Kashua has made his convoluted search for identity the distinctive feature of his artistic production. Born in 1975 in Tira, a village in the Triangle, central Israel, as early as a teenager he was admitted to a prestigious Israeli-Jewish boarding school in Jerusalem. Not unlike the protagonist of his autobiographical debut novel, *Dancing Arabs* (2002), he made every possible effort in order to assimilate into Jewish-Israeli society. Starting from an accurate, little-Arabic-sounding Hebrew pronunciation, the nameless antihero of the novel tries to get rid of his Arab background, starting to look like Israeli in order not to be rejected by his peers. He thus changes his clothes, his eating habits, his lifestyle, and slides between different schools, languages and cultures.

I look more Israeli than the average Israeli. I'm always pleased when Jews tell me this. "You don't look like an Arab at all," they say. Some people claim it's a racist thing to say, but I've always taken it as a compliment, a sign of success. That's what I've always wanted to be, after all: a Jew. I've worked hard at it, and I've finally pulled it off.³⁴

34 Sayed Kashua, *Dancing Arabs*, transl. Miriam Shlesinger (New York: Grove Press, 2002), 140 (*ebook*).

Similarly, throughout *Arab Labor*, Amjad undergoes not only Israelization but also ‘Jewification’, or Judaization,³⁵ especially if his exposure to Jewish culture at work is considered. Undoubtedly, passing as a Jew allows the sitcom’s protagonist to get by more easily in daily life complications. However, as suggested by Judit Druks, the deeper reason why Amjad identifies with Western habits and values could lie in its disavowal of his Arab background, conceived as an indistinct amalgam of impulses, irrationality, and backwardness.³⁶ In this regard, this attitude would recall a Bordieuan embodiment of longstanding Western stereotypes about Arabs that are well evidenced in Edward Sa’id’s masterpiece, *Orientalism*³⁷. To a certain extent, this is depicted in the ninth episode of the first season (*Meeting the Parents*), when Amjad takes his wife to their wedding anniversary’s dinner at a luxury restaurant in Jerusalem, where most of the Jewish *bon ton* élite goes. Unexpectedly, Amjad’s parents show up at the restaurant, invited by their Arab friend who works there as a waiter. To Amjad’s chagrin, his parents will be able to turn a quiet, high-bourgeoise eating environment into a party-like setting, animated by Arab dances and screaming chants. The protagonist feels ashamed by this little drama scene and sits on the sidelines with an arm over his head, as if to cover himself from such a trivial, embarrassing play. Although Amjad strives to escape from his Arab heritage, he is continuously haunted by it.

Palestinians in Israel: which kind of (co)existence?

Palestinian citizens of Israel experience a multifaceted sense of identity and belonging, due to the interaction of the Arab, Palestinian and Israeli components, the combination of which each individual embodies in a peculiar and always different fashion. Throughout his work, Sayed Kashua adds to this already complex frame a new component, namely the Jewish identity³⁸. More precisely, as per Batya Shimoni, in Kashua’s artistic pro-

35 Steir-Livny, Mendelson-Maoz, “From the Margins to Prime Time,” 85.

36 Druks, “Passing as...,” 317.

37 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge, 1978).

38 In the series, while Amjad’s never-satisfied tension towards *Israeli* identity is reflected in his desire to always appear as a loyal, ‘integrated’ citizen, the protagonist’s relationship with *Jewish* identity is evident in his admiration of Jewish traditions and customs (e.g., in the Passover episode), which he would seem to consider better, more refined, than Arab-Palestinian ones.

duction the Jewish-Arab identity emerges as a mirror image to that of the Arab-Jew (i.e., the Mizrahi, Sephardic Jew).³⁹

Starting from the 1950s, Arabic-speaking Jews who lived in North African and Middle Eastern countries emigrated to Israel, where they were forced to get rid of their Arab cultural heritage and to turn into Hebrew-speakers. As this Arab/Arabic component was thought to pose a threat to the very Jewish-Zionist configuration of Israeli statehood, the ‘Mizrahi’ identity was constructed by state authorities, in an attempt to erase every trace of Arabness and to integrate former ‘Arab-Jews’ in Israeli society. Nevertheless, the third generation of Mizrahi activists, particularly Mizrahi writers, started to reappropriate the category of Arab-Jew, mainly for political, confrontational purposes. This was meant to oppose the Ashkenazi hegemony that characterized Israel’s identity and public domain since early statehood.⁴⁰ In a similar fashion, Sayed Kashua appropriates and promotes an identity, the Jewish-Arab, which is perceived to be hostile to the Jewish-Zionist establishment. Just as the Mizrahi identity was created to counterbalance the Arab component in Jewish communities coming from the Middle East, so the ‘Arab-Israeli’ identity served to annihilate the Palestinian self-identification of non-Jewish citizens who remained within Israel’s borders after 1948.⁴¹ In this regard, Arab Labor and other literary works by Kashua strive to untangle the spectrum of identities perceived, embodied and represented by Israel’s Palestinian citizens, by playing with the ‘Arab-Israeli’ or ‘Arab-citizen’ imprisoning label, repeatedly imposed on non-Jewish citizens. Yet, it must be noted, Kashua insists on using – in the series and elsewhere – the term ‘Arab’ or ‘Israeli Arab’, rather than ‘Palestinian citizen’ or ‘Israeli Palestinian’,⁴² though fully aware of the implications that this choice carries on, and of Palestinian criticism to which he is exposed thereby.

The aim of the creator is to bring back the experience of Arab citizens into Israel’s collective imagination,⁴³ refusing every ethnonationalist, exclusivist narrative that conceives them as disloyal citizens, or non-citizens precisely because Palestinians (belonging to another nation-state), or a demographic threat that undermines Israel’s very foundations. Even more so, Kashua appropriates this labeling insofar as, in his viewpoint, it better dis-

39 Batya Shimony, “Shaping Israeli-Arab Identity in Hebrew Words – The Case of Sayed Kashua,” *Israel Studies* 18, no. 1 (2013): 150.

40 *Op. cit.*, 151-152.

41 *Op. cit.*, 152.

42 Gil Hochberg, “To Be or Not to Be an Israeli Arab: Sayed Kashua and the Prospect of Minority Speech-Acts,” *Comparative Literature* 62, no. 1 (2010): 78.

43 *Ibid.*

plays the complexities associated with this identity.⁴⁴ Thus, while pointing to the limits and hardships inherent in such hyphenated condition, his work unveils the paradoxical (and imprisoning) effects of the Arab-Israeli label and, through irony, finds a way to overcome it.

In the previous section, I offered evidence of Amjad's attitude to pass as a Jew, drawing from numerous episodes of Arab Labor's first season. It might be argued that this desire to disguise and conceal one's own original identity reflects asymmetrical relations between dominant and subordinate subjects. The protagonist, being part of the minority, feels inferior and therefore aspires to belong to the colonizer's collective,⁴⁵ enjoying the same privileges, habits and lifestyle – as evident in the aforementioned episodes of *Passover* and *Meeting the Parents*. Passing as a Jew, thus, gives Amjad further opportunities and the possibility of social ascent in a society that otherwise would reject him. Nevertheless, as suggested by Gil Hochberg, this desire to fit in, which cannot be light-heartedly judged, does not manifest Kashua's complex of inferiority towards the Jews.⁴⁶ On the contrary, this attitude "captures but also mobilizes the convoluted psychological impact of a society dominated by ethno-racial inequality."⁴⁷ In this context, passing represents a coping mechanism, a psychological reaction to unequal treatment and disadvantaged conditions.⁴⁸ Thus, rather than a mere emulative process, passing can be ultimately conceived as a subversive, transgressive and creative act, that shakes cultural misrepresentations and the boundaries imposed by reciprocal ethnonational narratives. Through satire, Kashua plays with the caricatures of Arabs and Jews, and by ridiculing them, he transcends their immobility and acquires a more genuine space for critique and social denounce.

In Arab Labor's eighth episode (*Crime on the Border*), Bushra is pregnant and visits her gynecologist with Amjad. The doctor notices that there is something wrong with her fetus, but he can't really explain why, claiming that it is *gvuli*, 'borderline'. After further medical examination, Bushra returns to the gynecologist, but nothing has changed in the conditions of her unborn child. "It is borderline", the doctor repeats. Later on, under the advice of an acquaintance, Amjad tries to fix the situation by slightly moving the bed where he and his wife sleep, as it is located right above

44 Hochberg, "To Be or Not to Be," 78.

45 Druks, "Passing as...," 313.

46 Hochberg, "To Be or Not to Be," 85.

47 *Ibid.*

48 Druks, "Passing as...," 322.

the border (*gvul*), the Green Line that splits Jerusalem into two. Once the bed is straightened and moved from its condition of liminality, the fetus's health conditions immediately improve.

The paradoxical episode of the borderline fetus constitutes a sharp allusion to the liminal, somehow impossible, condition of being Arab-Palestinian within the state of Israel. Even more so, in the seventh episode (*Loyalty*), Amjad is assailed by an identity crisis, after he makes an interview to an Israeli supporter of yet another plan of partition ("We are here, they are there") between Arabs and Jews, that envisions population transfers of Arabs into a new Palestinian state. "Who needs those Arabs?", such rhetorical question posed by the plan proponent resonates in Amjad's mind, who is compelled to go to a psychologist to alleviate his delusions. "Who am I? What am I? Am I Arab? Am I Israeli? Do they want me to stay? Do they want to throw me out? Where do I belong?"— he incessantly wonders and asks his therapist, but he cannot find peace, nor answer. "I am sure I am an Arab, but all I know is here: *Bank haPoalim*, the *Meuchedet*. I grew up on *Shmil the Cat*."⁴⁹

Right in the middle of two incandescent and mutually exclusive nationalist narratives, Palestinian citizens occupy an interlayered position, that between Israeli citizenship and Palestinian nationalism, sometimes described as schizophrenic because presumably impossible. But this is precisely where Kashua's point (and power) lies. His purpose is to lay bare the constructed character of ethnonational identities, by spotlighting their very paradoxicality. Imposed as they are by respective nationalist discourses, identities such as Palestinian and Israeli are fictitious and instrumental, the clearest evidence of that being the apparent contradiction embodied in Israel's own Palestinian citizens. In *Arab Labor*, through a set of surreal, tragicomic sketches, Kashua strives to spotlight the inconsistency of exclusivist ways of imposing one's own *Weltanschauung* in a land where Jews and Arabs, Israelis and Palestinian, are inextricably bound to live together. In his interview upon the release of the first season, Kashua claimed that *Arab Labor* intends to "make viewers break away from their national identity and see how ugly, complex, repulsive is when things like nationality and religion have to come into friendship, relationship and love."⁵⁰

Nonetheless, which kind of coexistence between Jews and Arabs is envisioned by Sayed Kashua, if any? The author is surely quite skeptical about the potential of the so-called 'Stand-Tall Generation' (in Hebrew: *ha-dor*

49 *Bank HaPoalim*, the *Meuchedet* health plan and the kid show *Shmil the Cat* are all common, popular reference for Israeli citizens.

50 Interview with Sayed Kashua, in *Arab Labor*. DVD. Directed by Roni Ninio and Yaakov Goldwasser. Keshet Broadcasting Ltd and Dori Media Paran Ltd, 2007.

ha-zaquf; Arabic: *jil muntasib al-qama*), a term coined by Dan Rabinowitz and Khawla Abu-Baker⁵¹ to describe the new ethos of young Palestinians in Israel, as being quite different from that of previous generations. In Abu-Baker and Rabinowitz's theorization, the first generation is termed the 'Generation of Survivors' and includes Palestinians who survived the Nakba and were forcibly integrated into Israel as citizens; they generally had non-confrontational attitudes towards the state, still affected as they were by the trauma of lost and dispossession. A second generation, named the 'Worn-Out Generation', started to challenge its parents' political quiescence in the 1970s and committed to political struggle, in order to obtain individual, civil equality, as per Israel's Declaration of Independence. Nevertheless, they were little successful in discarding Jewish hegemony, remaining excluded from the gravity center of state power. For this reason, they are deemed to be 'worn-out', exhausted, as, in Arab Labor, Amjad's parents are.

By contrast, members of the Stand-Tall Generation are Palestinians who were born in Israel in the last quarter of the previous century, who grew up in the midst of violence detonated with the Second Intifada and the October 2000 events, and who energetically advocate for Israel to be a state 'for all of its citizens', in an attempt to discard its very Jewish characterization.

Disillusioned with the prospect of ever becoming equal citizens in Israel, members of the Stand-Tall Generation are no longer interested in being marginal hangers-on of the Zionist project. They tend to see citizenship as a collective entitlement, not just a personal affair. They seek deep historic justice and meaningful incorporation into a transformed Israel.⁵²

In short, Stand-Tall Palestinians are aware of frustrations connected to the impossibility of becoming equal citizens and they recognize discrimination wherever it lurks. They are hyper-politicized, and committed to a continuous struggle against state institutions, against Jewish hegemony, and in the defense of their civil and political rights, of gender equality and much more.⁵³

In 'Avodah 'Aravit, Amal represents the stereotypical Stand-Tall Palestinian. She is a young feminist lawyer who obtained her degree in human

51 Khawla Abu Baker and Dan Rabinowitz, *Coffin on Our Shoulders. The Experience of the Palestinian Citizens of Israel* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005).

52 *Op. cit.*, 3.

53 Yair Adiel, "On Language and the Possibility of Change. Sayed Kashua and the 'Stand-Tall Generation'," *Interventions* 16, no. 3 (2014): 367.

rights in Boston, and who works for the Association of Civil Rights, in support of Palestinians discriminated by Israeli legal system. Her stand-tall attitude is well expressed when she is invited at Meir's place for the Passover eve dinner. Meir fell in love with Amal, and wants to impress her with a truly Palestinian, 'asli dinner, that he had previously prepared with Umm-Amjad's help. He then serves tabbouleh, vine leaves, maqlooba, tahini, a set of delights that Amal immediately detects as the 'embodiment of Orientalism'. Amal gets upset at Meir, as – she argues – the very fact of being Arab does not condemn her to eat just Middle Eastern cuisine, rather than steak, schnitzel or purée. She again repeats that the dinner veritably recalls what Edward Sa'id had theorized in his *Orientalism*. Meir, unaware of stereotypes and discrimination that he, as an Israeli-Jew, unconsciously perpetuates, asks her: "What, a cookbook?". Meir's naïve attitude acts here as Kashua's profound critique of the Stand-Tall hyper-critical stance, one that can ruin romantic, intimate situations in the name of some political dogmatism. In the 'Oriental' dinner scene, not only Meir as a bearer of incorporated stereotypes on Arabs, but also Amal, the ever-in-struggle Palestinian, turn out to be caricaturized and ridiculed.

Furthermore, Amal fully represents a Stand-Tall attitude insofar as her Arabic pronunciation is controlled, accurate and not mixed with Hebrew. This is quite evident in the way she pronounces the Arabic name of food served at the Passover dinner, and in her readiness to correct Meir's markedly Israeli pronunciation of *thina*, *taboula*, *labaneh*, *maqluba*. The authentic Arabic pronunciation, which does not intend to be 'contaminated' by Hebrew calques, is thus supposed to be a source of empowerment and distinction for Arab citizens who feel more 'Palestinized' and want to mark their distance from Israelis.

Nevertheless, as much as several colloquial (and vulgar) expressions in Hebrew are word loans from Arabic, Palestinian citizens of Israel speak colloquial Arabic filled with a great number of Hebrew words. Due to their adoption of the Hebrew word for 'OK, alright', in place of its Arabic equivalent, Palestinians of Israel are sometimes referred to by OPT Palestinians as *be-seder* Palestinians. In fact, Hebrew code-switching is a largely widespread phenomenon among Palestinian citizens of Israel, which has led sociolinguist Nancy Hawker to coin the term 'Arabrew' as a new language variety of Arabic.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, according to Rabinowitz and Abu-Baker, Palestinians who adopt this Arabic variant replete with Hebrew denote a

54 Nancy Hawker, "The Mirage of 'Arabrew': Ideologies for Understanding Arabic-Hebrew Contact," *Language in Society* 47, no. 2 (2018): 219-244.

yet non-advanced Stand-Tall consciousness, which often mirrors a scarce interest in Palestinian history or identity.⁵⁵ Moreover, such attitude usually shows greater proximity to Israeli-Zionist narrative. This subgroup of young Arab generation in Israel would thus know, in the scholars' words, only 'fragmented histories', and their only expectation is to get by.⁵⁶

As suggested, in Arab Labor *Kashua* seems to mock the too purist stand-tall attitude even at a linguistic level. With the exception of Amal, all of the Palestinian characters, although proud of their Palestinian identity, are comfortable in switching from Arabic to Hebrew, or, to some extent, they speak Arabic with consistent Hebrew terminological influence. By the way, it must be observed that the series' protagonists, much like Sayed *Kashua*, are expression of a middle-class family, which realistically implies the possibility of better education, most likely in Hebrew-speaking institutions. However, as noted by Yair Adiel, *Kashua's* production seems to suggest that hope coming from the young generation does not consist in tracing borders between languages or identities, between 'Israeliness' and 'Palestinianness', but rather, hope lies in "those who mix languages, who are confused by language, who mix reality and fiction, fantasize, hallucinate, fear capture, and are captured by fears."⁵⁷

In the episode that seals the first season of the sitcom, *Independence Day*, a glimpse of possible cohabitation, however troubled, appears. Bushra is about to give birth to her baby, but his still uncertain name is a major source of worries for the 'Aliyans. Abu-Amjad (whose real name is Isma'il) wants to call the baby Isma'il, an evocative Arabic name that reflects Muslim predilection for Prophet Ismael (instead of his 'rival' brother Isaac), through whom Abraham's offspring comes according to the Muslim tradition. However, Amjad prefers a more 'neutral' name for his son, namely Adam, less nationalistically charged. But such conjectures become more complicated as soon as both men hear that a million-shekel prize will be given, by a rich Russian donor, to the first baby born in Israel (*be-Yisrael*, in Hebrew) on Independence Day. Amjad and his father make pressure in order for the baby to be delivered before that of another Jewish-Israeli couple at the hospital: they will succeed thanks to Umm-Amjad's mid-wife abilities. However, once the donor realizes that the first baby born is Arab, he reconsiders what he had previously said, by stating that there has been a linguistic misunderstanding, and the prize will ultimately go to the

55 Adiel, "On Language and the Possibility of Change," 369.

56 *Ibid.*

57 *Op. cit.*, 376.

first child born *as* Israel (*ke-Yisrael*) – thus, a baby whose name is Israel. Leaving aside Kashua's mockery of FSU immigrants, their poor Hebrew mastery and their ultra-nationalistic, anti-Arab attitude, this retraction provokes a heated discussion in the 'Aliyan family, with Amjad and his father still determined to win the prize; meanwhile, the Jewish couple's son is given birth and his parents are resolved to call him Israel. Eventually, the dispute has an apparently comical, all-conciliating end: the prize is equally divided between the two families, the Jews call their son Israel, whereas Bushra and Amjad call theirs Isma'il. However, this, in a nutshell, embodies Kashua's sarcasm towards Israeli society. Formally, the prize for the newborn is equally divided between Jews and Arabs, namely, out of metaphor, Jewish and Palestinian citizens enjoy the same, on-the-paper rights in the country. However, the 'Aliyan family experienced discrimination in the prize allocation and, even as a winner, has less resonance on the media than their fellow Jewish family.

Through his artistic and journalist production, Sayed Kashua has long represented for Israeli (and, to a lesser extent, for Palestinian) public opinion an example of how Arab-Palestinians can integrate and live in Israel, questioning stereotypes on Arabs that are well-rooted in the Jewish public opinion. He has also long appeared as a supporter of Arab-Jewish coexistence, a living proof that this is somehow possible. Nevertheless, this seemingly optimistic attitude of his has never been constantly clear-cut in his work. Some hesitations appeared already in his early novels. In *Dancing Arabs* (2002) and *Let It Be Morning* (2004), the Arab main characters eventually realize their eventual distance, and marginalization, from the society they had put every effort in order to integrate into. In one of his satirical columns for *Haaretz*, in 2011 he wrote:

I lied to my children when I taught them that everyone is equal; I lied when I said there are no differences between Muslims, Jews, and Christians. I cheated them when I surrounded them with protective hothouses of mixed kindergartens and pleasant neighborhoods.⁵⁸

Eventually, in 2014, Kashua took the no return decision: he left Israel once for all, and moved to the United States with his family, intended to give a better future to his children. He explained his decision to his Israeli *Haaretz* readers in a column, that was published in concomitance with the murder of a kidnapped Palestinian child in Jerusalem.

58 Sayed Kashua, *Native. Dispatches from an Israeli-Palestinian Life*, trans. Ralph Mandel (New York: Grove Press, 2016), 276.

I was silent, knowing that my attempt at living together with others in this country was over. That the lie I'd told my children about a future in which Arabs and Jews share the country equally was over. I wanted to say to my wife that this is really the end, it's finished. That I'd lost my small war, that everything people had told me since I was a teenager was coming true before my eyes. That all those who told me that there is a difference between blood and blood, between one person and another person, were right. [...]

It was my first day at a Jerusalem boarding school, where only Hebrew was spoken. My father drove me there from Tira, and a moment before parting from me, at the entrance to the school, he said, "Remember that for them you will always, but always, be an Arab, understand?"⁵⁹

Kashua's father's warning had become more and more pressing, his words turned out to be true. One of the strongest supporters of Arab-Jewish coexistence, who had long rowed against his Jewish and Arab detractors, eventually gave up.

Conclusion: resisting through humor

In this article, Sayed Kashua's production, and especially the sitcom *Arab Labor*, was presented as a creative resistance discourse that aims to counterbalance stereotypical representations of Israel's Palestinian citizens, first and foremost by creating a Palestinian-centered space on primetime Israeli television. To a great extent, the sharp instrument of satire allowed the author to have *carte blanche* while staging caricatural features of both Arabs and Jews, by lowering down the tones of the political debate. Through paradoxical situations that border on absurdity, the everyday vicissitudes of Amjad stand to represent the liminality of Palestinians who live in Israel, but also embody their struggle for visibility, recognition and equality. Furthermore, Amjad's ever-failing attempts to assimilate into Jewish-Israeli society mirror Kashua's personal search for his own place and identity, and the uneasy realization that this identity is hyphenated, hybrid, fragmented, sometimes shattered. As argued above, the diverse characterization of *Arab Labor*'s protagonists, however stereotyped it seems, aims to ultimately deconstruct every *a priori* representation imposed on Palestinians in Israel, particularly by Israeli Jewish society, as it used to do, for instance, with the 'good Arab' la-

59 Sayed Kashua, "Why Sayed Kashua Is Leaving Jerusalem and Never Coming Back," *Haaretz*, July 4, 2014, <https://www.haaretz.com/.premium-for-sayed-kashua-co-existence-has-failed-1.5254338> (last consulted: 11 January 2022).

belonging. Even more so, Kashua's creative discourse on Arab-Palestinian citizens spotlights the ephemeral, illusory character of supposedly pure, exclusivist national identities, which ever fail to account for the complex entanglement of individual, social, political factors that contribute to define what a 'Palestinian citizen', or an 'Israeli-Arab', or whatever, is. Kashua's work, notably the sitcom *Arab Labor*, constitutes an invitation – after much pain – to coexist in peace, accepting one's own shortcomings and limitations, making fun of each other, mocking reciprocal collective representations. A challenge that has proven to be too hard even for the author himself, who eventually gave up. But not before trying to shake, with a little irony and sarcasm, the conscience of his fellow citizens, through his artistic attempt to resist, in order to coexist.

Bibliography

- Abu Baker, Khawla and Rabinowitz, Dan. *Coffin on Our Shoulders. The Experience of the Palestinian Citizens of Israel*. Berkley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005.
- Abu Baker, Khawla, and Rabinowitz, Dan. *The Stand Tall Generation*. Jerusalem: Keter Books, 2002 [Hebrew].
- Adiel, Yair. "On Language and the Possibility of Change. Sayed Kashua and the 'Stand-Tall Generation'." *Interventions* 16, no. 3 (2014): 365-379.
- Druks, Judit. "Passing as... in Arab Labor by Sayed Kashua on Israeli TV." *Third Text* 34, no. 2 (2020): 311-322.
- Fraser, Abigail, and Avi Shabat. "Between Nationalism and Liberalism: The Political Thought of Azmi Bishara" in *The Israeli Palestinians. An Arab Minority in the Jewish State*, edited by Alexander Bligh, 14-34. London and Portland: Frank Cass, 2003.
- Goren, Shiri. "'The Trump Era Has Arrived and I Finally Feel at Home': Sayed Kashua in Illinois." *Studies in Israeli and Modern Jewish Society* [Iyunim Bitkumat Israel], no. 36 (Winter 2022): 123-147 [Hebrew].
- Goren, Shiri. "Arab Labor, Jewish Humor: Memory, Identity, and Creative Resistance on Israeli Prime-Time Television." *Jewish Social Studies* 25, no. 2 (2020): 107-126.
- Goren, Shiri. "Humor, Violence and Creative Resistance in the TV Series Arab Labor". *Studies in Israeli and Modern Jewish Society* [Iyunim Bitkumat Israel], no. 24 (2014): 73-93 [Hebrew].
- Grumberg, Karen. *Place and Ideology in Contemporary Hebrew Literature*. Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 2011.
- Hawker, Nancy. "The Mirage of 'Arabrew': Ideologies for Understanding Arabic-Hebrew Contact." *Language in Society* 47, no. 2 (2018): 219-244.

- Hillel, Cohen. *Good Arabs: The Israeli Security Agencies and the Israeli Arabs, 1948-1967*. Berkley, California: University of California Press, 2010.
- Hochberg, Gil. "To Be or Not to Be an Israeli Arab: Sayed Kashua and the Prospect of Minority Speech-Acts." *Comparative Literature* 62, no. 1 (2010): 68-88.
- Jamal, Amal. "Manufacturing 'Quiet Arabs' in Israel: Ethnicity, Media Frames and Soft Power." *Government and Opposition* 48, no. 2 (2013): 245-264.
- Jamal, Amal. "The Counter-Hegemonic Role of Civil Society: Palestinian-Arab NGOs in Israel." *Citizenship Studies* 12, no. 3 (2008): 283-306.
- Kashua, Sayed. "Why Sayed Kashua Is Leaving Jerusalem and Never Coming Back." *Haaretz*, July 4, 2014.
- Kashua, Sayed. *Dancing Arabs*. Translated by Miriam Shlesinger, New York: Grove Press, 2002.
- Kashua, Sayed. *Native. Dispatches from an Israeli-Palestinian Life*. Translated by Ralph Mandel. New York: Grove Press, 2016.
- Kosman, Marcelle. "Comic Relief: The Ethical Intervention of 'Avodah 'Aravit (Arab Labor) in Political Discourses of Israel-Palestine." *Comedy Studies* 6, no. 1 (2015): 18-35.
- Mendelson-Maoz, A. and Liat Steir-Livny. "The Jewish Works of Sayed Kashua: Subversive or Subordinate." *Israel Studies Review* 26, no. 1 (2011a): 107-129.
- Mendelson-Maoz, Adiel and Liat Steir-Livny. "Hybridity in Israeli Television – 'Arab Labour', the First Arab-Israeli Sitcom." *Misgerot Media* 6 (2011b): 31-59 [Hebrew].
- Molavi, Shourideh. *Stateless Citizenship: The Palestinian-Arab Citizens of Israel*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013.
- Nassar, Maha. *Brothers Apart. Palestinian Citizens of Israel and the Arab World*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017.
- Pappe, Ilan. *The Forgotten Palestinians. A History of the Palestinians in Israel*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011.
- Rabinowitz, Dan. "The Palestinian Citizens of Israel. The Concept of Trapped Minority and the Discourse of Transnationalism in Anthropology." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 24, no. 1 (2001): 64-85.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. London: Routledge, 1978.
- Shimony, Batya. "Shaping Israeli-Arab Identity in Hebrew Words – The Case of Sayed Kashua." *Israel Studies* 18, no. 1 (2013): 146-169.
- Shohat, Ella. "The Return of the Repressed: The Palestinian Wave in Recent Israeli Cinema" in *Israeli Cinema. East/West and the Politics of Representation*, edited by Ella Shohat, 215-247. London: IB Tauris, 2010.
- Smootha, Sammy. "Index of Arab-Jewish Relations in Israel 2003-2009." Haifa: The Jewish-Arab Center, University of Haifa, 2010.
- Sokoloff, Naomi B. "Jewish Characters? Stereotype and Identity in Fiction from Israel by Aharon Appelfeld and Sayed Kashua," in *Boundaries of Jewish Identity*, edited by Susan A. Glenn and Naomi B. Sokoloff, 43-63. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010.

- Steir-Livny, Liat, and Mendelson-Maoz, Adia. "From the Margins to Prime Time: Israeli Arabs on Israeli Television. The Case of Sayed Kashua's 'Arab Labour'." *Israeli Journal of Humor Research* 4 (2013): 78-94.
- Talmon Miri and Yael Levy (editors). *Israeli Television: Global Contexts, Local Visions*. London and New York: Routledge, 2021.
- Talmon, Miri. "A Touch Away from Cultural Others: Negotiating Israeli Jewish Identity on Television." *Shofar* 31, no. 2 (2013): 55-72.