

Green License Plates and Blue Identity Cards: Arab-Israelis Negotiating in a Majority Culture in *Dancing Arabs*

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In this essay, I will be examining Sayed Kashua's novel entitled *Dancing Arabs* – a contemporary analysis of the complicated and conflict-ridden relationship between the Palestinian-Arabs and Jewish citizens of Israel. This relationship is one that has been controversial on both sides, as there has been a deep and time-worn divide between these two groups since the rise of the Zionist Movement in the late 1800's. The conflict became further compounded in 1948, when the region formally known as 'Palestine' became the Jewish State of Israel and in 1967, when Israel began its occupation of the Gaza Strip and The West Bank, during the '6-Day War'. Although these events are looked upon as 'groundbreaking' in a Jewish historical context, they have also been plagued by on-going international criticism, namely, that Israel's Arab citizens have been the victims of harsh discriminatory treatment, abuse, and lack fundamental human rights in various areas. The Arab citizens are even subject to several methods of identification based solely on their Arab ethnicity, such as Identity Cards and conspicuous automobile license plates, which many have compared to the mistreatment of Jews in Nazi Germany. Moreover, many of these Arab citizens have claimed that much of their land had been misappropriated by the Israeli government and, as a result, were compelled to reside in sub-standard dwellings and endure meager living conditions. The novel, *Dancing Arabs* offers a thought-provoking perspective into the lives of Arab citizens, residing in both the Occupied Territories and within Israel, and how they manage to survive as members of an ethnic minority, living within a majority culture.

Before I proceed further, I must introduce the subject matter of *Dancing Arabs*, and give proper context to the underlying themes of the book. The novel follows the life of an unnamed, Arab-Israeli boy from adolescence to adulthood, who also acts as the narrator. Much of the content focuses on his education at an Israeli boarding school for gifted students and how his failure to excel academically, affects the rest of his life negatively. Furthermore, the life of the narrator's family appears to reflect the lives of those similarly situated Arabs. For example, the narrator has a very strong bond with his grandmother, with whom his family resides. In the novel, she recollects how in 1948, much of her family's land was seized

and how the family was left with a considerably smaller tract of land, shortly after the State of Israel was established. This land dispute is a topic, which is raised several times, as the grandmother is frustrated and haunted by it. In effect, the theme of space itself is prevalent throughout the novel, and provides the impression that the Arabs residing in these areas generally lack space.

Another important relationship in the novel exists between the narrator and his father. This father-son relationship is complicated, as his father, a former radical spokesperson for Palestinian nationality, had spent time in jail when he was a young man for apparently being tied to an alleged bomb plot (something which he denied). His father is now working for the town City Hall, issuing Identity Cards. Since the Six Day War of 1967, the Israeli government has imposed and enforced very strict laws and regulations, whereby all citizens of Israel and the Occupied Territories (Gaza Strip, the West Bank and East Jerusalem) must carry ID cards. The different colors of the ID cards provide its bearer with certain rights over other citizens. This regulation is contentious as it further legitimizes the deep division between Israel's Jewish and Arab citizens.

As far as ID cards for Jews go, they are issued a Blue card, which permits them to reside freely within any area or region of Israel. On the other hand, there are various categories of ID cards relating to Palestinian residency, which are dependant on one's status in Israel and the Occupied Territories. There is a different Blue Card from the aforementioned, which is issued to Palestinians. This card allows for Palestinians residing in Israel to live in 68% of all towns in Israel, but it must be approved by a Committee. This particular ID card is what the narrator of the story and his family all possess. The next level of ID cards is a lighter shade of Blue, which are issued only to Palestinian citizens of East Jerusalem, overtaken by Israel in 1967. At the time, the Israeli government permitted most Arab citizens residing in this area the right to apply for Israeli citizenship, but many declined, as they did not wish to be exposed to Israeli sovereign power. As a result, most of the Arab citizens residing in East Jerusalem are merely Permanent Residents, with very few possessing Israeli Citizenship. Permanent Resident status for these individuals grants them access to most areas within Israel, but they risk revocation of such status if they are discovered residing outside of Jerusalem. The next level of ID cards is produced in the colour Green, which creates one of the major divisions between Arabs and Jews. The Green ID cards only apply to those residing in either the West Bank or the Gaza Strip and the holders of these cards are not permitted to reside in any other area but these Occupied Territories.

Other strict conditions that accompany these cards include the lack of voting rights in Israel, which apply to the three latter categories of ID cards. In the novel, an important scene occurs when the narrator and his friend Adel, are traveling on a bus to visit the narrator's family in Tira. Eventually, the bus approaches a roadblock and an Israeli soldier enters and asks to see all the passengers' ID cards. When the soldier approaches the two young men, they explain that they were never issued ID cards since they are still under sixteen years of age. The soldier then proceeds to ask them to exit the bus so that he can search both of the boys' personal belongings. The narrator becomes so humiliated by this event that he refuses to return to the bus, leaving the boys stranded in an area of which they were unfamiliar. This is a critical moment of the book, as it may be construed as representative of how young Arabs generally feel about being raised within a society where they exist as members of a minority group. At this point, the narrator feels so ashamed of the fact that he had been ethnically profiled, at such a young age.

An issue that is raised on various occasions throughout the book, which concerns the narrator's father, is whether the harsh lifestyle that is portrayed in the book has been imposed upon all Arabs by higher forces or as a means to advocate for change. There is a clear difference in ideology between the narrator and his father, as his father had fought against the system at a younger age so that he and other Arabs could gain what they believed was fair and just. The book presents this on-going sense of optimism which suggests that change for Arab-Israelis is in fact on its way. On the other hand, there is the narrator, who does not display any such optimism throughout the book and is presented as someone who would rather make his best efforts to assimilate into Israeli society and culture. One example in the novel, relates back to the bus incident, where the narrator and Adel were singled-out. Eventually, the narrator contacted his father who arrived to pick-up the boys. On their way home to Tira, the narrator becomes visibly upset and begins to cry, after which his father inquires about his behavior and why he would comply with the soldier's demands. The narrator then responds defiantly to his father's queries in the following manner:

Nobody ever told me to get off. They didn't notice I was an Arab. Every time the soldiers told an Arab to get off, I'd get up and shout, 'Take me off too, I'm an Arab!' and I'd hold up my ID card and was it proudly. (Kashua 101)

The father responds with the following, "What's the matter with you? What a jellyfish you are. Some soldier jerk can make you behave like this? Just look at yourself" (101). This event emphasizes the divide between the narrator and his father and how differently they view their Arab ethnicity in society.

There are many similar examples of this theme throughout the book. Moreover, the narrator believes that he has a significant advantage in life because he looks more Israeli than Arab. He is proud of this. For the narrator, appearing more Israeli rids him of the prejudice that accompanies one's Arab identity. I can personally attest to this fact, as I have witnessed, first-hand, the divide between Arabs and Israelis during my many visits to Israel. While reading the book, I found it surprising that the main character would feel this way, that he would almost rather be Israeli than Arab, however, it is understandable under the circumstances. When one resides within a society where he/she is disenfranchised, based solely on ethnicity and, at times, religious background, one tends to desire a change that will help them align with the norm or the majority. In addition to appearing 'Israeli', the narrator also resorts to further extremes by attempting to blend into Israeli society and culture in order to avoid any type of profiling when traveling to different regions of Israel. This includes driving a Subaru, which the narrator describes as a very Israeli car and he ensures that when he is driving, Israeli radio stations are blasting at a very high volume, making it less likely that he will be pulled over by Israeli authorities.

This brings me to my next point, which concerns an Arab's freedom of movement throughout Israel and the Occupied Territories. Depending on one's status, Arabs have varying rights, in regards to their freedom to move throughout the country. Similar to the ID card disparity, there are two different types of automobile license plates issued for Jews and Arabs, depending on one's status in Israel and the Occupied Territories. To illustrate, all Israeli citizens are issued Yellow license plates, where on the other hand, all Palestinians are issued Green license plates. For those issued Green license plates, they are only permitted access to roads that are located within the Occupied Territories (West Bank and Gaza Strip) and are not permitted to travel elsewhere. However, Israeli citizens have access to all roads within the country together with a few select roads within the West Bank, but not the Gaza

Strip. Similar to the ID Cards, this has resulted in considerable criticism from many throughout the world, comparing Israel's discriminatory treatment of Palestinians to South Africa's former apartheid system.

While the narrator's family members do not reside in either of the Occupied Territories and are able to travel freely throughout Israel, they may still be subject to profiling while traveling. As I previously noted, the profiling may be so extreme in certain cases that the narrator will attempt to adopt an Israeli persona while driving to avoid the humiliation of being pulled over. Conflict is once again witnessed when the narrator's parents were stopped in their car at the border, while returning home from a trip to Egypt. The narrator goes on to describe the following:

Mother says the soldiers at the border crossing called up his name on the computer and screamed at him in the most disgusting way. She's shaking, trying hard to contain the water that's collecting in her eyes and to keep the tears from forming. They ordered him to sit on the side. Children screamed at him, "Shut up!" and took him to another room. Mother says Father wouldn't have minded so much if it hadn't been for the other people who saw it happen and felt sorry for him. (Kashua 224)

This event captures the intimidation and trauma that many Palestinians are forced to endure in profiling situations and why they believe that the behavior of the Israeli Government is disrespectful and abusive.

Arguably, the most important theme throughout the book is education, which relates to the majority of the narrator's internal and external conflicts, from adolescence through to adulthood. From the outset, we observe how both the narrator and his family consider education and schooling to be integral parts of his life. His parents hope that the narrator and his brothers will be more successful in life than they ever were and will have greater opportunities to study. The narrator describes himself as the smartest student in his class, as demonstrated when as a young teen he was given the opportunity to apply for admission to an Israeli boarding school for gifted students. Attending a school of this stature is a considerable accomplishment for an Arab national, as very few are ever given this opportunity. This school provides the narrator the opportunity to write the school's admission test, which it offers to only the very brightest of Arab students, and the narrator succeeds in passing the test. As the narrator begins his school curriculum, he already senses the deep division between himself and his Israeli peers. He relates his initial experiences, as follows:

I didn't know the Jews put gravy on top of their rice, instead of putting it in a separate bowl. I cried when my roommates found out I'd never heard of the Beatles and laughed at me. They laughed when I said *bob* music instead of *pop* music. They laughed when I threatened to complain to Principal Binhas – instead of Pinhas. "What did you say his name was?" they asked, and like an idiot I repeated it: "Binhas." They laughed at the pink sheets Mother had bought me specially. They laughed at my pants. At first, I even believed them when they said they really wanted to know where they could buy such pants. "Do they make special pants for Arabs?" they asked. (Kashua 93)

It is evident that a deep division exists between the Jews and Arabs at the school, making it increasingly difficult for the narrator to become accustomed to sharing the same

environment and assimilating with the Jewish students. In any case, unlike his father, the narrator never felt a strong connection with his Arab roots and had mentioned that he wishes he was a Jew. Now that the narrator finds himself in an environment where he can interact with Jews, his fellow students do not welcome him.

These circumstances result in the narrator eventually leaving his assigned dormitory, in favour of living with another young Arab named Adel. The relationship between the narrator and Adel is integral to the story, as their lives and personalities are very different. For instance, Adel exhibits qualities that display no sign of his pride being disparaged by his Arab ethnicity. He also comes from a very inviting community where Jews and Arabs appear to have lived in harmony. This is explained in the book as follows;

[Adel] came from a village in the Upper Galilee, four hours away by bus. They'd made a film about him once for Israel TV. Showed him dribbling on the basketball court, to prove that Arabs and Jews can live together. Pinhas said about him in the film, "Adel brought his whole village on his back," and Adel said it was a compliment. He was a very good student and didn't need to study much. He answered in class and wasn't shy. (Kashua 93)

There are obvious differences between the narrator and Adel. Adel stands for the secure and stable life that an Arab can enjoy while living amongst the majority, as opposed to the narrator, who has been struggling all his life with this same concept and resorting to great lengths to fit in. After the narrator has reached adulthood, events occur which are specific to the relationship between he and Adel that cement this idea. Adel had successfully completed his studies and is now a practicing lawyer. The narrator visits Adel, and the reader is able to envision how Adel's standing and lifestyle could have been adopted by the narrator. Unfortunately, the narrator failed to secure a better life for himself. Moreover, we can discern how Adel has reconnected with his Islamic roots and by becoming an observant Muslim. No doubt, Adel has had a much less difficult time assimilating into Jewish-Israeli culture, while maintaining his Muslim faith, which is something that I believe the narrator would have desired for himself.

While attending the boarding school, the narrator also becomes acquainted with a female student named Naomi, for whom he has developed feelings. The fact that Naomi is Jewish, however, places them both in precarious situation. Initially, Naomi neither wished to accept the narrator's interest in her nor her own feelings for him, as her mother made it very clear that she did not want her daughter involved in a relationship with an Arab. However, because they were both attending a boarding school, being together was relatively simple and they did not have to worry about being separated by their ethnicity and culture. Though, towards the end of their studies, Naomi made it known that her relationship with the narrator would be impossible once they completed school, resulting in their inevitable breakup. This was perhaps, the most important experience for the narrator in the entire novel, as his life spiraled downwards afterward.

The narrator attempted to maintain some type of connection with Naomi, just by a simple overture like "Hello", if he saw her in public. However, she was never responsive, which resulted in the narrator falling into a deep depression. This depression would go on to jeopardize the completion of his studies. As a result, he was later hospitalized for a drug overdose on anti-depressants during his exams. While his family was devastated that he failed to complete his studies, his father was particularly angry at the fact that the narrator's

problems came about as a result of his relationship with Naomi. The relationship between the narrator and Naomi is symbolic of the relationship between Jews and Arabs, although it was romantic. The narrator was focused on trying to make his relationship work with Naomi and neither cared about her inflammatory Israeli background, nor the ensuing friction he would face from his family and from Israeli society in general. Unfortunately for the narrator, Naomi allowed their ethnic, cultural, religious differences to override her genuine emotional feelings for him. Not unlike the relationship between the narrator and Naomi, many Israelis and Arabs cannot seem to cast aside or ignore their perceived differences.

While writing this paper, it occurred to me that I am acquainted with a recently married, 'mixed' couple, consisting of an Iranian-Muslim male and a Canadian-Jewish female. As a young man raised with very strong Jewish and Israeli roots, I am aware that even in a multi-cultural city like Toronto, such a relationship can be very challenging and cause conflict within each spouse's respective families and inner circles. However, this couple seems to have overcome the inherent problems associated with such a union and have accepted one another on the basis of who they are as individuals, instead of their conflicting backgrounds. The relationship between the narrator and Naomi unfortunately reflects how, at this point in time, it is still near impossible for Arabs to fully enjoy security, comfort, and acceptance, while residing in Israel or the Occupied Territories, where the divide between Israelis and Arabs remains so prevalent. I can think of nothing better than for Arabs and Jews to live in peace and harmony, but until that end is realized, it will continue to be a struggle for the Arab minority to live amongst a majority. Sayed Kashua's novel, *Dancing Arabs*, presents insight about the many struggles facing Arab-Isrealis and Palestinians in Israel and its Occupied Territories, while its main character remains nameless throughout the entire book – a stark reminder of the reality and a representation of all individuals in this culture.

Work Cited

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