



Destined Failure of Interactions between Israeli-Arabs and Jews— An Analysis on Creative Works’ Presentation of Issues from the Jewish Side

Tianqi Yin

Department of Middle Eastern Studies, Beijing National Day School, Beijing, China

Article Info

Received: 22 Aug 2022,

Received in revised form: 15 Sep 2022,

Accepted: 20 Sep 2022,

Available online: 28 Sep 2022

Keywords— Arab-Jewish interaction, ethnographic conflicts, Israel, Jewish narrative, narrative styles

©2022 The Author(s). Published by AI Publications. This is an open access article under the CC BY license

Abstract

*Sociological research have investigated factors to account for the ethnographic conflicts between Jews and Arabs in Israel. Different from previous studies, this paper inquires the factors on the Jewish side that prevent successful interaction between the two ethnographic groups by looking at crucial scenes in creative works of books and films produced by Israeli authors/directors. The first scene is from the Jewish perspective in Amos Oz’s memoir *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, in which young Oz, a Jewish boy, attempts to interact with Aisha, a young Israeli-Arab girl, but eventually failed because of an accident. The second scene is from a short Israeli film *Bus Station* which, from an outsider perspective, depicted a brief encounter between an Arab woman and a Jewish woman in Jerusalem. The third scene is the initially successful yet eventually failed relationship between Eyad, a Palestinian boy, and Naomi, a Jewish girl, in an elite Israeli high school from the 2014 film *A Borrowed Identity*, which is depicted through Eyad’s Arab perspective. Through the analysis of these three narratives, this paper argues that the burden of national responsibility, family influences, and Israeli government’s discriminatory policies are the three main factors on the Jewish side, in ascender order of importance, that make Arab-Jewish interaction hard in Israel.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Following the establishment of the state of Israel, how to harmonize the relationship between Palestinians and Jews in Israel has always been an intractable problem. As the number of Palestinian Arabs in Israel has increased to over two million, the issue has become more severe [1]. Due to a variety of factors, Israeli Palestinians and Israeli Jews often find it hard to interact with each other, let alone form a relationship. Multiple authors and directors have produced cultural works to touch on the issue, exposing the reasons for the irreconcilable relation between the two ethnic groups. This essay will analyze the representation scenes of the Palestinian-Jewish relationship in three prominent cultural works to examine the intrinsic challenges from the Israeli side that curb the two

ethnicities from interacting successfully. The three cultural works, each from a distinct perspective, are Amos Oz’s memoir *A Tale of Love and Darknes*, Lili Sheffy’s short film *Bus Station*, and the 2014 Israeli film *A Borrowed Identity*, which is adapted from Sayed Kashua’s novel *Dancing Arabs*. Through the analysis of these three narratives, the paper answers the question: what factors are fatal in preventing successful interactions between Israeli Arabs and Israeli Jews.

II. YOUNG ARAB-JEW INTERACTION IN A TALE OF LOVE AND DARKNESS

The interaction between young Oz and Aisha in Amos Oz’s novel *A Tale of Love and Darkness* demonstrates how the burden of ethnic responsibilities prevents

successful interactions between the two ethnicities. In the middle of the memoir, young Oz was brought by his Auntie Mala and Uncle Staszek for a visit to Silwani Villa, an Arab neighborhood, where he met Aisha, an Arab girl. Language was not a barrier in this encounter since Aisha turned out to know some Hebrew. Meanwhile, before the conversation, young Oz felt a strong ethnic obligation to rehabilitate the identity of Jewish people to Aisha, who is seen as a representative of the Arabs from the perspective of young Oz. As Israel Studies professor Eran Kaplan argued, young Oz's mental activities assumed an "ideological and national character" [2]. As Oz wrote in the memoir:

The task was to dispel suspicions and to explain that we were in fact a positive and even kindly people...I meant to explain to her how pure our intentions were, how abhorrent was the plot to stir up conflict between our two peoples, and how good it would be for the Arab public – in the form of this graceful-lipped girl – to spend a little time in the company of the polite, pleasant Hebrew people, in the person of me.

This psychological unrest in young Oz's thought foreshadows the ultimate failure of the interaction between the two children.

Although young Oz sensed this responsibility, he was not sure how to articulate this expression. Therefore, he greeted Aisha and the two children, starting a talk about their future professions. However, after mentioning that she would like to be a poet, Aisha's question "Has anyone written poetry in Hebrew?" rekindled the flames of reshaping the image of Jews to Arabs in young Oz's heart. With a flurried attitude, young Oz shouts out multiple famous Hebrew poets including Tchernikhowsky, Levin Kipnes, Rahel, and Vladimir Jabotinsky, and then passionately recited fragments of their poems, "with feeling and gestures and facial expressions and occasionally even closing eyes." When young Oz finished, he was still in an extremely excited phase. Therefore, when Aisha asked him if he could climb trees, young Oz immediately climbed onto the tree with all his might and began swinging the iron chain, enjoying the delights of accomplishing ethnic empowerment. However, almost symbolically, young Oz's action of release caused an accident and hit Aisha's younger brother Awwad. Young Oz was soon taken away by his uncle and aunt, and Aisha was beaten by her uncle because she did not protect her brother, which marks the failure of this interaction [4].

According to literature professor Neha Soman, in this scene, flashes of hatred and horror reflect what has been anticipated of a short-lived coalition between Jews and

Arabs [5]. From the perspective of an Israeli Jew, young Oz's desire to reshape Israeli figures in the minds of Arabs has in effect conquered his act of talking with Aisha. This motivation distinguished the conversation between young Oz and Aisha and ordinary conversations, curbing a successful dialogue between the two. Israeli historian Anita Shapira commented that even a playful encounter between Jews and Arabs ends disastrously because of the grave burden of ethnic interest [6]. Indeed, under the implicit obligation of a civilization, an airy atmosphere of meeting new friends has been transformed into an environment with critical political implications.

III. INTERACTIONS BETWEEN WOMEN IN BUS STATION

The Israeli short film, *Bus Station*, presents how, after the burden of ethnic responsibilities has been cast off, the influences of family members can also curb harmonious interactions between Israeli-Arabs and Jews. The film opens with an Arab woman Ruba and a Jewish woman Miriam sitting together in a bus station in Jerusalem waiting for their husbands to pick them up after having bought produce from the market. After a while, because of the packed bags of produce they bought, two bags of tomatoes, one from each woman, fell off the bench to the ground and the tomatoes were scattered on the ground, making it hard to distinguish which tomatoes belonged to whom. The best solution, which was also enacted by Ruba immediately, was to split the tomatoes randomly between the two women. Miriam, however, has religious responsibility to only buy tomatoes from Arab sellers because of the Jewish ritual of the Shemita year. After knowing that Ruba had bought her tomatoes from a Jewish seller, she decided to give away all her tomatoes to Ruba. Ruba decided to pay Miriam money but was refused.

Different from the case between Aisha and young Oz, however, this ethnic-religious difference did not become a burden, and the two women continued their kind dialogue with a calm attitude. For instance, when Ruba tried to put her cash into Miriam's wallet, an Israeli young seller, suspecting a crime is happening, ordered Ruba to stop and asked if Miriam knows her. Miriam, after a short pause, said directly that she knows Ruba, thus preventing an unnecessary conflict. After the young seller left, Miriam and Ruba, willing to know more about each other, began showing photos of their children to each other. However, the friendly dialogue was stopped when the two husbands arrived by car. The two women, although reluctant to part from their interaction, separated from each other and went back to their bags after seeing their husbands. When the two cars stopped, the two men immediately carried the

produces into their car and the two women followed their husbands into the car [7]. This can be seen as an implicit influence from family members. Given the general attitude between the two ethnicities, even though the two men did not express a word of displeasure toward the inter-ethnic interaction, the women could feel the great embarrassment of the two husbands seeing a family of another ethnicity, and therefore was enforced to cease the dialogue. At the end of the film, the two cars headed into two separate routes, and the tomatoes were still left in the station, symbolizing the ultimate impossibility to form an effective dialogue between the Israeli-Arabs and Jews. As the *Ir Amim* website description of the film suggests, a random encounter between the two women, who, at a glance, could not be more similar, becomes an impossible dialogue taking place in a city as complex as Jerusalem [8]. Although the two women overcame religious and language barriers, the pressure of family influences eventually hindered the Arab-Jew interaction.

IV. INTER-ETHNOGRAPHIC RELATIONSHIP IN A BORROWED IDENTITY

The initial establishment of the relationship between Eyad, an Israeli-Palestinian, and Naomi, an Israeli Jew, in the film *A Borrowed Identity* demonstrates how love can help overcome burdens of ethnic responsibilities and family influences. Eyad, the protagonist of the film, grew up in the Arab village of Tira and has shown superb learning abilities from an early age. When Eyad finally grows up, he is accepted by an elite Israeli high school in Jerusalem. Eyad's father, a promising university student before his involvement in Palestinian liberation politics derailed his career and led to his current occupation as a fruit picker, was excited about this opportunity and told Eyad it was a chance of a lifetime to show Israelis you are better than them [9]. Before achieving his dad's expectations, however, Eyad has to first survive in his new environment, which is surrounded by Jews. Fortunately, although Eyad faced language barriers and bullying, a beautiful Israeli girl Naomi takes a shine to him after asking him for help on a chemistry problem. Eyad and Naomi gradually form a secret relationship. Their love, however, was not kept secret after Eyad announced it during a class in high school. The first opposition came from Naomi's parents, informing Naomi that "tell me you had drugs or got cancer but don't tell me that you're in a relationship with an Arab" and also grounded her at home. To respond, Eyad dropped out of high school to let Naomi return and, more importantly, to be able to meet her. Therefore, unlike the ending part of *Bus Station*, opposition from Naomi's parents, a strong family influence, was dissolved by the force of love.

The Israeli government's discriminatory policies, however, still destructed the relationship. The first occurrence happens when Eyad and Naomi, still in a secret relationship, walked on the street and Naomi asked Eyad to tell her he loves her in Arabic. After Eyad made the utterance, an Israeli soldier overheard Eyad, aggressively questioned him, and asked him to squat down behind the wall to wait for an ID-Check. Eyad expressed an innocent yet helpless smile to Naomi and had to comply. Although this small interlude did not pose an effectual challenge to Naomi and Eyad's relationship as Eyad was free to go minutes after, it symbolizes the upcoming, more severe discriminatory government policy that would break the relationship completely. After Naomi graduated from high school, as a motivated young person, she applied for a job in the Intelligence Counsel (IC). The position was highly selective, but Naomi succeeded in gaining the position by making only one difficult move during the interview when she was asked if she had relationships with other minorities in the country. Aware of the Intelligence department's strict requirements on personal relationships with other races, especially with Arab people, Naomi lied and answered no. At this time Naomi still believes that she can keep her relationship with Eyad secret. During a meal with Eyad after working for a while in the IC, however, Naomi expressed her incapability in concealing her connection with Eyad, that she was "suffocating," and broke up with Eyad [10]. Although the director did not shoot detailed scenes of challenges caused by the relationship between Eyad to Naomi's job, given the power of love between Eyad and Naomi in overcoming previous issues, one thing is clear: the challenges were extremely intolerable and irresolvable for Naomi. The interracial couple who had survived family influence and ethnic responsibility requirements was eventually knocked down by the Israeli government's discriminatory policies.

Some, such as film critic Howard Feinstein, argue it is Naomi's selfishness that broke the relationship, that "Even after his dad throws him out of the family home for abandoning his own goals, and Eyad has to wash dishes in an East Jerusalem eatery to survive, she continues to thwart his efforts to make the relationship viable in order to advance her career." These comments should be dismissed because if Naomi were pushy, why would she actively talk to Eyad, an Arab minority who is often bullied, and form a relationship with him instead of choosing her Jewish deskmate, who is always fond of her, to become her boyfriend? From unfounded inspection of Eyad on the street to strict requirements put on Naomi, the oppression brought by the government's discriminatory policy should be seen as a systematic phenomenon. Thus, even if Naomi managed to hide her relationship with Eyad,

other biased government policies would as well overwhelm the young lovers.

V. CONCLUSION

Accountable factors related to ethnicity, government, societal trend, and religion have posed challenges to interactions between Arabs and Jews in Israel. Through determination and kindness, however, many of them can be overcome. The remaining ones, unfortunately, are still hard to combat and often determine the ultimate failure between the two races. Through case study with three Israeli cultural sources, the Israeli government's discriminatory policies, influences from close family members, and ethnic responsibility are undoubtedly three crucial factors among them. Only through implementing effective shifts, from the government level to the grassroots level, shaped to solve these specific issues can interactions between Palestinians and Jews in Israel become successful. As critic Keith Phipps argues, Israel is defined by its divisions, yet by a persistent sense the divide should not last forever [11].

REFERENCES

- [1] Orus-Boudjema, S. (2021, July 14). Israel: 'The Jewish population is winning the demographic war.' *The Africa Report.Com*.
<https://www.theafricareport.com/102168/israel-the-jewish-population-is-winning-the-demographic-war/>.
- [2] Kaplan, E., & Oz's, A. (2007). "Amos Oz's 'A Tale of Love and Darkness' and the Sabra Myth." *Jewish Social Studies*, 119-143.
- [3] Feinstein, H. (2015, June 27). A Matter of Semitics: A Borrowed Identity. *Filmmaker Magazine*.
<https://filmmakermagazine.com/94670-matter-of-semitics-a-borrowed-identity/#.Yr7yMOxBy3J>
- [4] Oz, A. (2005). *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, trans. Nicholas de Lange (Orlando, Fla., 2004), 296.
- [5] Soman, N. (2020). Space, place and consciousness; Explorations on Jewish identity in Amos Oz's life narrative *A Tale of Love and Darkness*. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 1-15.
- [6] Shapira, A. (2005). 'Ha-siper ha-tsiyoni'shel Amos Oz. *Israel*, 7, 164.
- [7] Sheffy, L. (2014, January 22). פרויקט רגע ים-תחנת אוטובוס/ליילי שפי (Bus Station). YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=14AB6XCfGxA>
- [8] Ir Amim. (n.d.). Bus Station. Retrieved August 4, 2022, from <https://www.ir-amim.org.il/en/movie/bus-station>
- [9] Turan, K. (2015, July 3). Review: "A Borrowed Identity" shows life in Israel from an Arab's view. *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved September 20, 2022, from <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-a-borrowed-identity-review-20150702-column.html>
- [10] Strand Releasing. (2015, June 4). *Dancing Arabs* (2014). *IMDB*. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2841572/>
- [11] Phipps, K. (2015, June 25). *A Borrowed Identity*. *The Dissolve*. <https://thedissolve.com/reviews/1682-a-borrowed-identity/>.