

**Identity Crisis of the ‘I’ and ‘the other’ in Gassan Kanafani's  
*Returning to Haifa* and Anton Shammas's *Arabesque***

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**Abstract**

This paper focuses on the identity of the 'I' and the 'other' in the novels of both Gassan Kanafani's *Returning to Haifa* and Anton Shmmas's *Arabesque*. It falls into two parts; the first part investigates Kanafani's technique in handling the identity of the colonizer both collectively and individually through the construction of characters. The collective image of the Israeli occupation is traditionally shown as an aggressive force of destruction while he was very adept in using the postcolonial discourse to reflect a human enemy in his portrayal of individual Jewish characters. He presented the crisis by using a postmodern technique which is based on juxtaposition and parallelism whereby he was able to delineate the boundaries of individual /collective or national/ personal identities.

The second part involves the issue of identity crisis in Shammas's *Arabesque*. Again Shammas in this novel uses the dialectics of the postcolonial discourse to bring to the foreground the issue of the Palestinian identity in the wake of 1948 Nakba. Shammas was very creative in mixing the fictional with the non-fictional, the autobiographical with the baffling historical. In addition, Shammas's use of Hebrew as a medium of writing was point of departure in the ongoing inter-group dialogue over the issue of identity.

\* Remark from authors: The format of the paper, the in-text citation and works cited follow the author-page style of the most recent MLA school styles as explained in both MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers (7th ed.) and the MLA Style Manual and Guide to Scholarly Publishing (3rd ed.) 2009. Sources can be accessed on the following site. <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/>

When a western reader reads a non-western cultural product, there is a concern that misunderstanding or misreading may occur. This concern, we believe stems from misunderstanding of differences in terms of context and culture of representation. The works analyzed in this paper should be understood in the light of being a product of the "other" or the discourse of the displaced. Context should also be taken into consideration, and readers will understand the work more deeply when they have enough knowledge of the context, the time, and place. We do not claim though that absolute contextual understanding is necessary or even attainable, yet knowledge of it will provide a clearer insight. The novels herein discussed follow the events of 1948 that lead to the creation of Israel on the Palestinian soil and to the displacement of Palestinians from their original towns. It has been a new situation which shaped their identities both in reality and fiction. This displacement of the Palestinians and the unjust creation of the state of Israel have resulted in identity crises where the majority has become the minority and the minority a majority.

Over the last few decades or so, the concept of identity and its impacts have acquired a high degree of importance in the fields of studies including psychology. Many writers and psychologists developed their own theories on the question of identity. In their article on "Current Identity Theories", the two American professors Peter Stets and Jan Burke, divide theories of identity into three basic hypotheses: "social identity," "role identity" and "person identity" (226). The first two ideas are defined respectively as "being like others in the group, and seeing things from the group's perspective," and "acting to fulfill the expectations of the role, coordinating and negotiating interaction with role partners"(227). Then in his essay "Identifying Identity," Philip Gleason describes the 'person

identity' as that which "involves an interaction between the interior development of the individual personality, understood in terms derived from the Freudian id-ego-superego model, and the growth of a sense of selfhood." (913). This meaning of the "person's identity" focuses more on the sense of the "I" as a separate entity from the society. It is the individual selfhood as an independent human being.

On the other hand, the above two definitions of both Stets and Burke, differ from what

Gleason later calls the "national identity" or the national character which belongs to the group and identifies itself in reference to the group norms and culture. Gleason shows that the current North American conceptions of identity were for the most part developed after World War II (914). In this sense, the creation of Israel in 1948 was heavily based on the articulation of a Zionist identity as a national identity and a unifying element for the different nationalities and ethnic backgrounds of Jews in Palestine. In his PhD dissertation "*Patterns of Identity in the Hebrew and Arabic Novel*," Mohammed Siddiq says that the Zionist articulation of nationalism and national character before and after 1948 was developed alongside the process of identity articulation described by Gleason; attachment to place via the rhetoric of nationalism (2). In her study *Giving Voice to Stones*, Barbra Parmenter shows that the Zionist literature and rhetoric of the time have focused on the national identity that increasingly dealt with the Promised Land and the question of belonging in nationalistic terms (75). For such purpose the Israeli writer Amos Oz affirms his national identity as much more important than his individual identity:

I am a Zionist because I will not and cannot exist as a  
splinter of a symbol in the consciousness of others.

Not as the symbol of the shrewd, gifted vampire, and not as the symbol of the sympathetic victim who deserves compensation and atonement. Therefore, there is no place for me in the world other than in the country of the Jews (Ramras-Rauch 149).

This paper discusses the issue of identity in Ghassan Kanafani's novel *Returning to Haifa* and Anton Shmmas's *Arabesque*. In this sense, this paper falls into two parts. The first part focuses on Ghassan Kanafani's representation of the personal, the collective and the national identity, while the second part concentrates on Shammas' unique dialectics in his quest of identity; it is the dialectics of conflating thematic concerns with innovative stylistic tools of narration.

### **Identify Crisis in Ghassan Kanafani's Novel *Returning to Haifa***

In Ghassan Kanafani's novel *Returning to Haifa*, the author seeks to show the construction of both the 'national identity' and 'individual identity' of the Israelis. The 'national identity' refers to the collective image of Israelis in the novel while the 'individual' identity is a reflection of the individual character or image of the Jew in the novel.

It is first necessary to introduce the writer of the novel in few words to show that his biography and suffering as a Palestinian refugee didn't prevent him from expressing a human portrayal of the 'other'. Ghassan Kanafani is a prominent Palestinian writer and literary figure. He was born in Acre in 1936, a son of a lawyer. In 1948 his family fled to Lebanon then to Syria after the Israeli army occupied Palestine. He experienced the harsh and frustrating conditions of all displaced Palestinians who lived a period of long diaspora. During his short life he enriched the Arabic library with valuable collection of publications, varying from novels to short stories to

literary researches and political essays. Kanafani was killed in a car-bomb explosion in Beirut for which Mossad, the Israeli secret service, later claimed responsibility. Gassan was considered "the commando who never fired a gun. His weapon was a ballpoint pen and his arena newspaper pages. And he hurt the enemy more than a column of commandos" (Harlow 9).

The story of *Returning to Haifa* takes place in 1967. Said and his wife Safiyya, a Palestinian couple, return to their former flat in Haifa, from which they were forced to escape during the war Israel launched on Palestine in 1948. In the chaos and violence of the war Said and Safiyya left their five-month-old son Khaldun behind. The flat was occupied by an elderly Israeli woman, Miriam, a Holocaust survivor who came to Israel from Poland in 1948. She and her husband, Evrat, adopted the boy and raised him as a Jew and named him Dov. While waiting for Dov's return, Said tells his wife the story of their neighbor Faris Al-Lubda, who also returned to his former flat, but found it occupied by a supportive Palestinian, the discussion with whom induces Faris to join the resistance. When Dov returns wearing the Israeli army's uniform, he treats his biological parents with a great deal of contempt. He insists on keeping the only identity he knows, that of being an Israeli Jew. The saddened Palestinian parents return to where they came from hoping that their second son in Ramallah escapes to join the resistance.

Kanafani's text sets up two binary opposites of the national/individual or collective/personal images of the Israelis in Palestine. The problematic portrayal of the two images in the novel is different from the appearance of the Israelis in some other Palestinian pieces of literature. A considerable segment of the Palestinian literature makes no distinction between the national and the individual or the collective and the personal. It

maintains the basic view of the Israelis as intruders, strangers, expropriators of land and forces of aggression and hatred. Kanafni's *Returning to Haifa* projects a similar collective image of the Israelis who occupied Palestine and displaced its people out of their home land. Said and Saffiya along with thousands of Palestinians were forced to leave their homes and original towns because of the heavy bombardment of innocent civilians. They were simply displaced and became refugees in their own land because of a merciless colonizing power.

The other binary in *Returning to Haifa* is the personal image of individual Jewish characters which is more important to this study. Away from the blinding enmity, *Returning to Haifa* humanizes the enemy as an individual and reflects characters as victims of a case of injustice. The novel deals with them as victims of the Nazis. This victimization rendered them sensitive to the suffering of others. For example, when Said first meets Miriam, who opens the door to them and lets them in, she apologizes to her visitors:

"I am sorry," she says, "but that is what happened. I didn't understand things the way they are now." Said at this point... smiled bitterly, not knowing how to tell her that that was not the reason he had come for and that he was not going to get involved in a political discussion and that he knew she hadn't done anything wrong (Kanafani 114).

Kanafani doesn't blame Mariam and her husband for occupying his home; on the contrary he sympathizes with them as human beings who suffered a painful experience in Poland during World War II. Mariam tells her experience when she happened to be upstairs at her neighbors', when the Germans came to her building:

The German Soldiers found no one at home, but as they were on their way down the stairs, they met her little brother who was probably coming just then to tell her that her father had been taken off to the concentration camp and that now he was alone. She could see him through the tiny opening made by a small space between the stairs. From there she watched as they shot him (119).

Mariam is humanized despite the fact that she has occupied Said's house for almost twenty years. She is also portrayed as a victim rather than a victimizer. Moreover, her experience of pain and loosing a family member equates Said and Safiyya's experience of loosing a son in the horror of war: both were rendered unable to speak, move, or feel by the invasion and the occupation of their homes.

Kanafani draws other similar parallels in the novel that make it explicit that Mariam and her husband Evrat are good and sympathetic people whose experience is analogous to Said's and Safiyya. When Mariam and Evrat arrive at Haifa they waited for the Jewish Authority to find them housing. At that moment she witnessed:

Two young men from the Haganah carrying something which they put in a small truck parked nearby. In an instant, as if spellbound, she was able to out what it was that they were carrying. She grabbed her husband by the arm. Trembling, she cried: "look!"... She said: 'that was a dead Arab child. I saw him covered with blood.' Her husband asked : "how do you know it was an Arab child?" "didn't you see how they threw him in the truck as if he were a piece

of wood? They wouldn't have done that if he were Jewish”(120).

Miriam parallels between what Nazi soldiers did with Jewish children and what the Israeli soldiers exhibit of a similar action with Palestinian children. To her, they reflect the same attitude which does not acknowledge the humanity of Palestinian children. Kanafani's above text leads to a conclusion that the two forms of genocide are morally equivalent and Mariam and her husband respond to both in the same way.

Another Analogy that can also be understood from Kanafani's text is the parallel between Jews during the Holocaust and the Palestinians under the occupation. This analogy makes Miriam and Evrat, on one hand, exactly like Said and Safiyya on the other. It seems that Kanafani tries to project in literature a vision of the equality of human suffering.

When we came here, Said says to Mariam at the conclusion of their meeting, we were going against history. And also I admit to you, It seems to me that every Palestinian will pay the price. I know many who have paid with their sons. I know because I too in a strange way have paid with my son (137).

This is a dialogic moment; a discussion between equals characterized by pouring out ideas and sharing feelings with the others. Both try to understand the other's point of view and participating in the other's experience without losing the self.

Miriam and Evrat personal characters are presented by Ghassan Kanafani as sympathetic human beings who are far from the colonialist ambition and moral decline while Kanafani, himself, was assassinated by people like Miriam and Evrat in July 1972.

### **Identity Question in Anton Shammas's *Arabesque***

While Kanafani's evocative treatment of the issue of identity is mainly determined by 1948 disaster, it illuminates the same question that constitutes the structural and thematic core of *Arabesque*. However, the issue of identity in Anton Shammas's *Arabesque* is even more intricate than in Kanafani's. It is dealt with in a free-flowing cyclic style, a style which departs from the linearity of traditional narrative to assume the complexity of the discursive postmodern style where a story does intersect with another story. For instance, the segment of the family saga intersects with the autobiographical stories and the author's personal experiences are interrelated thematically through the narrator's search for his lost cousin, Michael Abyyad. Shammas describes the writing style of "The Tale" section when he comments on his uncle Yusuf's stories:

His stories were plaited into one another, embracing and parting, twisting, and twining in the infinite arabesque of memory [...] All of them, however, flowed around him in a swirling current of illusion that linked beginnings to endings, the inner to external, the reality to the tale."  
(Shammas 226-227)

Anton Shammas is an Israeli citizen and a Christian Palestinian who considers himself more Israeli and Palestinian. He was born in 1950 in Fassuta, a village in the Galilee. He returned with his family to live in Haifa in 1962. There he joined an integrated Jewish Arab School. In 1968 Shammas moved to Jerusalem where he studied English Literature and Art History at the Hebrew University. Since then, he has established himself as a very prolific writer; he became a poet, a playwright, and a novelist. His most acclaimed novel, *Arabesque*, was written in Hebrew and was

translated into many languages. Shammaas now lives in the United States where he works as a professor of Middle Eastern Literature at Michigan University.

By the Israeli law, he is considered an Israeli citizen who should be educated within the epistemological norms of the Jewish culture. Shammaas is a Palestinian torn between two cultures, his native Palestinian culture and that of the Jewish colonizer. In this context, yet in different text, Shammaas identifies himself with the blackbird which knows but does not tell. In his second book written and published in Hebrew in 1979, Shammaas concludes it with the following lines:

The blackbird does not imagine things.

The blackbird knows.

And since he knows,

He does not tell.

I do not know.

One language a head, another behind,

And I imagine things in my no-man's land (46).

Shammaas's attempts to define himself are further illustrated by the imagery of the illusive treasure cave which is covered by a boulder. The fictional Shammaas, despite his efforts, fails to move this boulder with a magic phrase and reaches the treasure cave-in the save.

In his nonfiction writings Shammaas has often used the image of the Russian doll known as a babushka; it is an image of a doll that consists of several dolls, one inside the other. In *Arabesque*, the image of babushka is used as an emblem of the multifaceted identity. Shammaas, the Christian Arab writes a novel in Hebrew language; a language other than his Arabic mother tongue. In this novel Shammaas's autobiography is not told by the

writer himself but rather by a narrator called Michael Abyyad. Since Abyyad's story is a second hand narration, it is lacking credibility; the gaps in the story are filled in with the narrator's imagination. Furthermore, Abyyad's story about the identity of the narrator of "The Tale" is highly doubtful inasmuch as Abyyad is disguised as Anton Shammas who has constructed his own world in a very fictional way. It is a very confused identity, an identity where the narrator does not assume a fixed identity. Commenting, on this unique narrative technique, Avraham Balban argues:

Although *Arabesque* tells the story of Shammas's family and possesses a distinctive autobiographical feature, the very identity of the narrator is questionable. The babushka effect of the narrative technique illuminates the conflict – laden identity of a Christian – Arab who lives as a Hebrews writer in Israel, where issues of ethnic origins, religion, and sociopolitical affinities overlap and confront one another and where Palestinians are still not welcome to voice their own views (420).

A close look at *Arabesque* mainly "The Tale" part, reveals much uncertainty wrapping the real identity of Anton Shammas. Shammas, the Israeli Arab, and his Palestinian doppelganger, Mickhael Abyyad from the center of the Palestinian studies in Beirut, are always confused with each other in a very mystifying manner. Shammas the narrator is named after his cousin Michel Abyyad. Surprisingly, the latter had been named Anton Shammas. Shammas the narrator "was kidnapped when he was a child from his natural mother, Almaza and was soon adopted by a childless couple from Arab nobility living in Beirut" (Bilsky 200). While reading a newspaper article, Shammas, the narrator comes to know about Surrayya said, the housemaid who raised

him and the Christian girl who had become a Muslim convert and got married to the son of Abdallah Al Sabah, who was one of the heroes of the Great Arab Revolt of 1936. Shammaas conjectures that this woman is not more than Layla Khouri who was brought by his father from Fasuta village to Beirut to live with the Baytar family. Afterwards, she worked as a servant in one of the affluent neighborhoods of Beirut. It was said that Layla Kohuri had worked as a servant in Michel Abyyad's house where she secretly fell in love with him. The same day Layla returned to Fasuta in 1948, Michel Abyyad's parents were blackmailed in order to reveal the secret of their adopted son. It is then, the Abyyads were compelled to send their young son to America. This story reappears in the "narrator's" part of the book. During the emotional meeting between Shammaas and Michel Abyyad in Iowa city, the latter tells his own story, a story almost similar to the story Shammaas surmised about Layla Khouri. The only discrepancy was Abyyad's version; it was set in 1949 rather than 1948 and the servant in his house was identified as aunt Almaza rather than Lala Khouri.

To add a further complexity to the issue of identity in *Arabesque*, Shammaas opted to write in Hebrew language, and by doing that, he was trying to assume the source of power of the dominant Jewish majority. In the meantime, Shammaas was trying to debunk the so called multiplicity of the Israeli society. Hebrew was the language of the majority, yet Shammaas, a member of the minority, used this language in order to fight for political and cultural recognition; two elements essential to attaining identity. It is true that in *Arabesque* the year 1948 is the center of identity issue, but by using Hebrew language, Shammaas shifts the focus from the political to the linguistic domain. In this context Rachel Feldhay Brenner asserts that “the ramifications of the disaster shift from the political scene to the language...

the linguistic mode of Shammas's narrative epitomizes the Israeli Arab problem.” (433) Brenner continues to affirm that Shammas's Hebrew rendition for his search of identity conveys the political and cultural dialects of distancing and rapprochement. Discarding Arabic detaches the author from his native Palestinian traditions, whereas the use of Hebrew poses a threat to the Jewish monopoly of Hebrew in Literature, and thus estranges himself from the literary tradition which he embraces. The narrator has to go through an internal conflict, and this conflict is externalized by the narrator's dilemma. On the one hand, he wants to assert his indigenous Palestinian identity and belong to his people. On the other hand, he wants to assimilate himself in the Jewish community, but unfortunately he finds himself an outsider or rather a foreigner who should not be trusted.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, the catastrophe of 1948 which is widely known as "Nakba" rendered the Palestinians displaced physically and mentally, however and despite the ongoing Israeli attempts to efface the Palestinian national as well as individual identity, some Palestinian writers such as Kanafani and Shammas tried to counteract those colonial attempts by their postcolonial discourse, a discourse which was distinguished by an arabesque style, a style where the modes of representation and the aesthetics of presentation are intricately conflated. Kanafani's unique techniques of parallelism and juxtaposition enabled him to question the issue of identity at many levels: the individual, the national and the personal. The outcome of such presentation was to bring to the foreground the issue of the Palestinian identity and in the meantime to stress the need for identity acknowledgement. Similarly in *Arabesque* Shammas has handled the issues

of identity in a very discursive narrative style where the real was mixed with the fictional, the autobiographical with the historical, and the literal with the emblematic. Such a style was a tool to highlight the sense of identity crises. The recourse to Hebrew language has been an attempt to assume the sources of power possessed by a suppressive majority. However, the result was that the identity of the narrator has become very questionable. In this context, the destabilization of identity in both writers triggers the real quest for identity.

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