

## **Eliminating the middleman:**

*How Palestinian citizens of Israel found themselves at the heart of  
Israeli prime time*



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Master Thesis in Middle East Studies (MES4590)

Middle East Studies

30 credits

Autmn 2023

Department of Culture and Oriental Languages (IKOS), University of Oslo

## **Abstract**

This thesis seeks to examine the nature of representation, or lack thereof, of Palestinian citizens of Israel on prime-time of Israeli Hebrew-language television by analysing two television programs created by the members of Palestinian minority. By doing so this paper attempts to situate the Palestinian minority of Israel within the Israeli context and not in the context of Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Since the state was established back in 1948, it was meant to be a homeland for the Jewish people. Palestinians who remained within the borders of the new state are often seen as a threat, their loyalty is questioned, and it is still common to refer to them as a fifth column. Media representation plays an important role when it comes to minority representation and a fair reflection of cultural diversity. Media representation includes both participation and recognition. Participation is not just about visibility and presence on the national channels, but also the opportunity to present themselves to the majority and determine the way they would like to be perceived. Is it possible for a minority to renegotiate their social identity using national TV channels as the platform to speak out and, potentially, dismantling some of the stereotypes? The results of this study indicate that achieving this goal is only partially feasible, given the impact of the powerful Zionist narrative on shaping the self-perceptions of Palestinian citizens within the state. However, the cultural production examined in this thesis has the capacity to question entrenched narratives by addressing significant subjects that provoke discussion among audiences, while also advocating for Palestinian actors, actresses, and the Arabic language on television screens.

**Key word:** representation, minority, Palestinian citizens of Israel, Hebrew-language television

## **Acknowledgements**

First, I would like to offer my appreciation of the highest regard to Jacob Høigilt, the supervisor of this research project. He has been extremely supportive and patient. Thanks to his empowering encouragements that kept me on track, I succeeded in submitting my master's thesis despite all odds.

It has been a great pleasure to be a student at the Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages at the University of Oslo. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr Soraya Batmangelichi, Albrecht Hermann Hofheinz, Teresa Peppe and others who contributed either in the lectures or in seminars as teachers.

I would like to extend my appreciation to the individuals I encountered during my time in Israel/Palestine, whose presence served as the inspiration for the subject matter of this research paper.

This thesis could not have been materialized without the generous support of my family and friends. Without their love and encouragements, I wouldn't have gotten through this.

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## Introduction

During 2019, I resided in Israel for a year, living most of the time in Tel Aviv while fulfilling duties as a delegate for the International Red Cross Committee. My work with the ICRC facilitated frequent visits to the West Bank, enabling encounters with Palestinians living under Israeli occupation. While residing in Tel Aviv and visiting cities such as Haifa, Be'er Sheva, and Nazareth, I also had the opportunity to engage with Palestinians living in Israel. What particularly struck me during that time was their diverse self-introductions; some identified as Arab Israeli, while others introduced themselves as Palestinian or Israeli Palestinian. Subsequently, I came to understand that such self-introductions, given the historical background, are also political statements. The fluidity of their identity is evident in various instances where Palestinians adjust the way they introduce themselves over time, influenced by the shifting dynamics of history, culture, and politics. As an example, in the aftermath of the horrible massacre that took place on the 7th of October 2023, where hundreds of Israelis were attacked and killed by members of Hamas, Nusair Yassin, known as Nas Daily, an international YouTube Star of Palestinian origin, posted the following on X:

“For the longest time, I struggled with my identity.

A Palestinian kid born inside Israel. Like...wtf.

Many of my friends refuse to this day to say the word “Israel” and call themselves “Palestinian” only.

But since I was 12, that did not make sense to me.

So I decided to mix the two and become a “Palestinian-Israeli”

I thought this term reflected who I was.

Palestinian first. Israeli second.

But after recent events, I started to think.

And think.

And think.

And then my thoughts turned to anger.

I realized that if Israel were to be “invaded” like that again, we would not be safe. To a terrorist invading Israel, all citizens are targets.

900 Israelis died so far. More than 40 of them are Arabs. Killed by other Arabs. And even 2 Thai people died too.

And I do not want to live under a Palestinian government.

Which means I only have one home, even if I'm not Jewish:

Israel.

That's where all my family lives. That's where I grew up. That's the country I want to see continue to exist so I can exist.

Palestine should exist too as an independent state. And I hope to see the country thrive and become less extreme and more prosperous. I love Palestine and have invested in Palestine.

But it's not my home.

So from today forward,

I view myself as an "Israeli-Palestinian".

Israeli first.

Palestinian second.

Sometimes it takes a shock like this to see so clearly.”<sup>1</sup>

Events of this nature not only impact Palestinians self-identification, but also influence how they are perceived by the government and other Israeli citizens. Descendants of the Palestinian population who remained in what became the state of Israel in 1948 perpetually navigate a delicate balance between their national affiliations and cultural heritage. The engagement of Palestinians in different sectors of Israeli society shows a gradual increase.<sup>2</sup> They dedicate themselves in activism and advocacy for social justice, establish successful businesses, and pursue positions of influence in political and public spheres. The Israeli mass media has the potential to offer a platform for Palestinian voices and other marginalized groups. Depending on the approach, this can either increase or decrease empathy among the general public, fostering a more inclusive and understanding society. Furthermore, the media can challenge stereotypes and prejudices by showcasing the diversity and richness of minority cultures and

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<sup>1</sup> Nuseir, 'Personal Thoughts: (Not for Everyone, Feel Free to Skip). For the Longest Time, I Struggled with My Identity. A Palestinian Kid Born inside Israel. Like...wtf.'

<sup>2</sup> Haddad Haj-Yahya et al., 'Statistical Report on Arab Society in Israel'.

experiences. Therefore, it is quite unfortunate if television content is overwhelmed with news depicting Palestinians solely in shooting incidents, portraying them as criminals, backward, or victims of domestic violence.

The Israeli media sphere has long been dominated by Ashkenazi Jews, who have shaped the narratives and functioned as gatekeepers, controlling access to this space. Sayed Kashua, a Palestinian writer and journalist, once ironically said that the only way for an Arab to occupy the prime-time of Israeli television is by becoming a suicide bomber.<sup>3</sup> He is a prolific author of critically acclaimed novels and a screenwriter of the first sitcom about Palestinian citizens of Israel to be aired on Israeli prime-time television, which is called "Arab labor". The satirical sitcom turned out to be successful and was called a milestone show by *The Jerusalem Post*.<sup>4</sup> With its four seasons and high viewing ratings<sup>5</sup> it inspired another famous artist and activist, Mira Awad, to create the series called "Muna", developed by Channel 1. Recently, Mohammad Magaldi, another young and promising Palestinian journalist became the first Palestinian political commentator on "Ulpan Shishi".<sup>6</sup> "Ulpan Shishi" ("Friday Studio") is the weekly news magazine of Israel's most popular television channel. In 2014 it was described by the Israel's oldest and most widely read newspaper *Haaretz* as "the most eloquent and influential mouthpiece of the Israeli Jewish mainstream" that serves to prevail a national narrative.<sup>7</sup> Before his appointment Magaldi, referring to Ulpan Shishi, wrote the following message on his Twitter account: "Is this the place where Jews talk about Arabs? So, let's eliminate the middleman, I'll talk about Arabs myself".<sup>8</sup>

Roger Silverstone and Myria Georgiou suggest that media representation includes both participation and recognition.<sup>9</sup> Participation, according to the article, is not just about visibility and presence on the national channels, but also the opportunity «to gain a presence on one's own terms on the nationally owned spectrum or on the global commons of the internet".<sup>10</sup> In

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<sup>3</sup> 'A Conversation with Acclaimed Israeli-Arab Writer Sayed Kashua'.

<sup>4</sup> "Avoda Aravit" - Breaking TV Barriers'.

<sup>5</sup> Mendelson-Maoz and Steir-Livny, 'The Jewish Works of Sayed Kashua', 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Glazer, 'A Star Israeli-Arab Journalist Wants Jews to Know the Truth'.

<sup>7</sup> Sharir, 'Four Against One'.

<sup>8</sup> Glazer, 'A Star Israeli-Arab Journalist Wants Jews to Know the Truth'.

<sup>9</sup> Silverstone and Georgiou, 'Editorial Introduction'.

<sup>10</sup> Silverstone and Georgiou.

Israeli television and radio stations, Palestinian citizens of Israel are either significantly underrepresented or misrepresented. According to the Jewish and Arab nonprofit organization Sikkuy, the Palestinians' share of representation in the various Hebrew-language media—television, radio, newspapers and Internet is only 2-3%.<sup>11</sup> These numbers do not reflect the proportion of the population, since one of every five Israeli citizens is Palestinian. Furthermore, the media coverage of the Palestinian minority is often negative, discussing topics such as poverty, crime, and domestic violence. As Carmit Romano-Hvid points out, commercial TV has primarily targeted the Jewish audience, therefore entertainment in Arabic targeting the Palestinian minority was either absent or broadcast at inconvenient times.<sup>12</sup>

Semi-structured individual in-depth interviews with 20 Palestinian Israelis conducted in 2010 by Baruch Shomron and Amit M. Schejter provide support for Sikkuy's and Carmit Romano-Hvid's viewpoint on this topic.<sup>13</sup> The article reveals that all the interviewees "complained about the complete lack of entertainment content addressed to their population". This includes the lack of Palestinian actors on Hebrew television and, the absence of Arabic subtitles for those who have a limited knowledge of Hebrew.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps it worth to mention that in 2018 Arabic language was no longer an official language of the Israeli state. The political decision further marginalized the Arabic language within Israeli society, deepening the concerns of many Palestinian citizens about their future.<sup>15</sup>

Despite of this development, several movies, TV series, and other media productions manage to reach Israeli television screens, gaining popularity and sparking numerous discussions, panels, and debates. Employing a case study methodology, this thesis investigates and scrutinizes selected prime-time TV programs produced by Palestinian citizens of Israel to explore the following research questions:

RQ1: What factors have enabled Arabic TV shows to enter Israeli TV mainstream?

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<sup>11</sup> 'Representation Index'.

<sup>12</sup> Romano-Hvid, 'The Israeli Palestinian Minority on Prime-Time Israeli Jewish TV'.

<sup>13</sup> Shomron and Schejter, 'The Communication Rights of Palestinian Israelis Understood Through the Capabilities Approach'.

<sup>14</sup> Shomron and Schejter, 1735.

<sup>15</sup> Holms and Balousha, 'One More Racist Law': Reactions as Israel Axes Arabic as Official Language'.



RQ2: What is the message the authors of “Arab Labor” and “Muna” try to convey through their cultural productions?

RQ3: How does the constructed representation of Palestinian citizens of Israel in “Arab Labor” and “Muna” impact the public discourse on this group in Israeli society?

## Background chapter

### Emotive language: Defining and Naming Palestinian Citizens of Israel

“We did not move places,  
we did not move geographically,  
but the state around us changed”.<sup>16</sup>

Mira Awad, Palestinian artist

West Bank or Judea and Samaria? Nakba or Yom Ha'atzmaut? Palestina or Eretz Israel? Arab Israeli, Palestinian citizens of Israel, the 48 Arabs? None of these terms are neutral. The way this group is defined can evoke a whole avalanche of connotations. The Israeli government remains firm in calling their citizens the Israeli Arabs, avoiding the word “Palestinians”. In 2000 a study was conducted by Muhammad Amara & Izhak Schnell, with 500 Arab men and women from Israel being interviewed about their identity. The results of the study revealed that 47 percent chose Arab identity over other identities such as being Muslim or Christian, Israeli or Palestinian. Less than 10 percent identified themselves as Palestinians or Israelis.<sup>17</sup>

However, Itzhak Galnoor professor of political science at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, points out that intellectuals within the Arab community prefer to refer to themselves as Palestinian Arabs in Israel.<sup>18</sup> This is how this group defined themselves in the document written by the High Follow-Up Committee and the National Committee for the Heads of the Arab Local Authorities in Israel back in 2006:

“We are the Palestinian Arabs in Israel, the indigenous peoples, the residents of the States of Israel, and an integral part of the Palestinian People and the Arab and Muslim and human Nation”.<sup>19</sup>

Other terms that refer to this group are Israeli Arabs, the Israeli Arabs of 48, Arabs in Israel or, as Sayed Kashua jokingly mentioned in one of his interviews, it may be now more politically correct to say Palestinian citizens of Israel by force.<sup>20</sup> Another prominent artist,

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<sup>16</sup> Legends, 'Eurovision Legends - Mira Awad'.

<sup>17</sup> Amara and Schnell, 'Identity Repertoires among Arabs in Israel'.

<sup>18</sup> *Arab Citizens in the Jewish State of Israel*.

<sup>19</sup> 'The Future Vision of the Palestinian Arabs in Israel'.

<sup>20</sup> 'A Conversation with Acclaimed Israeli-Arab Writer Sayed Kashua'.

Mira Awad, prefers to call herself Israeli Palestinian. She said in one of her interviews that people will often wonder how she can identify herself both as a Palestinian and as an Israeli. But for Mira this contradiction is quite logical, and she likes to explain it in a simple way: “My father and I were born in exactly the same geographical spot which is the village Rameh... He was born in 1936 and it was Palestine, and I was born in 1975 and it was Israel. So, there is already a duality. We did not move places, we did not move geographically, but the state around us changed its definition and became Israel.”<sup>21</sup>

In this thesis I have chosen to refer to the mentioned minority group as Palestinian citizens of Israel. The reason for that is that this thesis focuses on the representation of Palestinian minority of Israel. Druze and Bedouin communities that fall often under the category of Arab citizens of Israel will be not included in the analysis, and therefore more specific terminology is required. In order to differentiate this group from the Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza, “citizens of Israel” was attached to the blanket term “Palestinian”.

## **An Arab population in a Jewish state**

“That egg has been scrambled.

It can’t be put back in its shell”.<sup>22</sup>

Rogel Alpher, Haaretz

David K. Shipler in his book “*Arab and Jew: Wounded Spirits in a Promised Land*” wrote that Palestinians living inside Israel do not compare their lives to the Arabs living in neighboring countries, but rather “make their dreams, measure their opportunities, judge their chances, and formulate their dissatisfaction largely in an Israeli context”.<sup>23</sup> It may therefore not be surprising that the deliberate policy of separation between these two communities goes against the rising expectations of the Palestinian minority to be treated as an equal citizen of the state they unwillingly became part of.

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<sup>21</sup> Legends, ‘Eurovision Legends - Mira Awad’.

<sup>22</sup> Alpher, ‘If We Want to Go on Living Here, Jews and Arabs Need to Be Israelis Together’.

<sup>23</sup> David K. Shipler, *Arab and Jew*, 394.

Carmit Romano-Hvid outlines four key characteristics that she argues have defined the approach of the Jewish majority towards the Palestinian minority. Those are **segregation, exclusion, discrimination** and **fear**.<sup>24</sup>

**Segregation** has to do with school and housing first and foremost. To this day, Israel's education system remains segregated as a result of the policies implemented by the Israeli Ministry of Education, resulting in minimal or no interaction between the Arab and Jewish communities. It's worth mentioning that most members of the Palestinian community do not view the division of the Israeli educational system as an issue, but rather it is the discriminatory nature of the system that causes dissatisfaction. Journalist Or Kashti, who has published multiple articles on the matter in the daily Haaretz, writes that "Arabs in Israel have been dealing with institutionalized neglect since the state's establishment: outdated study programs, obsolete teaching methods and a lack of resources and infrastructure".<sup>25</sup> The allocation of funds, in particular, poses a problem that results in overcrowding, outdated facilities, and a shortage of teachers. Consequently, Arab students have an average score in math, language, and science exams that is two grade levels lower than their Jewish counterparts.<sup>26</sup>

So called mixed cities such as Haifa, Lyd, and Ramlah are divided in Jewish and Arab neighborhoods. The unequal distribution of resources in these cities has resulted in high poverty rates, particularly among the Arab neighborhoods, which has subsequently led to a rise in crime and violence. In 2011, an independent human rights organization, Adalah, published a report titled "Inequality Report: The Palestinian Arab Minority in Israel", which concluded that Palestinian communities "are among the poorest and most neglected communities in Israel".<sup>27</sup> The report also addresses the issue of overcrowding by providing a comparison of two cities. An illustration of this can be seen in Nazareth, with a Palestinian population of 70,000 and jurisdiction over 16,000 dunams (16 square km), compared to Illit, which has a population of 50,000 but controls 40,000 dunams (40 square km) of land.

**Exclusion.** Under the military rule following the establishment of the state of Israel that lasted until 1966, political participation was impossible for Palestinian citizens. After the Six Day

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<sup>24</sup> Romano-Hvid, 'The Israeli Palestinian Minority on Prime-Time Israeli Jewish TV'.

<sup>25</sup> Kashti, 'The New Plan to Save Israel's Arab Education System'.

<sup>26</sup> Dattel, 'Education Ministry Funds Fewer School Hours for Arabs Than Jews'.

<sup>27</sup> Hesketh, 'Inequality Report: The Palestinian Arab Minority in Israel', 25.

War in 1967 that led to further displacement of Palestinians and territorial changes, Palestinian intellectuals realised that they should pay more attention to Israeli politics.<sup>28</sup> They were confronted with a twofold difficulty where they had to fight for their community's rights while also being expected to be a voice for Palestinians living under occupation. Excessive participation in Israeli politics can lead to suspicion and accusations of collaboration with the occupiers. But if they don't participate enough, they risk becoming politically irrelevant with narrow sphere of influence.

Amal Jamal demonstrates that there is a growing willingness among Palestinian intellectuals to challenge the Jewish identity of the state. However, the state has responded with tactics that include “intimidation, arrest, and detention of individual leaders, as well as legal measures such as banning or attempting to ban political parties or prevent them”.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps the most controversial legislation adopted by Israel’s parliament in 2018 was the “Jewish-nation state law”. The law defines the state of Israel as exclusively Jewish, demoting the Arabic language from an official status to a 'special status,' emphasizing Israel as the Jewish homeland.

Having said that, it is also important to highlight positive changes that have occurred in the last decades when it comes to the representation of Palestinian minority. The 2020 Knesset elections was historical when it comes to the number of seats four Arab-led parties united in the Joint List managed to capture. For the first time in the history of Israel, 17 Arabs were set to serve in the Knesset, including 5 women, a record of its own. In comparison, Arabs won just five seats in the elections of 1984, and according to Shipler, “were scattered so thinly through various parties as to be ineffectual”.<sup>30</sup>

**Discrimination** emerges as a prominent factor in relation to the labor market for Palestinian citizens of Israel. Nationality-based employment discrimination in Israel results in various obstacles for Palestinians when attempting to access employment opportunities, including biased recruitment practices, lower wages, and limited job placement options. David K. Shipler argues in his book that the Palestinian minority became Israel’s underclass due to the “inferior education, impoverished living conditions, low motivation, and a lack of investment capital”.

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<sup>28</sup> Nassar, *Brothers Apart*, 147.

<sup>29</sup> Jamal, ‘The Arab Leadership in Israel: Ascendance and Fragmentation’, 8.

<sup>30</sup> David K. Shipler, *Arab and Jew*, 398.

<sup>31</sup> However, according to Ahmad H. Sa'di, residential segregation or educational gaps alone do not fully explain the established disadvantage in the labor market. He argues that a closer investigation into the Jewish character of the state and the Israeli economy is necessary to gain a better understanding of the reasons behind the substantial obstacles that Palestinian citizens of Israel encounter in their pursuit of equal employment opportunities. He claims that the state of Israel has had multiple ideological and political motivations for maintaining the underdevelopment of the Palestinian sector through various policies since its establishment. Sa'di observations also explains partly the poor education financing: "The low quality of education available to the Palestinians ensures that their majority become employees in blue-collar jobs". <sup>32</sup>

Another way to exclude Palestinians from the labor market is to favor IDF veterans in the hiring process. It can be done in an official way using security reasons, or as Sa'di points out, by "recruiting workers from labor exchange offices for discharged veterans; using word-of-mouth recruitment methods"<sup>33</sup> During a panel discussion on the employment of Arab citizens in Israeli media, Anat Saragusti, a former journalist, pointed out that "most of the reporters on Channel Two grew out of Army Radio, where they did their military service".<sup>34</sup> Indeed, Army Radio acts as a springboard for a young journalist who are looking for an opportunity to work in top media companies. Lior Kodner a Haaretz journalist who himself started his career at Army Radio points in his article that there is a connection between the absence of the Palestinian minority in Army radio and their absence in the Hebrew-speaking media. <sup>35</sup>

**Fear.** The concerns of the Israeli majority regarding Palestinian citizens of Israel can be attributed to two primary factors. The loyalty of Palestinian citizens is often questioned by the Jewish majority in Israel, particularly in light of the broader Palestinian struggle for independence and statehood, as some Palestinian citizens may identify more strongly with this struggle than with the Israeli state. Another commonly debated issue is the increasing birth rate among Palestinian citizens of Israel, which some argue could potentially threaten the Jewish character of the state. Given the fact that 50 % of Palestinian citizens of Israel are under the

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<sup>31</sup> David K. Shipler, 402.

<sup>32</sup> Sa'di, 'Incorporation without Integration: Palestinian Citizens in Israel's Labor Market', 245.

<sup>33</sup> Sa'di, 246.

<sup>34</sup> Kliger, 'Panel Discusses Integration of Arabs Citizens in Israeli Media'.

<sup>35</sup> Kodner, 'Don't Shut Down Israeli Army Radio, Reform It'.

age of 50, it is estimated that in 2050 the population will increase to 3.6 million.<sup>36</sup> Various solutions are being discussed to address the demographic challenge. Among these measures are facilitating the immigration of Jews from different parts of the world to Israel, prohibiting Palestinians who fled the country from returning to their homes, or investing in education by increasing funding for schools and universities. The last one is based on the concept of the "fertility-income" or "education fertility" hypothesis, which suggests that as education and income levels increase, people tend to have fewer children.

I included these four parameters to depict various facets of being a Palestinian citizen in the Jewish state, aiming to illustrate in the subsequent chapters the significant influence of the Israeli mass media in shaping public opinion about this community. Exploring how various mainstream media outlets perpetuate stereotypes and misconceptions, or alternatively, promote diversity and inclusion, is a broad topic that, within the scope of this master's thesis, cannot be thoroughly examined. Hence, I decided to narrow the scope of my research and focus on two television programs that, in my view, deviate somewhat from the standard media portrayal of the Palestinian minority. This is particularly noteworthy, considering that the creators of these television series are themselves Palestinians, a rarity in a media landscape predominantly influenced and operated by Jewish individuals and organizations in Israel. Through the use of Stuart Hall's representation theory and media representation theory, I bolster my analyses with a theoretical framework that provides a deeper comprehension of the influence exerted by mass media concerning the interactions between various groups characterized by distinct power dynamics.

Television series often serve as reflections of the society in which they are produced. Intended for a broad audience, they not only mirror contemporary social issues but also, to some degree, influence public discourse, even if they initially appear to be purely for entertainment purposes. Alan McKee believes that it is not possible to “completely revolutionize sense-making practices in a culture using only a small number of texts: and certainly not when the choice to consume particular texts is voluntary”.<sup>37</sup> However, he emphasizes that certain texts have the potential to influence and reshape the way a culture interprets and understands things, although this transformation typically occurs gradually. He

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<sup>36</sup> Charles D. Freilich, *Israeli National Security: A New Strategy for an Era of Change*, 127.

<sup>37</sup> McKee, *Textual Analysis*, 17.

continues by saying that “human beings are sense-making creatures, and although we can make educated guesses about uses and interpretations of particular texts, these can never be confidently predicted with mathematical equations”.<sup>38</sup> However, examining the concepts and context that led to the creation of these series, as well as the themes and messages they portray, alongside their reception by audiences, may provide valuable understanding of the status and role of Palestinian citizens in Israel. This, in turn, may not just give food for thought about the relationship and the reconciliation prospects between Israelis and Palestinians within the green line, but also beyond it.

### **A historical overview of Palestinian minority on Israeli Jewish prime-time TV**

In such a polarized society, where there are so few touching points between two ethnic groups, did the media make any attempts to bridge the gap? Itay Harlap notes that “television in particular is considered a highly influential medium, due to both the visual nature of its messages and its widespread “infiltration” of the domestic space.”<sup>39</sup> According to him, Israeli television is intricately connected to Israeli society, culture, and history. It reflects a specific period from 1965 to 1970, during which there was only one public channel that deliberately avoided broadcasting controversial or intricate subjects. With the arrival of a new director for Israeli Television in 1973, this era earned the title of the "Golden Age" of Israeli television. Despite the ongoing monopolization of the Israeli discourse, a competing narrative began to emerge within the Israeli public.<sup>40</sup> Throughout the early years of the 21st century, trauma as a theme became increasingly prominent in Israeli culture and made its way into various television genres. In his scholarly work, Harlap primarily referred to the Mizrahi Jews who challenged the hegemonic presence of Ashkenazi on television screens. Regardless of the various transformations that Israeli television has undergone since its first broadcasting, the exclusion of the Palestinian minority remains a persistent and defining factor across all these periods.

The historical examination of the representation of Palestinian citizens on Israeli television is a field that is lacking in comprehensive coverage. Romano-Hvid provides a brief summary of television productions that incorporates Palestinian characters into their narratives. She

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<sup>38</sup> McKee, 17.

<sup>39</sup> Harlap, *Television Drama in Israel*.

<sup>40</sup> Harlap, 6.



discusses the period between 1985 and 1988 when the first comedy show about a Palestinian owner of the restaurant in Jerusalem was aired on the only Israeli television channel at that time.<sup>41</sup> “Abu Rahmi's Restaurant” tells a story about the Palestinian family that owns a restaurant, focusing on their daily life and other aspects of running a restaurant. The television program was intended to cool down the tense political climate. At that time, a radical and racist political party led by Rabbi Meir Kahana had not yet been banned; it was known for its “incitements against Palestinians, and the rationale behind the series was to demonstrate a positive picture of co-existence between Palestinians and Israeli Jews”<sup>42</sup> These series were the first television productions that allowed Israeli viewers to become acquainted with a Palestinian family portrayed with positive attributes. By contrast, a sitcom called “Krovim Krovim” (Near once, dear once) aired in 1984 and centered on the lives of three Israeli families residing in the same apartment building. The sitcom depicted only one Palestinian character in a minor role portrayed solely as hired housekeeper.

It is also important to mention that television series such as “Abu Rahmi’s restaurant” had only Israeli actors playing Palestinian characters on the screen. The interest to bring more Palestinian protagonists was growing, but not the idea to include actual Palestinian actors. Therefore, sitcoms “Arab Labor” and “Muna” stand out, marking a shift in the history of Israeli cinematography. It's the first time that a television series meant to entertain Israeli viewers has included such a considerable number of Palestinian actors.

Almost a decade passed before another documentary series focused on Palestinian citizens made it to the Israeli prime-time. According to Romano-Hvid, a documentary series “Tkuma” (Revival) “marked a shift in the representation of Palestinians on prime-time TV”, as controversial topics such as the nakba were openly discussed on Channel 1 for the first time.<sup>43</sup> Although the alternative narratives were presented alongside the national narrative rather than in opposition to it, they provided opportunities for new and diverse perspectives to emerge, challenging the dominant and ethnocentric perspective presented in the documentary.<sup>44</sup> Years later, when Sayed Kashua revisited this subject in his television show 'Arab Labor,' it was still considered a controversial and sensitive topic to be discussed in the public domain." According

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<sup>41</sup> Romano-Hvid, 'The Israeli Palestinian Minority on Prime-Time Israeli Jewish TV', 107.

<sup>42</sup> Romano-Hvid, 107.

<sup>43</sup> Romano-Hvid, 108.

<sup>44</sup> Ram, 'Ways of Forgetting: Israel and the Obliterated Memory of the Palestinian Nakba', 388.

to Harlap who wrote a book “Television drama in Israel” the sitcom 'Arab Labor' by Sayed Kashua is an example of the gradual erosion of the dominant Zionist narrative, and the emergence of “competing narratives that had begun arising among the Israeli public.”<sup>45</sup>

### **Palestinian filmmakers and TV show creators in Israel**

The presence of Palestinian filmmakers and TV show creators on Israeli television signified a notable progression towards more diverse and inclusive representation. Within the Israeli context, the working circumstances of Palestinian filmmakers are influenced by the interplay of political, cultural, and economic factors. While some aspects within this environment provide certain opportunities, there is also a widespread pattern of discrimination against Palestinians filmmakers, which significantly hampers their professional prospects.<sup>46</sup> In addition, Palestinian female filmmakers face discrimination both within their society and by the state under which they hold citizenship. In this regard, Palestinian filmmakers navigate a delicate balance between reconciling with their own patriarchal society and confronting the discriminatory policies imposed by the state.<sup>47</sup> The scholarly article by Jamal and Lavie highlights the challenges they encounter, including dependence on Israeli funding and the task of addressing such issues as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or domestic issues involving these groups from a Palestinian perspective.<sup>48</sup>

Filmmakers such as Elia Suleiman, Hany Abu-Assad, and Michel Khleifi, among others, typically appeal to the Western audiences by focusing on themes like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, occupation, and the dynamics between Palestinians divided by the Green Line. Movies such as “Omar” and “Paradise now” by Hany Abu-Assad or “Divine interventions” by Elia Suleiman received an international recognition all over the world yet facing different obstacles while attempting to reach out to the Israeli viewer. A good example is the documentary film "Jenin, Jenin," directed by Mohammed Bakri, which faced a ban in Israel following a Supreme Court ruling. Moreover, Bakri was instructed to pay 175,000 shekels (\$54,000) to the soldier portrayed in the film.<sup>49</sup> Movie describes the events that took place in the West Bank during

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<sup>45</sup> Harlap, *Television Drama in Israel*, 101.

<sup>46</sup> Jamal and Lavie, 'Self-Categorization, Intersectionality and Creative Freedom in the Cultural Industries: Palestinian Women Filmmakers in Israel', 1034.

<sup>47</sup> Jamal and Lavie, 1034.

<sup>48</sup> {Citation}

<sup>49</sup> Anderman, “Voluntary Transfer”: Israel Faces Exodus of Palestinian Filmmakers’.

the Operation Defensive Shield, highlighting an alleged war crime that occurred during the outbreak of the Second Intifada and was purportedly committed by Israeli soldiers. The working conditions of Palestinian filmmakers offer a framework that can shed light on the opportunities and challenges encountered by Palestinian TV show creators aiming to enter the Israeli television entertainment sphere.

To provide a brief summary of the distinction between movies and television series, I would begin by highlighting my perspective that television series, due to their extended storytelling spread over multiple episodes and seasons, have a more pervasive impact on the lives of television viewers, often reaching a substantial portion of the population. In the context of the historical and politico-social framework of Israel, movies made by Palestinians (“Jenin, Jenin”, “Paradise now”) or with Palestinian actors (“Fauda”, “Tehran”) tend to be ignored by Israelis as products that are meant for a Western audience. In contrast to this, it becomes challenging to turn a blind eye and disregard television series featured on widely watched Israeli national and commercial networks, especially when they generate diverse discussion, provoking admiration, and criticism.

Mira Awad, the author of "Muna," serves as a compelling example of the dilemmas she is facing as a Palestinian TV show creator. Addressing national issues can potentially diminish financial support, while tackling critical issues within her own community may invite harsh critique. As for Kashua's sitcom, with its comedic approach it earned him a place in the Israeli national prime-time schedule. However, to please an Israeli viewer, it appears necessary to steer clear of sensitive Israeli-Palestinian conflict topics and instead focus on portraying Palestinian citizens through the stereotypical lens that Israeli society has grown accustomed to. In the following chapters I will elaborate whether Kashua intentionally adopted this strategy to win over the Israeli public by setting the stage for conveying crucial messages that could be challenging to communicate, given the various committees and boards that could swiftly censor cultural productions. It is important to note that his subsequent release of the semi-autobiographical series named "The Writer" suggests that certain segments of Israeli society are increasingly receptive to diverse narratives and viewpoints. However, it's important to recognize that certain political events and groups may attempt to perpetuate divisions in response to perceived threats to their own interests.

## Methodology

This master's thesis adopts a case-study approach to offer textual readings and discursive analyses of two television programs produced by members of the Palestinian minority. To explore a social phenomenon, such as the representation of a group, it is important to analyze and discuss relevant contextual conditions. Swanborn describes case study as an intensive approach arguing that this approach “may provide us with tentative ideas about the social phenomenon, based on knowledge about the studied event or about this specific person, organisation or country, and ‘how it all came about’”.<sup>50</sup> In this context, studying the representation of the Palestinian minority in Israel by analyzing two sitcoms created by members of this community does come with some limitations for my research. It does not encompass the full range of media content produced by Palestinian citizens, which could offer a broader perspective on the portrayal of this group. Nevertheless, this approach transforms the nature of the study into a more focused investigation of the phenomena, prioritizing a detailed exploration of a certain “event” over the mere acquisition of empirical data and general understanding. Furthermore, a case study provides the opportunity to utilize diverse data collection methods, encompassing textual analyses of cultural productions, watching video interviews, making observations, and analyzing relevant documents.

The idea to write my thesis on this topic was born after I left Israel. However, I watched both “Arab Labor” and “Muna” while I was living there. This was partly driven by my desire to improve my Arabic language skills, and also because I was enrolled in Hebrew classes. When the Palestinian actors spoke, I focused on the Hebrew subtitles, and when the Jewish actors spoke, the Arabic subtitles were immensely helpful since I couldn't fully grasp the dialogue. Watching a single episode would naturally consume hours, but the comedic nature of “Arab Labor” made the experience more enjoyable.

When I decided to write my master's thesis on this topic, fieldwork wasn't possible due to Covid-19 and its travel restrictions. However, it wasn't a huge obstacle as all I needed was access to the television series. I was also aware that an interview with Sayed Kashua and Mira Awad would add credibility to my paper. However, due to their popularity and Kashua's relocation to the USA, it was challenging to arrange. But as public figures, they were

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<sup>50</sup> Swanborn, *Case Study Research: What, Why and How?*

interviewed numerous times, especially about the series, answering various questions whose responses I could use to support my arguments and analyses.

I also faced some challenges while trying to find all the episodes of the series, as only some were accessible on YouTube, with certain episodes and seasons missing. I came across several episodes of "Arab Labor" on Vimeo, where I found numerous episodes accompanied by English subtitles, simplifying my analysis process. As for "Muna," the series could be accessed on the Kan channel, but after the summer of 2023, I could no longer view them. Due to my limited understanding of Hebrew, I faced challenges navigating the channel's website to ascertain the cause. Only a few episodes remain available on YouTube.

Parts of the episodes that I included into my thesis I chose to translate myself. Primarily, this was because, to the best of my knowledge, "Muna" does not have English subtitles, and the English subtitles on Vimeo for "Arab Labor" were of uncertain quality.

It is important to mention that my limited knowledge of Hebrew, constrained the scope and depth of my research. I could only analyze and include the interviews with Kashua and Awad that were conducted in English and Arabic. A number of Hebrew newspapers that I included in my thesis were also limited to those operating in both Hebrew and English. However, working with native Hebrew speakers back in 2019 while I was watching these series proved advantageous, as I frequently sought their insights on certain cultural and linguistic nuances that were challenging for me to grasp.

## **The factors behind Palestinian TV shows “Arab Labor” and “Muna” entering Israeli TV mainstream**

### **A short introduction to the TV series “Arab Labor” and “Muna”**

Debuting in 2007, the sitcom "Arab Labor" spans five seasons and is notable as the pioneering prime-time series showcasing predominantly Palestinian characters who speak Arabic. Amjad, a central character in the sitcom, along with his extended family, uses their personal stories to illuminate their experiences as Palestinian citizens as they navigate the complexities of Israeli society. Kashua, the series' creator, heavily incorporates elements from his own life and the experiences of his family members, resulting in a work that closely mirrors his autobiography. Amjad is a journalist who works for a popular Israeli newspaper. He finds himself often in humorous and absurd situations as he strives to assimilate into Israeli society as much as possible. He believes that doing so he can mitigate the discrimination issues faced by himself and his family that occurs almost on a daily basis.

The sitcom's humorous tone provided Kashua with an avenue to address a sensitive and contentious subject, which will be examined in more detail in the next chapter of this thesis. He also included a wide palette of Jewish characters making sure that the Israeli audience has an opportunity to view themselves from an outsider's perspective. An illustrative case is that of Amjad's neighbors, who identify as liberal and progressive Jews, consistently advocating for coexistence and positive relationships between Jewish and Palestinian citizens of the state. However, their ideals and steadfast beliefs are put to the test when their own child expresses an interest in dating a Palestinian. This situation serves as a reminder that Israeli society still has a significant journey ahead in terms of fostering greater acceptance and understanding among its diverse communities.

Moving on to the television drama titled “Muna”, it is produced for the popular channel Kan 11. It is created by Mira Awad, a renowned singer, activist, and public figure who gained fame for her participation in Eurovision, where she became the first Palestinian to represent Israel. “Muna” tells the story of a young Palestinian photographer who lives in Tel-Aviv. The TV series is about a complex relationship between Jews and Palestinians. "Muna" centers on a young Palestinian woman whose deep attachment to her parents and cultural heritage is challenged as she no longer wishes to accept certain aspects of her society that she finds unacceptable, including issues like domestic violence and a patriarchal social structure. She encounters minimal support for her efforts to challenge these norms within her own

community. Many people in both communities have taken either a judgmental stance or prefer to keep such matters at arm's length. This is how she find herself powerless when trying to help her childhood friend to escape from her violent and abusive husband.

Muna also grapples with the complexities of dating a Jewish boyfriend who loves and supports her, yet it does little to change the opinion of her parents, who strongly oppose such a union. On occasion, she finds herself being held responsible for the collective mistakes of her own community when engaging in discussions about occupation on a television program to which she was invited. It appears challenging for Muna to balance her aspirations as a young female photographer in Tel Aviv with her efforts to assert her Palestinian heritage and advocate for her community's rights within the Israeli state.

Muna and her friends represent a growing number of young Palestinians who find themselves in a situation of not belonging to any specific place. They often move from small villages or towns to more liberal and multicultural cities such as Haifa or Tel Aviv, hoping to find a place where they can feel a sense of belonging. Similarly, like Muna and her friends, they frequently experience disillusionment and face multiple challenges, including discrimination, exclusion, and suspicion when interacting with the Jewish majority. It is interesting to point out that both cultural productions have a biographical element, drawing inspiration from the personal experiences and perspectives of their creators. This adds gravitas and a testimonial aspect, as some may perceive this series primarily as entertainment with a superficial nature.

### **The political climate and the Israeli media industry**

Ariel Sharon Israeli prime minister between 2001-2006 strongly believed that Jews and Arabs citizens of the country can live together, however he was convinced that a peaceful coexistence is possible if full rights and full obligations go together. In his autobiography Sharon wrote a long reflection on obligations such as military service, unequal taxation, he even mentioned the fact that Palestinian citizens of Israel are exempted to pay minor television and radio fees in contrast to the Jewish population.<sup>51</sup> Little was mentioned about the other prerequisite of the peaceful coexistence such as full enjoyment of citizen rights and equal access to opportunities and resources. It also appears that at that time, Sharon had little awareness of the fact that

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<sup>51</sup> Sharon and Chanoff, *Warrior*, 543.

Palestinians represented only 0.3% of the Israeli (Hebrew) media industry.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, it would be somehow unfair to pay television and radio fees for something they were excluded from and had no say in. While Sharon and his administration were focusing more on obligations and duties regarding Arab citizens of Israel, an organization The Citizens Accord Forum (CAF) was established in 2001, aimed “on making a contribution toward building a just and equal relationship between Jews and Palestinians in Israel.”<sup>53</sup> CAF decided to produce and publish their own newspaper, *Du-Et*, in the response to polarization between these two groups, claiming that the lack of knowledge about each other led to the poor and inaccurate representation on both sides. Another CAF project that is more relevant to this master thesis was a training and mentorship program in one of Israel’s major Hebrew media outlets, Keshet Television Production Company.<sup>54</sup> Seven young Palestinian journalists were chosen to participate in this program and assigned to different departments. Udi Leon who was at that time Keshet program manager together with CAF had a goal to prove that the presence of Palestinians on prime-time shows would not reduce the TV ratings. This is how members of the minority group found themselves participating in *Kochav Nolad* (the Israeli version of American idol) and the Israeli version of *Supernanny*. Subsequently, CAF gained momentum and chose to participate in the committee responsible for creating “Arab Labor,” the inaugural sitcom featuring predominantly Palestinian characters speaking in Arabic during Israeli prime time.

According to scholars like Jamal and Lavie, sitcoms such as “Arab Labor” or “Muna” secured funding and support from the Ministry of Culture due to their focus on the internal issues such as the complicated relationship between the Palestinian minority and the Jewish majority. Cultural productions that were deemed critical to the state of Israel were perceived as having a radical political stance. Specifically, those that criticized the state of Israel and its policies towards Palestinians residing on occupied territories were disregarded.<sup>55</sup> Jamal and Lavie believe that “Arab Labor” illustrates “the delicate balance maintained between critiquing the oppressive hand of the Jewish majority and the existential need of the minority to accept its

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<sup>52</sup> The Citizen’s Accord Forum, ‘Coexistence in the Israeli Media’.

<sup>53</sup> The Citizen’s Accord Forum.

<sup>54</sup> The Citizen’s Accord Forum.

<sup>55</sup> Jamal and Lavie, ‘Self-Categorization, Intersectionality and Creative Freedom in the Cultural Industries: Palestinian Women Filmmakers in Israel’, 1035.



role as a submissive minority that seeks sophisticated ways to meet the expectations of the hegemonic majority and thereby survive the tense relationship resulting from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.”<sup>56</sup> In the case of "Muna," it appears that one of the factors contributing to Mira Awad's acquisition of funding is the emphasis on addressing prevalent stereotypes surrounding Palestinian women. This includes shedding light on issues such as domestic violence and the challenges posed by patriarchal norms within their community. According to Palestinian filmmaker Suha Araf, she encounters similar challenges when it comes to obtaining funding from European sources. She highlights that these funders often show interest only in topics related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or subjects that depict elements of primitiveness within her own society.<sup>57</sup>

### **The Second Authority for Television and Radio and its tender**

"We proved something that Israeli broadcasters were not willing to accept until today - that doing a show about Arabs in Arabic is possible on prime time."<sup>58</sup>

Udi Leon, Keshet program manager

Concurrently with the events described in the previous chapter, three broadcasters in 2004 were fighting for the tender to operate Channel 2, Israel's main commercial channel. The Second Authority for Television and Radio, the authority that regulates and supervises commercial broadcasts, would choose just two, those who could satisfy certain criteria presented by the regulator. One of the demands was that the cultural diversity must be improved, minorities and marginalized groups should be better represented on the screen. Eli Avraham and Anat First published an article in 2010 where they analyzed and compared two studies in order to examine whether the released tender had an effect on the representation of minority groups in Israel's national-commercial media.<sup>59</sup> Both studies used quantitative content analyses measuring the representation of minority groups in different genres. Equipped with the results of these two studies, Avraham and First found out that a minor improvement occurred in the representation

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<sup>56</sup> Jamal and Lavie, 1036.

<sup>57</sup> Jamal and Lavie, 1037–38.

<sup>58</sup> "Avoda Aravit" - Breaking TV Barriers'.

<sup>59</sup> Avraham and First, 'Can a Regulator Change Representation of Minority Groups and Fair Reflection of Cultural Diversity in National Media Programs?'

of national-religious, ultra-Orthodox and Mizrachi characters.<sup>60</sup> The tender, however, did not have a positive effect on the representation of Arab and new immigrants.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, the pre-tender and the post-tender study showed that Arabs were completely absent in television dramas:

**Table 4**  
**Social Groups' Representation in Drama, Current Events and Investigative Programs**

Group	Drama		Investigative and Current Event Programs	
	Pre-tender	Post-tender	Pre-tender	Post-tender
Men	128 (64%)	148** (56%)	547 (77%)	714 (77%)
Women	72 (36%)	117** (44%)	168 (23%)	218 (23%)
Jews	200 (100%)	261 (99%)	660 (97%)	868 (97%)
Arabs	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	23 (3%)	27 (3%)
Secular	190 (95%)	252 (97%)	606 (93%)	614** (85%)
National-religious	6 (3%)	1 (0.4%)	39 (6%)	86** (12%)
Ultra-Orthodox	4 (2%)	7 (2.7%)	6 (1%)	24 (3%)
Veteran Israelis	194 (97%)	254 (97%)	656 (97%)	835** (95%)
New immigrants	6 (3%)	8 (3%)	22 (3%)	47** (5%)
Total	200	265	733	932

Note: \*\*Significant increase/decrease in the post-tender study according to a probability test  $p < .005$ .

**Figure 1**<sup>62</sup>

Borrowing the words of Avraham and First it seems that “the franchisees delineated the boundaries of Israeli society in ethno-centric terms” and failed to represent the cultural diversity of Israeli society.<sup>63</sup>

The researchers determined that to counter this trend, three elements must be integrated: the regulator, the franchisees/broadcasters, and the minority groups themselves. They added that even with all three factors working in unison, the process is expected to be lengthy.<sup>64</sup> It is important to notice that the post-tender results were published in 2006. A year later the first

<sup>60</sup> Avraham and First.

<sup>61</sup> Avraham and First.

<sup>62</sup> Avraham and First, 142.

<sup>63</sup> Avraham and First, ‘Can a Regulator Change Representation of Minority Groups and Fair Reflection of Cultural Diversity in National Media Programs?’

<sup>64</sup> Avraham and First.

sitcom “Arab Labor” featuring mainly Palestinian characters speaking in Arabic premiered on Keshet Channel 2.

The appearance of TV programs created by minorities is a step toward inclusivity and representation. While analyzing the data in this chapter, it seems that sitcoms like “Arab Labor” and “Muna” are more of an exception than a developing pattern. Even though it may not be substantial enough to create a significant shift in societal perspectives, it is a step forward in challenging the prevailing Zionist narrative, presenting alternative perspectives, and offering a more balanced portrayal of Palestinian citizens of Israel. The high viewing ratings of these TV series <sup>65</sup> and the subsequent debates they sparked suggest that the Israeli majority is open to such content, portraying Palestinians in a context beyond stereotypical news coverage. However, further in this paper, we will delve into whether this was indeed the case in more detail.

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<sup>65</sup> Mendelson-Maoz and Steir-Livny, ‘The Jewish Works of Sayed Kashua’, 2011, 122.

## **The messages the authors of “Arab Labor” and “Muna” are trying to convey through their cultural productions**

“I just have to be a good writer  
and I will free my people  
from the ghettos they live in.  
Another book, another movie,  
another newspaper column  
and another script for television and  
my children will have a better future”.<sup>66</sup>

Sayed Kashua, *The Guardian*

### **The search for identity**

Belonging and identity serve as central themes in both sitcoms analysed in this paper. Sayed Kashua’s persistent fascination with the concepts of identity and belonging manifested in his extensive collection of novels, in which his characters embark on quests to discover their true selves and a place to belong. Both Kashua and Awad endeavor to depict the immense challenges faced by individuals who navigate the delicate tightrope of being Palestinian, Israeli, Arab, or Muslim within a predominantly Jewish society. Both main characters of the two sitcoms, Amjad and Muna, powerfully illustrate the challenges of navigating their identities within a state that fails to fully embrace them as equal citizens. According to Kashua, the Arab Israeli failed identity is a result of “separatist ideologies that depend on this clash in order to sustain the illusion of authentic and coherent (Israeli and Palestinian) national identities”.<sup>67</sup> This choice of portraying Amjad, the main character, in a mocking and absurd manner, which subsequently drew criticism from members of his own community, can be attributed to this explanation. The main character in "Muna" experiences a similar situation as she navigates her search for a sense of belonging by frequently shuttling between her parents' home and Tel Aviv, where she currently resides. Due to her Palestinian heritage, she encounters numerous discriminatory tactics from the Jewish community, who are unwilling to view her as their equal. Simultaneously, her own community perceives her as an outsider because she challenges several norms, such as living independently in the predominantly Jewish city of Tel Aviv and

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<sup>66</sup> Kashua, ‘Sayed Kashua’.

<sup>67</sup> Hochberg, ‘To Be or Not to Be an Israeli Arab’, 70.

having an Israeli boyfriend. Amjad encounters similar challenges, albeit portrayed in a more humorous manner. Despite his continuous efforts to assimilate into the Jewish environment, Amjad faces ridicule from his father and wife, while simultaneously encountering closed doors and discriminatory policies from the Jewish society.

Episode 5 of the first season showcases his willingness to compromise his Palestinian identity in pursuit of acceptance from the Jewish majority.<sup>68</sup> Amjad and his wife are invited by the family from west Jerusalem to celebrate the Jewish holiday Passover. Amjad eventually says to his wife “Look at this elite. This is how you celebrate properly by seating around the table like humans. This is a culture.”<sup>69</sup> He juxtaposes Passover and the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Fitr. While he admires certain aspects of the Israeli culture, he holds a negative perception of his own traditions and customs, which he considers to be noisy and uncivilized. Judit Druks describes the relationship between Amjad and the Jewish majority as similar to the one of the colonizer and the colonized, where Amjad “cannot help but be in awe of and envy the colonizers, and admire their lives, culture and style.”<sup>70</sup>

This is just one of many examples where Kashua ironically derides various aspects of life of the Palestinian minority group. Mandelson Maoz and Steir-Livny believe that Kashua by doing this attempts to criticize the Israelization process among Palestinians<sup>71</sup>. However, Kashua is well aware that the majority of his audience are Jewish Israelis, so if he wanted to convey a message, it had to be directed to them first. Mills, for example, argues that the humorous nature of the sitcom “contributes (unwittingly?) to stereotyped representations of underprivileged groups, turning such social issues into nothing more than something worthy of laughter”.<sup>72</sup> In one of his radio interviews, Kashua himself expressed the following sentiment: “I use a lot of humor, and I follow the saying that if you want to tell people the truth, you better make them laugh first, otherwise, they will shoot you”.<sup>73</sup> Indeed, in his writing, Sayed Kashua frequently presents characters in a superficial or stereotypical way. However, this does not necessarily detract from the power of his work to address important and sensitive topics. As an example,

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<sup>68</sup> Arab Labor, Loyalty.

<sup>69</sup> Arab Labor, Loyalty.

<sup>70</sup> Druks, ‘Passing As... in Arab Labor by Sayed Kashua on Israeli TV’, 313.

<sup>71</sup> Mendelson-Maoz and Steir-Livny, ‘The Jewish Works of Sayed Kashua’, 2011, 108.

<sup>72</sup> Kosman, ‘Comic Relief’, 24.

<sup>73</sup> Mcevers, ‘It’s A Surviving Tool’: “Native” Tells Satirical Stories Of Life In Israel’.

in one of the episodes Kashua touches upon a highly sensitive and a controversial topic which is Israel's Independence Day, known among Palestinians as Nakba Day (meaning "catastrophe" in Arabic).

### **Confronting the Past: Nakba and the Creation of Israel**

Mendelson-Maoz and Steir-Livny, who examine this episode in one of their articles emphasize that “after the great success of the first season, in the second season, Kashua allowed himself to be more critical and targeted the issue of the Nakba”.<sup>74</sup> Having three children of his own, Kashua is worried if the memory of the Nakba will continue to be a significant part of the collective memory and identity of Palestinian citizens of Israel for generations to come. Being a minority in a country with a strong national Zionist narrative can make it challenging to reconcile one's own identity and beliefs. Maya, the daughter of Amjad, is unaware of how controversial and sensitive Memorial Day is for her family, asked for help with her homework. Maya needs to explain the cause of the outbreak of the War of Independence, and Amjad provides her with the Zionist narrative to avoid any trouble at the Jewish school she attends. However, this situation upsets his wife, who holds Amjad responsible for sending their daughter to a school that might cause her to lose touch with her identity and family history. The story takes a new turn when Maya is excluded from singing in her school's choir, which was invited to perform at the upcoming Mount Herzl Memorial Day ceremony.

Israeli Memorial Day and the Palestinian Nakba are interconnected aspects, and Sayed Kashua's decision to address them during a prime time TV show demonstrates his courage in tackling such sensitive and controversial subjects; during the ceremony, Amjad permits Maya to sing "Ha-Reut" (The Song of Friendship), which honors the camaraderie and sacrifice of soldiers in establishing the Jewish State, yet her performance offers viewers a contrasting perspective, revealing the other side of this complex issue. The night before the ceremony, Maya pays a visit to her grandmother, who reveals to her for the first time the family history. Her grandmother opens a family album recounting the dramatic events of 1948, when her family and other Palestinians were forced to flee their homes and seek refuge in neighbouring countries.

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<sup>74</sup> Mendelson-Maoz and Steir-Livny, 'Contemporary Israeli Television Challenges National Traumas', 66.

Shiri Goren argues that Kashua intentionally used the genre of the sitcom to bridge the gap of these two different narratives by taking into consideration both the Jewish and the Palestinian stories.<sup>75</sup> Because in contrast with Palestinian refugees who fled the country and those living in the West Bank and Gaza, Palestinian citizens of Israel, as Goren puts it, “are forced to function within an impossible national dichotomy”.<sup>76</sup> Goren also makes a very interesting observation regarding the representation of Palestinian women and Kashua's ability to intervene in the negative media construction. In public and media discussions, the issue of Palestinian women, who hold Israeli citizenship, often centers around gender-based violence and their adherence to patriarchal norms. Um-Amjad, Bushra and her daughter Maya, the three generations of women are placed “at intersections, where they have agency and can actively assist in defusing tensions and effecting positive change.”<sup>77</sup> Especially Bushra, with her exceptional education, unwavering pride in her Palestinian identity, and steadfast commitment to her beliefs, poses a challenge to the prevailing portrayal of Palestinian women and the dominant narrative.

### **Portrayal of Palestinian women in the sitcom “Muna”**

As previously stated, the theme of belonging and identity holds great importance in both sitcoms. The prominent role that women play in both sitcoms introduces an additional layer by exploring the experiences of being a female Palestinian in a Jewish state. Mira Awad and the main protagonist, Muna, share several commonalities. Both have left their villages, a stronghold of the patriarchal norms related to gender roles and family fabric, to pursue their ambitions and careers in Tel Aviv, and both face challenges in their relationships with their parents due to having Jewish boyfriends. Muna is portrayed as a strong character to the viewers; however, it is evident that she bears the consequences of various established norms. Awad made the decision to invite TV viewers to accompany Muna on her journey back to her village, aiming to portray the obstacles she encountered, particularly in her complicated relationship with her father. Her independent life in Tel Aviv is viewed by her father as a potential threat to his reputation, particularly considering his involvement in the upcoming local elections. In addition, Awad aims to emphasize that life in the liberal and democratic

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<sup>75</sup> Goren, ‘Arab Labor, Jewish Humor’, 109.

<sup>76</sup> Goren, 113.

<sup>77</sup> Goren, 115.

city of Tel Aviv is not without its own set of challenges for Muna, who consistently experiences discrimination, exclusion, and a deep sense of alienation. Through the character of Muna, Awad endeavors to illustrate the absurdity of the predicament faced by many Palestinians, including herself, in Israel, as she humorously remarks, “for the Jewish I was too Arab (laughing), for the Arabs I was too Jewish”.<sup>78</sup>

As an example, in the fifth episode of the sitcom<sup>79</sup>, Muna who is talented photographer, receives an invitation to present her photography exhibition in Paris. The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs is not very pleased that Muna is going to represent the state of Israel. The committee invites Muna for a meeting, where they question her loyalty to the state, threatening to not provide funding for the upcoming Paris tour. Frustrated and angry, Muna afterwards records herself on her phone, saying:

My name is Muna ‘abbud  
and I am a photographer.

I have been holding a camera  
since my tender age of youth,  
and I turn it to where my heart  
tells me.

Now, I am not political person,  
and I am not trying to imitate  
anyone except myself.

Now, you want me to apologize  
for whom I am, for my art...

Is this country fragile to such  
extent that they can’t absorb  
someone like me?

Or maybe I am good for you just  
if I am nice and silent?<sup>79</sup>

اسمي منى عبود

وأنا مصورة

أنا ... أحمل الكاميرا منذ نعومة أظفاري وأنا

أوجهها الى حيث يقول لي قلبي

الآن، أنا لست سياسية ولا أحاول أن أمثل أحدا

غير نفسي

الآن تريدونني أن أعتذر عن

عما أكون، عن فني

هل هذه الدولة هشة الى الحد لدرجة أنها لا

تستطيع استيعاب واحدة مثلي؟

أو ربما أنا جيدة بالنسبة لكم فقط عندما أكون

لطيفة وصامتة؟

In this scene, the author effectively eliminates intermediaries by employing a monologue, which prompts the viewer to directly engage with Muna and attentively listen what she has to

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<sup>78</sup> *Other Israel Film Festival 2019 - 'Muna' Q&A with Mira Awad.*

<sup>79</sup> Muna, Weak Spot.



say. The viewer is compelled to listen to her narrative, empathize with her, and potentially develop a deeper understanding of a group that has frequently been perceived as a security and demographic threat.

Suhayr, another character in the series, exemplifies an additional significant subject tackled by Mira Awad - domestic violence. Suhayr, Muna's childhood friend finds it difficult to get out of an abusive relationship, despite being beaten by her husband on a regular basis. Muna convinces Suhayr to leave the village and stay with her in Tel Aviv. She believes that Suhayr can start a new life away from her abusive husband, away from her family that turns a blind eye on the situation. It seems that Suhayr for a little while enjoys her new life in a liberal city. Nevertheless, she returns to her husband, and reflects on their relationship by saying the following: "Thwarting destroys us. We didn't succeed to establish a family and he is behaving just the way he knows it, just as his father was behaving before him and his grandfather was behaving before that. I, myself, grew up with violence in the family".<sup>80</sup> Shortly thereafter, she reconciles with her husband, a decision that leaves Muna feeling both furious and disillusioned, struggling to comprehend the rationale behind her friend's chosen path. Suhayr appears to come to terms with her circumstances and even attempts to rationalize her experiences, conveying to the audience a sense that female representatives of the minority group may feel powerless and likely to acquiesce to the functioning of their society.

Bringing up the story of Suhayr to the Israeli audience was seen by some members of the Palestinian community "as betraying national and social norms, especially when done with the support of Israeli funds".<sup>81</sup> During the "Other Film Festival" in 2019, Awad participated in an interview where she was specifically questioned about her motivation behind incorporating this particular topic into her TV series. She simply explained that she did so because domestic violence remains a pervasive issue in her community and others. She highlighted the prevalent tendency to avoid open discussions about it and the societal pressure for women to conceal such experiences.<sup>82</sup> Awad, at the conclusion of the interview, expressed her recognition that although there is a strong desire within her community to be fully represented to Israeli viewers, she conveyed that achieving this objective within the

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<sup>80</sup> Muna, *Weak Spot*.

<sup>81</sup> Jamal and Lavie, 'Self-Categorization, Intersectionality and Creative Freedom in the Cultural Industries: Palestinian Women Filmmakers in Israel', 1042.

<sup>82</sup> *Other Israel Film Festival 2019 - 'Muna' Q&A with Mira Awad*.

confines of a single TV show is not feasible. However, she expressed hope that sitcom “Muna” is just a beginning, and more content will emerge in the future to further enrich the portrayal of Palestinian citizens of Israel, thereby fostering greater diversity.<sup>83</sup>

Considering that instances of domestic violence and homicides within the Palestinian community are often featured on Israeli news platforms, incorporating these themes in the sitcom does not introduce any fresh insights, but rather contributes to further stigmatization of this community. In fact, Mira Awad had the opportunity to add narrative complexity and showcase the diverse facets of Palestinian society, emphasizing the positive social changes occurring within the community, including increased civic participation, entrepreneurial initiatives, heightened advocacy efforts, and activism aimed at addressing social, political, and economic disparities, to name just a few. Having said that, the presence of a young Palestinian actress in a prominent role act is a source of inspiration, encouraging individuals from similar backgrounds to chase their dreams and have confidence in their capabilities. Israeli audiences, who have grown accustomed to seeing Palestinian actors portraying terrorists from Gaza or the West Bank, were provided with the chance to engage with the daily life of a regular Palestinian woman. Therefore, laying the foundation for diversification of the representation of Palestinian characters on Israeli television.

### **Social stratification in Israeli society**

“The army is a gathering of the community, and anyone left outside remains something of an outsider in his civilian life as well”.<sup>84</sup>

David K. Shipler, “Arab and Jew”

In this section, I will examine how the stratification in Israeli society affects the Palestinian minority, using an episode of "Arab Labor" as an illustrative example. Social stratification refers to a society that has been divided into advantaged and disadvantaged groups through institutional processes.<sup>85</sup> Kashua skillfully discusses this highly sensitive social topic with a humorous touch, focusing specifically on how it impacts non-Jewish minorities. Israel is

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<sup>83</sup> *Other Israel Film Festival 2019 - 'Muna' Q&A with Mira Awad.*

<sup>84</sup> David K. Shipler, *Arab and Jew.*

<sup>85</sup> Heilbrunn, Abu-Asbeh, and Nasra, 'Difficulties Facing Women Entrepreneurs in Israel: A Social Stratification Approach', 146.

ethnically fragmented society and Palestinians are not the only ones who are suffering from discrimination and exclusion. However, Kashua frequently portrays how the state's commitment to preserve its Jewish identity tends to marginalize minority groups that do not belong to the ethnic majority, placing them at the bottom of the social hierarchy. It was already mentioned that Amjad, who endeavors to suppress or hide his Palestinian identity in hopes of gaining acceptance from the majority, amusingly finds himself entangled in absurd situations. In the sixth episode of the second season, Amjad's Jewish friend Meir invites him to celebrate Purim, the festive Jewish holiday renowned for its masquerades and costume parties. Persuaded by Meir, Amjad decides to participate and arrives at the party dressed as an IDF soldier. Soon after, he ends up being abducted by two Palestinians who think that they have captured an Israeli soldier. The dialogue when they realize who is being kidnapped deserves to be presented in its original form:

Kidnapper 1: Tell your name on front of the camera.

Amjad: Amjad. Amjad al-Alyan.

Kidnapper 1: Cut, cut \*stop filming.

Amjad: Amjad what?

Kidnapper 2: We abducted a Druze soldier.

Kidnapper 1: He happens to be a Druze? It is still ok, we will reduce our requirements to 100 prisoners. He is a Druze, but still a soldier. Let's go, film it! Action! Amjad Alyan, are you a druze?

Amjad: No.

Kidnapper 1: Cut, my brother, cut. What? Aren't you a Druze?

Amjad: No.

Kidnapper 1: Are you a Bedouin? (Amjad nods his head). Caucasian?

Kidnapper 2: Christian? Do not tell me that you are a Muslim. <sup>86</sup>

Kashua uses this scene to illustrate the social stratification of the Israeli society. The kidnapers had a plan to achieve the release of Palestinian prisoners in exchange for the abducted Israeli

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<sup>86</sup> Arab Labor, #2.6

soldier. But their plan unravels upon discovering that Amjad is of Arab descent. Moreover, he does not belong to the Druze community, whose members enjoy a relatively privileged relationship with the state and are the only non-Jewish minority that is drafted into the military (aside from the tiny Circassian community).<sup>87</sup> In contrast to the Druze community, whose members are required to serve in the IDF, the members of the Bedouin community of Israel are not drafted into the Israel Defense Forces. However, they can volunteer along with the Christian Arabs, and the government regularly comes up with different recruiting campaigns aiming to attract young members of the minority groups.

Kashua's brilliant capacity to write amusingly and satirically about complex and often tabooed issues in Israeli society, such as the exclusionary political attitude toward its minorities, made him both an internationally recognized and nationally criticized writer. The scene from the sitcom can be summarized by borrowing the observation made in a Haaretz editorial: "Branding minorities in accordance with their degree of loyalty to the state, especially when the yardstick for measuring this loyalty is service in the Israel Defense Forces, undermines the supremacy of the principle of equal citizenship for all".<sup>88</sup> In a country where military service extends beyond a merely compulsory duty for all citizens, acting as a gateway to improved employment prospects and shaping their sense of national identity, the limited involvement of Palestinians in these military responsibilities significantly shapes their future outlooks, as long as the relationship between the Israeli army and Israeli society is deeply intertwined.

### **Ethnoreligious mixed couples/marriages in Israel**

Crossing ethno-religious or racial boundaries through partnering or marriages has always been challenging in Israel. Kashua and Awad chose to incorporate this subject into their sitcoms, highlighting the challenges that couples face in accepting one another with all their differences and complexities, while also endeavoring to gain recognition from the society, both in terms of legality and social acceptance. According to Karkabi-Sabbah, mixed marriages in Israel are a unique case study, given the fact that one of the spouses belongs to the indigenous minority

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<sup>87</sup> 'Israel's Interventions Among the Druze'.

<sup>88</sup> 'Israel's Divide-and-Conquer Strategy toward Arabs - Opinion - Haaretz.Com'.

who is regarded as an equal citizen of the state, yet the social and political landscape continues to be underpinned by a historical legacy of inequality between Palestinians and Jews.<sup>89</sup>

Kashua in “Arab Labor” on several occasions tests the flexibility of social and ethnic boundaries. This is achieved through the strategic placement of his Palestinian characters in a Jewish neighborhood, enrolling the children of the main character in Jewish kindergarten and school, assigning Amjad to operate within a predominantly Jewish professional milieu, and lastly, delving into the intricacies of intermarriage through the experiences of two protagonists, Meir and Amal.

In his article, Karkabi-Sabbah identifies three key factors that contribute to the facilitation of mixed marriages: assortative mating, the availability of opportunities for potential couples to meet, and the presence of formal and informal barriers that can hinder such relationships.<sup>90</sup> I will individually examine each of these factors by employing the protagonists from the analyzed sitcoms as case studies. The concept of assortative mating suggests that “similar educational, occupational, and/or economic status is a prevalent trend that weakens the degree of ethnic and racial barriers”.<sup>91</sup> In “Arab Labor” both Meir and Amal belong to the middle class. Meir works as a journalist alongside Amjad, while Amal is a friend of Meir's wife and a young lawyer who obtained her degree in the United States. In “Muna” both the main protagonist and her boyfriend share common interests as they both work in a creative industry such as art, media, music. Muna's passion for photography and her university degree allow her to explore the world beyond her small village in the pursuit of her career and aspirations. As the article implies, “schooling increases the probability of leaving ethnic enclaves, because education is associated with more geographically dispersed labor markets”.<sup>92</sup> This, in turn, enable her to meet people outside her social and ethnic circles. In her boyfriend's case, schooling as suggested in the Karkabi-Sabbah's article, makes him more open to explore another cultures, including considering an option to date someone from a different ethnic minority.

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<sup>89</sup> Karkabi-Sabbah, ‘Ethnoreligious Mixed Marriages among Palestinian Women and Jewish Men in Israel: Negotiating the Breaking of Barriers’, 191.

<sup>90</sup> Karkabi-Sabbah, 192.

<sup>91</sup> Karkabi-Sabbah, 193.

<sup>92</sup> Karkabi-Sabbah, 193.

Another prerequisite for the dating of mixed couples is the existence of opportunities for them to meet. Amal and Meir meet each other through Amjad, who himself crossed racial, ethnocultural, religious borders by establishing himself by settling in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood and working in a Jewish-dominated professional setting. This again shows that such ethnic or racial border crossing can have a domino effect on other aspects of the relationship between minority and majority groups. The exact circumstances of how Muna met her boyfriend Yaniv are not detailed, but as the article implies, such encounters are more likely in diverse residential areas. Tel Aviv, in this context, is one of those places where ethnic, racial, and social boundaries are quite fluid and flexible.

Regarding formal and informal sanctions that may be enforced by their respective social circles, such as judgmental attitudes and exclusion from friends and family, Meir encounters significant challenges when it comes to introducing Amal to his parents. He makes efforts to delay this moment for as long as possible, and even though in the sitcom the reaction of his mother is slightly exaggerated (she ends up in hospital with a heart attack), it is not a secret that couples face difficulties not just from the society they live in, but also from those closest to them. Muna's parents are not happy to hear that she is dating a Jew, even though her mother is more supportive of her lifestyle. Her father, who is running in a local election, faces the possibility of losing both the election and the respect of his community if word spreads about Muna's boyfriend in the village.

It is important to mention that Mira Awad is not just a scriptwriter, but also an actress who played Amal in "Arab Labor". As she shared in one of her interviews, she found a personal connection to the challenges faced by Amal and Meir in their relationship because she, too, is married to a Jewish man. Therefore, it was important for her to incorporate this subject into her own created series, as Muna's love story also draws inspiration from her own personal experiences. Jews and Palestinians who marry each other are not only crossing societal norms but also defying the legal framework, as marriage and divorce in Israel are governed by religious laws that institutionalize the non-acceptance of such unions.<sup>93</sup> The rise or fall in the number of such marriages can tell us whether society is becoming more open to bridging religious, historical, and ethnic gaps or, on the flip side, is feeling insecure and trying to protect their own groups. Kashua and Awad may not offer a definitive solution or the ultimate answer

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<sup>93</sup> Karkabi-Sabbah, 295.

in this regard, but they do bring this topic to the forefront, emphasizing its relevance to people's lives and illustrating its potential real-world impact on Israeli society.

### **The criticism of the sitcom “Arab Labor” and “Muna”**

Regarding the criticism of these television productions, a significant portion of it originated from the Palestinian community, which viewed specific characters, scenes, and dialogue as an insult. Existing literature on this question is ambiguous. Critics and scholars often disagree if the authors of these sitcoms contribute to the reproduction of the unequal relationship between two groups or managed to introduce weighty and delicate topics moving the discourse in a slightly different direction. Marcelle Kosman believes the sitcom “humanizes the Arab characters, problematizes the value of assimilation, lampoons Israeli leftist politics and ridicules Israeli right-wing racism...” therefore “...produces critical, nation-building discourse”.<sup>94</sup> The well-known Palestinian Arabic-language newspaper al-Ittihad published an article where the authors by referring to the main protagonists Amjad of “Arab Labor” wrote following: “all his aspirations in life can be summed up as being and looking less Arab and more Israeli. He internalizes, reproduces, recycles and chews his inferiority endlessly . . . Arab Work is indeed a funny program (because it is always funny to make fun of the oppressed and marginalized minority), but it is mainly pathetic”.<sup>95</sup>

While Kashua's portrayal of Palestinian women offers a slightly different perspective, Mira Awad falls short in presenting a fresh and distinct depiction of Palestinian women. Instead, she emphasizes and perpetuates the stereotype of their oppression and the struggles they face in challenging patriarchal values and norms within their families and society. By avoiding the use of stereotypical characters, Awad had the potential to intervene in the negative portrayal of this group, creating a more diverse characters that could promote a more nuanced understanding of the female Palestinian citizens of Israel.

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<sup>94</sup> Kosman, ‘Comic Relief’, 32.

<sup>95</sup> Mendelson-Maoz and Steir-Livny, ‘The Jewish Works of Sayed Kashua’, 2011, 123.

## **Reinforcing established stereotypes or creating an intervention in the negative media's construction of "the others"?**

### **Stuart Hall and the system of representation**

According to a cultural theorist Stuart Hall the meaning people make of events depends on how it was represented. To put it differently, representation for him is an activity that does not occur after the event, but rather is a part of it, something that exists within the event. Hall believes that the system of representation plays a key role when it comes to the construction of meaning. After a while the event and the representation become so intertwined that the representation begins to appear natural and trustworthy.<sup>96</sup> Applying Halls theoretical framework to the cultural productions examined in this paper the findings suggest that the particular mode of representation of the Palestinian minority in "Arab Labor" and "Muna" does not create an intervention or try to subvert the meaning that already exists when it comes to established stereotypes about Palestinian minority. The process of changing negative established stereotypes about certain group involves several aspects. Merely boosting the representation of Palestinians on television screens to ensure diverse portrayals of minority groups in media and popular culture will not suffice. A vital component to ensure more fair and accurate representation of a minority group evolves around the individuals who representing this group and the manner in which they do so.

In earlier sections, we have already examined and determined that the presence of Palestinians in various television programs is increasing. However, when compared to other groups, Palestinian citizens are still significantly underrepresented when it comes to positive representation. Regarding the representation and the significance of Palestinians themselves in creating television content and offering their own narratives, the analyzed series in this paper suggest that within the current political context, Israeli society has become more receptive to the inclusion of Palestinian screenwriters and actors in the mainstream media. Hence, the question that remains is as follows: Do Palestinians, when given the chance to create their own content, perpetuate established stereotypes or intervene in the negative portrayal of Palestinian citizens in the media?

In order to answer this question a further discussion about Hall's perspective on the construction of cultural identity would offer valuable insights. Hall prefers "to situate the

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<sup>96</sup> Hall, 'Representation. Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices', 21.



debates about identity within all those historically specific developments and practices which have disturbed the relatively 'settled' character of many populations and cultures".<sup>97</sup> Palestinians who are often ascribed dual identity due to their historical heritage and current Israeli citizenship, offer a compelling empirical study. Hall regards identity as a dynamic notion. He believes that in the light of historical, linguistic, and cultural developments, identity cannot simply serve as a descriptor of who we are and our origins, but rather as a reflection of **"what we might become, how we have been represented, and how that influences how we might represent ourselves."**<sup>98</sup> Hall's observations on the connection between the portrayal of minorities and its influence on their self-representation are notably thought-provoking. He challenges the notion of whether members of a minority group can represent themselves objectively, uninfluenced by the dominant narrative of the state. He finds inspiration in Althusser's essay "Ideological State Apparatuses." According to him, the prevailing dominance of social forces prevents individual subjects from acting as autonomous agents with self-generated identities.<sup>99</sup> The Zionist ideology, if viewed through this theoretical lens, continues to exert a strong influence across multiple facets of Israeli society, potentially affecting the way Palestinians construct their own identities. This theoretical perspective forms the basis for a more in-depth discussion on the influence of cultural identity on cultural productions.

According to Hall, identities are constituted within, not outside representation. This, consequently, has an impact on how minorities might represent themselves, if we consider Hall's line of thought.<sup>100</sup> Should the fluid identity of Palestinian citizens and their self-categorization be influenced by the state's ideology, the cultural output produced by them should also be examined through this theoretical framework.

Taking Hall's perspective into account and examining these two television productions along with their creators, I believe, that the identities of Kashua and Awad, constructed within a strong Zionist narrative, influenced their choice of topics to wanted to explore in these series. Muna's character illustrates the inability to break free from the stereotypical portrayal of Palestinian women as being subjected to marginalization. Despite the effort to present this

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<sup>97</sup> Hall and Du Gay, *Questions of Cultural Identity: SAGE Publications*, 4.

<sup>98</sup> Hall and Du Gay, 4.

<sup>99</sup> Hall and Du Gay, 6.

<sup>100</sup> Hall and Du Gay, 4.

character as an independent, educated, and free-spirited woman, the author of the series evidently still feels the need to demonstrate the difficult relationship she has with her father, who doesn't want to accept her independent lifestyle. However, when Mira Awad was asked at the Other Israel Film Festival back in 2019 if this is how things are in the Palestinian village in Israel, she said that "We have changed. The Arab society in Israel has changed a lot in these 25 years, so girls today don't have to face the same problems".<sup>101</sup> In case of "Arab Labor" Kashua, according to him, intentionally utilize stereotypes to shed the light on the experiences and struggles Palestinian minority experiences in Israel. The question that remains is: will this medium raise awareness among the Jewish majority about these challenges and foster an improved relationship between these groups?

Hall believes that the reproduction of different stereotypes generates a perception that will circulate within society, shaping an accepted perception of this specific group. He presents three racial stereotypes: "the slave figure", "the native" and "the clown" that, on his view, are often used by the mass media in their cultural productions to strengthen and reproduce negative images of "the others".<sup>102</sup> Marginalized groups will often appear in newspaper articles or television programs as poor, uneducated, and suffering from the patriarchal system. Another widespread stereotype that media often reinforce is that ethnic minority groups are dangerous, strengthening the perception of the minority as violent, criminal, and therefore to be regarded as a threatening element in the society.<sup>103</sup> The exotic stereotype is a remnant of colonialism and the way, "the colonial subject" was represented in the past. The "exotic" characteristics attributed to the minorities will often highlight their "otherness", reinforcing the belief that they are different and do not belong to "us", leading to stigmatization and to power imbalance. One example could be emphasizing the group's lack of development, their primitiveness, or unique practices and traditions that set them apart from the larger community.

The humorous stereotype, termed "the clown" by Stuart Hall is particularly relevant for this paper given the humorous nature of the sitcom "Arab Labor". In his article "the Whites of their eyes" Hall argues that television programs such as stand-up comics where sexist or racist jokes

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<sup>101</sup> *Other Israel Film Festival 2019 - 'Muna' Q&A with Mira Awad.*

<sup>102</sup> Alvarado and Thompson, *The Media Reader*, 15.

<sup>103</sup> Shomron and Schejter, 'The Communication Rights of Palestinian Israelis Understood Through the Capabilities Approach'.

are reproduced by their own community members help to maintain inferior position between two groups. Hall believes that "telling racist jokes across the racial line, in conditions where relations of racial inferiority and superiority prevail, reinforces the difference and reproduce the unequal relations because, in those situations, the point of the joke depends on the existence of racism".<sup>104</sup>

Certainly, in the event that two groups, namely the Israeli majority and the Palestinian minority in our context, had the chance to develop an opinion or mutual understanding through direct communication, there would be a reduced reliance on constructing this perception through alternative modes of communication, or at least last one will not play such a major role. However, if there is a lack of intergroup communication and a social segregation taking place as it was described in the background chapter, the mass media becomes one of the main sources for the Israeli society to learn, understand and make an opinion about the Palestinian minority. Considering the prevalence of negative portrayals in the media, it is apparent that such arrangements contribute to the distorted portrayal of Palestinians.

Even with the interruption of various representations, achieving a balance remains elusive. In line with Stuart Hall's view of identity formation within historical and institutional contexts, it becomes evident that identity is "fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices, and positions."<sup>105</sup> Hence, challenging the negative media construction within the dominant Zionist discourse proves to be a difficult endeavor. Kashua, who wrote several books and articles on this subject, may have found a way to break free from this perpetual cycle. In 2014, he relocated to the United States with his family with no intentions to return. Despite the popularity and acclaim he received from his Jewish audience, his quest for identity entered a new phase, one to be explored within another historical and social context.

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<sup>104</sup> Hall, 'The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media', 18.

<sup>105</sup> Hall and Du Gay, *Questions of Cultural Identity: SAGE Publications*, 4.

## **Conclusion:**

This thesis looked in depth at two sitcoms: “Arab Labor” and “Muna” with the aim of gaining a more comprehensive insight into the representation of Palestinian citizens of Israel on national prime-time television. Additionally, it sought to discern the messages these creators intended to convey through their cultural productions when given the opportunity. From the analysis this thesis was able to conclude that Palestinian citizens of Israel in the media are underrepresented and overrepresented at the same time. Anat First, a researcher who has published multiple articles on the topic, has concluded that Palestinian citizens of Israel are subject to significant underrepresentation. In comparison to other minority groups in Israel, such as Mizrahim and women, a general visibility of Palestinian citizens of Israel decreased between 2003 and 2011 (from 3% in 2003 to 2% in 2005 to 1% in 2011 <sup>106</sup>). Nevertheless, with regard to overrepresentation, Anat discovered that the minority's portrayal through negative stereotypes saw a significant increase (21% in 2003, 29% in 2005, and 55% in 2011). <sup>107</sup> The emergence of television series like "Arab Labor" and "Muna," as well as similar television content on national and commercial channels in recent years, has been viewed positively by many scholars and the general population on both sides of the ethnic line. As an example, "Arab Labor" was incorporated into the curriculum at the Israeli police academy as a valuable topic for discussing cultural diversity, particularly acknowledging that police stations often serve as melting pots for various minority groups. <sup>108</sup> The consistent and high viewership ratings across all five seasons of the sitcom demonstrate a strong public appreciation for the show, solidifying 'Arab Labor' as one of the top-rated programs on the Keshet channel. <sup>109</sup>

Considering the historical and social circumstances, it was unlikely that such programs would overcome all political obstacles and make it to the prime time broadcast. The data concerning the representation of this group indicates that Palestinian citizens have not been fully accepted by the majority groups in various areas, including the media industry. Yet, it is important to mention the success of this pioneering television series might inspire others to produce similar content. Additionally, positive feedback from Israeli viewers suggests there is an opportunity to address a gap in the market.

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<sup>106</sup> First, 'Common Sense, Good Sense, and Commercial Television', 539.

<sup>107</sup> First, 540.

<sup>108</sup> Romano-Hvid, 'The Israeli Palestinian Minority on Prime-Time Israeli Jewish TV', 101.

<sup>109</sup> Kershner, 'TV Comedy Depicts World of the Arab Israeli'.

While investigating my second research question analyzing the message the authors of “Arab Labor” and “Muna” try to convey through their cultural productions, I aimed to uncover the subjects and motifs that held significance for the sitcom authors when they had a media platform to articulate their ideas. It is important to mention that this platform wasn't just any platform, but rather prime time with a substantial viewership. By conducting a comprehensive analysis of every aspect of the series, I identified recurring themes that held significance for the authors, frequently sparking substantial discussion and debate within both communities. Topics like identity, discrimination, distinct historical narratives, and mixed marriages were central in both sitcoms and other works that Kashua and Awad has created. Kashua and Awad attempt to intervene in sense-making practice by producing texts that will portray “the others” as less hostile, and more human. Both assumed the role of intermediaries, recognizing that, because of historical and socio-political circumstances, these two groups were often unable to engage in direct dialogue as equal citizens of the state. The analyzed sitcoms contribute to presenting a more balanced picture of Palestinian citizens, allowing Israeli viewers to immerse themselves in various Palestinian households. Through humor, they enabled audiences to share laughter with Palestinian characters, poke fun at themselves on occasion, but, more importantly, shed light brought on the difficult everyday realities experienced by this group as citizens of the predominantly Jewish state.

Through my third research question, I aimed to gain a deeper understanding of whether these sitcoms were reinforcing existing stereotypes or could potentially challenge the negative portrayal of Palestinian citizens of Israel in the media. Using Hall's theoretical framework, I determined that due to the comedic nature of the sitcom "Arab Labor" and its focus on reinforcing typical stereotypes that Israeli viewers already hold about Palestinians, it does not contribute to overcoming or altering these stereotypes. However, it is important not to overlook the fact that Kashua addresses highly sensitive subjects like Israeli Independence Day versus Naqba and criticizes the Israeli government for neglecting the Palestinian population, among others.

When considering the sitcom “Muna”, a similar observation was made. In addition to the storyline focusing on the main protagonists, Muna’s attempts to navigate Israeli society, Awad chose to highlight an ongoing issue within her own community, which is domestic violence. She also decided to talk about the persistent patriarchal family structure that continues to exist in her society, inadvertently contributing to the reinforcement of certain stereotypes. These

stereotypes, to some degree, have a negative impact on the way the Israeli majority perceives Palestinians, even though Awad just as Kashua did talk about the elephant in the room.

Drawing from these perspectives, I would like to assert my own conclusion, highlighting that an attitude rooted in bias and discrimination cannot be transformed by the media unless it is capable and willing to establish an alternative platform where Palestinian citizens are afforded the chance to counteract such stereotypes. To achieve this, they must also free themselves from the stereotypes imposed on them by the Israeli majority, which, within the current socio-political and ethno-cultural context, is exceedingly difficult to attain.

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