Ethnic Democracy and the Case of Israel: A Parallel Reading of Sayed Kashua's
***Let It Be Morning* and Sammy Smooha's "Ethnic Democracy"**

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Abstract

The Ethnic Democracy model hinges on a complex political principle that sanctions undisguised bias in favour of a specific ethnic group. Thus, it is a system whose hierarchical design must, by its very nature, ignore any notion of democratic equality. The organising principle of Ethnic Democracy holds that the dominating or majority ethnic group shall have exclusive access to power, self-determination, and will have superior status in the socio-political life of the nation. Over and above its moral shortcomings, the feasibility of this model for governing in deeply divided societies should be examined to understand how Ethnic Democracy variously affects different social groups and how its architects envision the state's commitments to its citizens. To that end, this paper has examined the case of Israel as example of this system. The social inequalities that separate Jews and Arabs are clear indication of an institutional bias that favours the Jewish ethnic group to the detriment of Israeli Arabs, despite Israel's reputation as an impartial parliamentary democracy. In order to develop a cogent line of reasoning with which to analyse Israel's ethno-democratic traits, this paper offers a parallel reading of *Let It Be Morning*, a novel written by the Arab Israeli writer Sayed Kashua, and the ground-breaking essay "Ethnic Democracy: Israel as an Archetype", written by the Israeli sociologist Sammy Smooha.

Keywords: ethnic democracy, Israel, Jewish-Arab coexistence, Sayed Kashua, Sammy Smooha

Introduction

The rise of Jewish nationalism and the establishment of a Jewish national homeland in 1948 had an unarguable impact in the narrative of Palestinian nationalism. The waves of Jewish mass immigration during the 19th century to Ottoman Syria and later to the Palestine Mandate marked the implementation of the Zionist ideology of entitlement with regard to the "Promised Land". The persecution and near annihilation of Jews during WWII had activated the urgency to identify a homeland for Jews, a place to safeguard their community and bring it back from the verge of extinction. But at the same time, Jewish nationalism disrupted the Palestinian discourse of national identity and their dream of establishing a homeland. In 1947, a plan for division was offered by the United Nations to create independent Jewish and Arab nation-states, but the plan was rejected by Arab leaders. The following year, on May 14, 1948, David Ben-Gurion, the head of Jewish Agency, announced: "the establishment of Jewish state in Eretz-Israel to be known as the State of Israel." (Clark, 1992, p. 20) The recognition of a Jewish democratic state was followed by the infamous Arab-Israeli War of 1948, which is referred to as *al-Nakba* (the catastrophe) in the Palestinian narrative. Israel's victory in this, their "War of Independence," and the contentious process of nation building resulted in the expulsion of a great number of Arabs from the new state of Israel to the neighbouring Arab countries. However, nearly twenty per cent of the Arab population remained in Israel and were subsequently identified as Arab citizens of Israel.

But the national identification of Israeli Arabs remained a politically charged topic since the majority of the Arab population thought – and still think – of themselves as Palestinian citizens in Israel. Though this population has been granted Israeli citizenship, they nevertheless drive a robust Palestinian nationalism within Israel, living in closed Arab communities and excluding themselves from the dominant social and political life of the state. The social exclusion of Arabs is a product of the failure of Israel's system for Arab integration and the manifest absence of Arabs from the social image of Israel. Oren Yiftachel states that this failure is the result of Palestinian indentitary concerns: to accept "Israelisation" would be tantamount to "accepting Jewish exclusivity and privilege and the Arab inferiority that comes with it" (Yiftachel, 2006, p. 95). Unfortunately, during the initial years of Israeli statehood, Arab citizens were victimised and mistrusted by both the Israeli government and Arab countries, being portrayed as spies and traitors. After the initial conflict, the state enjoyed a period of political passiveness among the Arab citizens until the wars broke out in 1967 (Six-Day War) and 1973 (Yom-Kippur War). The image and the attitudes of Arabs in Israel then changed, as Arabs saw the necessity to actively engage in state affairs. A shared comprehensive narrative of their social and political condition in Israel became consensual among Arabs even across the Green Line (Smooha and Peretz, 1982). The surge of Palestinian nationalism was anathema to the divisive political philosophy of the Jewish majority, so tension between Jews and Arabs intensified. Though Israel is the only practising democracy in the Middle East, the righteousness of its democratic system remains a point in question.

As per the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics of October 2019, 74.24% of the state's total population is Jews from all backgrounds, 20.95% covers Arabs of any religion other than Jewish and the remaining 4.81% are called "other," a classification that includes people who are not registered at the Interior Ministry as Jews, Muslim non-Arabs, Christian non-Arabs, as well as other residents of the state without a specific religious or ethnic affiliation. These figures explain why state's Jewish majority is able to monopolise political power and accumulate privileges in a state that was established *for* Jews. This Jewish nature of the state of Israel, even after more than seventy years of its establishment, continues to produce

discrimination in obvious and subtle forms. Claims to the same land tend to perpetuate and gradually escalate the process of Arab exclusion. Though Israel has proclaimed itself as a democratic state, the Arabs reject the validity of its democratic system. (Smooha, 1997, p. 203) The institutions of the state, its national heroes, its symbols and official holidays are exclusively Jewish, while the Arabs are neglected (Smooha, 1997, p. 206). The ethno-democratic nature of the state will always complicate and make unfeasible any peace process in Israel.

Israel's Arab Minority – Literary Documentations

The socio-cultural subjugation of the Arab minority and the inequality of citizens are still a reality in Israel. Since the late 1960s there have been inordinate attempts initiated by Arab scholars and writers to challenge the dominant narrative by articulating the lived realities of Arabs in Israel. They not only speak of social oppression in Israel, but also offer justifications for not taking part in the Palestinian Exodus of 1948 and staying back in a new country that disrupted their national aspirations. Sayed Kashua is one of the prominent Arab voices of Israel who fearlessly criticise the divisive politics of the ethno-democratic state. Born in the Israeli Arab town of Tira, Kashua grew up understanding what it is to be an Arab in Israel. As a Palestinian citizen of Israel, Kashua's novels and humorous columns speak of the calamitous future of Jewish-Arab coexistence. In 2014, Kashua announced that he had decided to leave Israel following the events of political and religious extremism that caused fatalities among Arab citizens. In one of the interviews that he granted at the time, Kashua stated that he had tried hard to assimilate to the state of Israel as much as an Arab possibly can, but reality prevailed and he no longer wants to try to conflate the narratives of two peoples whose worlds are far apart, to the point that they cannot agree to live together.

Kashua's novels explore the vicissitudes of Israel's political actions and their often aberrant and destructive consequences for Arab citizens. His novel *Let It Be Morning* (2004) spins around the uncertain lives of Israeli Arabs through the prism of one family. The novel encapsulates the bigotry of Israel's political decisions, inhuman treatment of Arab citizens, overriding militarism and their repercussions. Kashua's satirical style of narration highlights the inefficiency of the Israeli government to equally accommodate its citizens, irrespective of their ethnic or religious affiliations. He questions the democratic status of Israel by portraying the real plight of Israeli Arabs and gives impulse to the notion that Israel is a democracy only for the Jews.

Through *Let It Be Morning*, Kashua observes the discrepancy between Israel's democratic pretensions and reality. The gradual development of the plot begins with the return of an Arab journalist to his village and initially spotlights the miserable lives of Israeli Arabs. In this regard, the novel reflects the stark contrast between Jewish and Arab lives in Israel and questions the state's claims regarding social and economic equality. Through the detailed exposé of people's everyday existence, the model of ethnic democracy/ethnocracy is revealed as inherently unjust, redefining the state's image as a democratic country.

There have always been difficulties when attempting to classify Israel's political system. Portraying it as an anomaly on the world stage, political scientist Emanuel Gutmann observes that "Israel is usually, though not always, omitted from comparative analysis. Moreover, when Israel is mentioned, it is usually as a 'most baffling case' or 'a case by itself." (Gutmann, 1989, p. 295) This assumption has emerged from the notion that Israel's democratic traits do not fit the three types of conventional models of democracy, namely liberal, consociational and Herrenvolk. Thus, Smooha identifies a missing typology labelled "ethnic democracy" to

examine the causes of social cleavage between the Jewish majority and the Arab minority as they problematise Israeli democracy (Smooha, 1997, p.198). A parallel reading of Kashua's *Let it Be Morning* and Smooha's characterisation of Israel as an archetype of Ethnic Democracy will expose the bigotry in Israel's governance and social life.

Sammy Smooha on Ethnic Democracy

Israeli sociologist Sammy Smooha defines Ethnic Democracy in his essay "Ethnic Democracy: Israel as an Archetype" as "a system that combines the extension of civil and political rights to individuals and some collective rights to minorities, with institutionalization of majority control over the state" (Smooha, 1997, p.199). He has also identified some peculiar traits of those states that practice ethnic democracy, where all the political and social actions of the state are driven by ethnic nationalism.

1. The state observes the creation of a homogenous nation-state, a state of and for a particular ethnic group.
2. The state acts to promote the language, culture, economic well-being and the political interests of that particular ethnic group.
3. Minorities are treated as second-class citizens even if they enjoy citizenship and voting rights.
4. Minorities are feared as threats and are excluded from the national power structure.
5. Minorities are often placed under control.
6. Minorities are allowed to conduct a democratic and peaceful struggle for incremental improvement within their status.

Smooha distinguishes ethnic democracy from other models by the fact that an ethno-democratic state identifies critical ethnic differences though it observes some universal collective rights. He emphasises the inability of ethnic democracy to treat all the citizens equally because of ethnic non-neutrality. The state under this model of democracy will be owned and ruled by the majority group and minorities are involved neither in autonomy nor in power-sharing. (Smooha, 1997, p.200) Thus, minorities are blatantly excluded from mainstream politics.

A Parallel Reading of Smooha and Kashua

Kashua's novel provides a fictional version of reality to Smooha's theoretical perceptions of Israel as an ethnic democracy. The unnamed protagonist of *Let It Be Morning* is an Arab journalist who works for a Hebrew newspaper in the city. He is forced to return to his Arab village in Tira following the fatal attacks on Jews by terrorists from the West Bank. Though Israeli Arabs were not involved in plotting the tragic incident, they were considered a potential threat against the security of Jewish citizens. The protagonist nearly loses his job and rushes back to his village in the hope of being secure among his people. But his decision to return is unfortunate, as the village is seized by the Israeli military. The people of the village undergo considerable distress and difficulties as they are deprived of their basic needs and of access to the city. Kashua paints the image of a ruthless government whose actions reveal Arabs as a despised second class. The descriptions of the events move in a parallel with the characteristics of ethnic democracy as defined by Smooha, surveying the hopeless future of Jewish-Arab coexistence in Israel:

> I'm not saying they're all like that. But now, with the things getting more and more tense and all, it's just getting worse. They can't tell the difference between people like us, living inside Israel, and the ones living on the West Bank. An Arab's an Arab as far as they are concerned. I bet you thought I was from the West Bank too when you came in and saw me in all my dirty coverall. I bet you were scared. (Kashua, p. 13)

This excerpt from the conversation between the protagonist and a villager in Tira reveals the increasing tension between the Arabs and the Jews of Israel. There is a clear indication that the Israeli government does not recognise any difference between its Arab citizens and the Arabs from neighbouring territories. They see a potential enemy in every Arab, and Israeli Arabs are no exception. As the excerpt shows, the government fears that the terrorists will invade Jewish territories and unleash violence with the help of Israeli Arabs. This fear has also swamped the Jews with fear causing them to resist the assimilation of Israeli Arabs into their society. Kashua provides a clear indication that the state fails to acknowledge Israeli Arabs as citizens of Israel, and this attitude of aversion has caused Arab retraction from Israel's social assemblage.

But how does the incident discussed above indicate the ethnic nature of Israel's democracy? Given the fact that the Arabs are given Israeli citizenship and voting rights, how are they discriminated against in a democratic environment? Sammy Smooha discusses some of American social scientist Raymond Duncan Gastil's ideas in order to validate his argument that Israel is an archetype of Ethnic Democracy. In his article titled "The Past, Present and Future of Democracy", Duncan affirms that an Ethnic Democracy is the "definition of the state as belonging to a particular religious or ethnic group" (Gastil, 1985, p. 163). He also observes that several democratic countries that are currently considered as liberal or consociational are ethnic democracies, Israel being one among them. Thus the first indication of a state's Ethnic Democratic nature is that the state belongs to a particular religious or ethnic group. In the case of Israel, the state was legitimately established as a product of the Jewish cause and, as a result, the security of the Jews becomes the state's foremost priority, even many years after its establishment. As seen in Kashua's novel, though Israeli Arabs are considered citizens of the state, they are also seen as potential threats to national security. Smooha reaffirms this notion, stating that an Ethnic Democratic state will recognise ethnic differences though it does accord some universal collective rights (Smooha, 1997, p. 200). Similarly Kashua's novel is a protracted reflection upon the ethnic nature of the state of Israel and the effects this has on its Arab population. Passages like this abound:

> I was the only journalist who saw the fear in the eyes of the veiled women whose hearts would skip a beat every time someone was brought in, who would cry every time a shot was heard. I was there, and I knew that nobody had expected the police to react so harshly, so relentlessly. Like me, the demonstrators had always thought of themselves as citizens of Israel, and never imagined they would be shot at for demonstrating or for blocking an intersection. (Kashua, p.18)

Being an Arab, the protagonist was perhaps the only journalist reporting from the scene of an Arab demonstration in the Wadi Ara after the Israeli cabinet members appeared at the al-Aqsa Mosque. The protest was against Jewish intrusion into a Muslim area of exclusivity, so the Arabs had blocked an intersection to express their dissent and concern. The protest was violently curbed by the police, who shot at the protestors and caused several fatalities. Kashua's protagonist is traumatised by the police's unleashing of violence against a peaceful demonstration, and pities the dead and injured who truly believed that they were the citizens of Israel. The protagonist feels that the protestors would never have anticipated being shot to

death for a nonviolent protest aimed at registering their common concern. The divisive governance clearly sidelines the Arabs as second-class citizens, deeming them a burden and a threat to the majority group.

This trait of Ethnic Democratic systems is elaborated by Smooha, where he mentions the works of Israeli political scientist and activist Yoav Peled. Peled has accepted Smooha's classification of Israel as an ethnic democracy with some refinements. In his article titled "Strangers in Utopia: The Civil Status of Palestinians in Israel" (Peled, 1993), Peled distinguishes among three types of guiding principles in Ethnic Democracy, namely ethnic, liberal and republican. The ethnic principle provides preference to the Jews who are the ethnic majority. The liberal principle gives individual rights to all citizens, and the republican principle preserves special rights to people who actually belong to the community and contribute unreservedly to the common goal, which makes them the "good citizens". In the case of Israel, the Israeli Arabs are merely regular citizens of the state and not "good citizens" like the Jews because they do not contribute to the collective goal of the nation. They can enjoy liberal rights but they are denied republican rights because, as Arabs in a Jewish state, they cannot earnestly contribute unreservedly to Jewish ascendancy. Thus, the practice of Ethnic Democracy affects the Israeli Arabs in two ways. The application of ethnic principles makes their lives less significant than those of the Jews, and the denial of republican rights separates and excludes them from the core ethnic configuration of the nation and constrains their ability to be "good citizens" of the country. This comes across very clearly in Kashua's novel:

> Some of the journalists in the Hebrew press- non-Zionist left-wingers allowed themselves to lash out against the occupation and against the restrictions imposed on the Palestinian inhabitants, but I no longer dared. The privilege of criticizing government policy was an exclusively Jewish prerogative. I was liable to be seen as a journalist calling for the annihilation of the Zionist state, a fifth column biting the hand that was feeding it and dreaming each night of destroying the Jewish people. (Kashua, p.20)

In the quote above, the protagonist, despite his position as a journalist, is scared to report the subordination experienced by the Israeli Arabs. As Shourideh C. Molavi indicates (2013, pp. 23–26), the authority to criticise the political actions of the government is exclusively Jewish, and Arabs have no right to involve themselves in state affairs. Especially during the times of Intifadas or the Arab uprising, the entire Arab population of Israel was treated with disgust and mistrust. The Jews scorned them for protesting against a government that had provided them with citizenship, voting rights and a better standard of living, but the lives of the Arabs became more difficult as they were suspected of treason even in public forums. The status of their social life deteriorated and they were portrayed as anti-nationalists aiming for the destruction of the Jewish national homeland. The state was never sure about its Arab citizens and excluded them from almost all sectors that would define the core ethnic nature of the state.

The attitude of mistrust and social exclusion against the Israeli Arabs are apparently the weaknesses of Israeli democracy. Though the Jewish national homeland had withstood several social and political challenges, it is still irresolute regarding the assimilation of its Arab citizens. Smooha discusses the three weaknesses of Israeli democracy that complicate the equal accommodation of the citizens. These weaknesses are the incessant implementation of Emergency Regulations, suspension of civil and political rights by the authorities, and political intolerance. What makes Arab incorporation more difficult is that the state of Israel has declared itself a homeland for Jews, which automatically makes outcasts of the Arabs within

the state's borders. Thus, Hebrew is the official language of the state and Arabic is given an inferior status. The Law of Return allows Jews to enter the state freely and the process of naturalisation is inherent and seamless for the Jews. On the other hand, central immigration legislation excludes Palestinian Arabs and their immigration and naturalisation are limited and tightly controlled (Smooha, 1997, p. 205-206). These discriminatory practices manifest the state's unequal treatment of its Arab citizens, who are deliberately excluded from the mainstream social picture in order to advance the Zionist complexion of the state.

> Well, you know how it is. You've been, haven't you? You meet people. Your friends are active in the party, so you decide you want to be active too, but it's mainly because of how they treat me. Suddenly I see our problems. Suddenly I understand what it means to be hated, what racism and discrimination are. In the dorms, they make sure you're put into the Arabs' rooms, which are the worst rooms there are. One room for Arabs on each floor, to make sure there aren't too many of us in any one place, to keep us in a minority status even on the floor. (Kashua, p. 116)

This is an emotionally charged conversation between the protagonist and his younger brother who is a graduate student. When the protagonist returns to the village, he is shocked at hearing the news that his brother has joined the Communist party. He ridicules his brother for fancying a political ideology without much knowledge about it. But his brother's reply unravels the discrimination faced by the Israeli Arabs even in an educational institute. He states that he had very good reasons for joining the Communist party and that he was not peer-influenced. Being a victim of racist discrimination in the college, he realised what it is to be an Arab in Israel. The reality shook him and he experienced hatred and isolation. Though he was ignorant of the political propaganda behind the Communist Party, he sought refuge in its ideology of equality between Jews and Arabs.

In Kashua's novel, Israeli Arabs are constantly reminded of their inferior status amidst the Jewish majority. Israeli Arabs are racially, ethnically, economically and socially discriminated by the majority, a reality that demotivates them in their willingness to assimilate and integrate. This discrimination leads to a disparity in the treatment of minorities in a presumably democratic country. Smooha states that the Arabs are only an ethnic minority and not a national minority in Israel. However, in reality, Israeli Arabs are both an ethnic and a national minority and they are entitled to special collective rights in addition to their liberal rights as citizens of Israel. But Israel does not recognise them as a national minority thereby denying their rights to self-determination. Smooha also observes that the denial of national rights to the Arabs stems from the Jewish fear of losing exclusivity of their own claims to the land of Israel. He also states that since the Arab minority of Israel is a part of the wider Arab world across the Green Line, any nationalistic rights given to them may cause a cultural and demographic threat to the state of Israel. Unfortunately, the national minority status for Israeli Arabs is yet to be provided and the status as an ethnic minority is manipulated and used against them for subordination (Smooha, 1990, p. 410). Kashua's novel ubiquitously reflects Smooha's analysis. For instance:

> "The Israeli Arabs", I can hear someone say after the commercial, "never felt part of the State of Israel. They're really Palestinians, whose relatives live on the West Bank and in Gaza. The transfer of lands to the Palestinian Authority has spared Israel the enormous danger of a rising Islamic Movement and other nationalist movements from within…. They've always complained about being discriminated against and about their minority status, and we should be pleased that our democracy will finally have real meaning." (Kashua, p. 269)

In the closing part of the novel, the Arab village and its residents are given to the Palestinian authority in exchange for other territories. The seven days of the blockade was a pre-emptive action taken by the Israeli government to avoid any commotion from the side of the villagers. When negotiations were taking place between the state and the Palestinian Authority, the village was entirely muted and offered as bait to attain the state's political goals. The protagonist, like any other villager, knows the danger awaiting them in the future and expresses his fear and discomfort. The Israeli government was ingeniously disposing of unnecessary burden by exchanging the village, and it justifies its action by stating that it helps the Arabs by reuniting them with their relatives in the West Bank and Gaza. The Israeli authority glorifies its democratic stand in the issue but the protagonist disdains its political strategy as an attempt to get rid of the Arabs. Though they would be reunited with the Arab world, the protagonist knew that their future under the Palestinian authority would be more uncertain, insecure and more subject to underdevelopment. All they had wished for was an equal life in Israel, one marked by mutual respect and a civil tolerance of differences and incongruities.

Conclusion

The episodes that come to make up *Let It Be Morning* are a reminder of the intense ethnic nationalistic nature of the state of Israel. The traits of an Ethnic Democracy identified by Smooha are aptly dramatised in the novel. Therein, Israeli Arabs are considered potential threats to national security and their abrupt swap to the Palestinian authority confirms the state's preference for the Jewish majority. The situation raises two significant questions. What shall be the future of Jewish-Arab coexistence in Israel and what form of democracy shall ensure peace and harmony in the state? The post-Zionist narrative believes that the liberal and consociational democratic models will replace Ethnic Democracy because of their practicality and desirability. Yuvah Peled thinks that Ethnic Democracy will continue to disrupt the peace process in Israel by deterring political stability. He opts for a consociational model that will entitle Israeli Arabs to autonomy and constitutionally acknowledge the presence of two ethnic groups, negotiating their peaceful coexistence through mutual respect. However, Smooha states that the state of Israel will remain an Ethnic Democracy for the foreseeable future, as the Jewish self-righteous majority will prioritise the Jewish cause over any other. He states that the Jews will continue to preserve the state's Jewish nature and type of democracy, and that the process of coexistence will evolve positively due to the gradual improvement of Arab life and the negotiated response to Arab demands.

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