

Let It Be Morning

Sayed Kashua. Trans. Miriam Shlesinger. New York: Grove /Atlantic, 2006.
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The English word “transfer,” which has been incorporated into the Hebrew lexicon, has a particular meaning in Israel, one with a long and insidious history. It means, roughly, “expulsion.” The term “Palestinian-Israeli” also has a divisive meaning, because the state refuses to recognize its Arabs citizens (those who remained in Israel post-1948) as Palestinians and insists on defining them as Israeli Arabs. Conjuring up these two explosive notions, Sayed Kashua’s second novel, *Let It Be Morning*, chillingly literalizes the significance of “transfer” and forcefully dramatizes the sheer improbability of inhabiting a Palestinian-Israeli identity.

Kashua’s novel begins shortly after the eruption of the second

Intifada and the events of October 2000, in which thirteen Arab citizens were killed by Israeli police during demonstrations. The first-person narrator, an “Israeli Arab” who works as a journalist, decides to return to his native village because city life has become too expensive and fraught with racial tension. Signs like “Arabs out = Peace + Security” have proliferated over the landscape. Moreover, the narrator’s position at a Jewish newspaper has changed. His reports from the West Bank are now edited beyond recognition, with “every word double-checked,” and his very presence in the office elicits unease and suspicion.

Feeling increasingly unwelcome among Jews, the narrator imagines that life will be better in the Arab village. He wants to be in a place “where everyone was like [him]” and “Arabs didn’t have to hide.” But what the narrator finds after a ten-year absence is a fragmented society, increasingly isolated from the Jewish mainstream and alienated from the Palestinian inhabitants of the occupied West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem. Jews no longer come to shop in the village, gangs and crime abound, Palestinians from the Occupied Territories are treated like a sub-human species, and there has been a formidable Islamic revival.

One day, soon after the narrator returns, something unprecedented occurs. Without warning and without explanation, the Israeli military surrounds the village. No one is allowed to leave, and all forms of communication with the outside world are cut off. The novel goes on to describe how the narrator, his family, and the village in general cope with the siege. Not surprisingly, fault lines quickly begin to emerge, until finally it is every family for itself. People stock up on food; there is looting, rioting, and betrayal.

But just as the village teeters on the brink of total disaster, the electricity comes back on and the mystery of the siege is revealed. A comprehensive peace agreement has been reached between the Israelis and the Palestinians, and most of the Arab villages within Israel have been “transferred”—without the inhabitants’ knowledge—to the new Palestinian entity. Villages that were part of Israel have been placed under the jurisdiction of the new Palestinian state in exchange for the dismantling of Jewish settlements in the West Bank, and the citizenship of all “Arab Israelis” has been revoked. Transfer has exposed the inextricable relationship between Israeliness and Jewishness, and separated Palestinian from Israeli identity once and for all. Israeliness and Jewishness have become

completely and unapologetically interchangeable.

Let It Be Morning is a disturbing account of anti-Arab racism within the Jewish mainstream, and of the deep divisions within Palestinian society. Invoking and literalizing the concept of “transfer” becomes a means, in Kashua’s capable hands, of revealing the extremely fragile position of Israel’s Arab citizens. The novel highlights how, on the one hand, the minority population is compelled to emulate the norms of the dominant Jewish society in order to access sites of power. For instance, in order to survive in the Jewish world, the narrator denounces the Islamic movement, criticizes the Arab leadership in Israel, and expresses his gratitude every time someone tells him that “Israeli Arabs really ought to say thank you.” On the other hand, no matter how well the narrator adopts “the lingo of the military reporters” and emulates “Jewish” norms, an “Arab’s an Arab” and remains so “as far as the [Jews] are concerned.” While Arab citizens may be encouraged to appropriate dominant norms in order to “succeed,” they cannot—by virtue of their “Arabness”—ever become full and “loyal” citizens. Given these irreconcilable pressures and realities, which Kashua so skillfully fictionalizes, it is not surprising, the narrative intimates, that the fabric of village life unravels.

The book’s power comes from the blunt and jaded perspective of the first-person narrator. He is neither particularly likable nor admirable, but he is brutally honest. He is disillusioned by everything, and no one is exempt from his sharp eye: not the Jews, not the villagers whom he most often describes with utter disdain, not his wife, and, of course, not himself. A particularly relevant example of this unsettling mixture of perspicacity and lack of what one might term integrity relates to his periodic critique of women’s position within the village. On the one hand, he insightfully comments on the way village norms shape and monitor female behavior and even desire. Good girls, he tells us, are dissuaded from going away to university and encouraged to study at the local college. This way, “everyone knows what bed they slept in.” His wife is one of these good, respectable, and well-educated girls and wives, who, as the narrator tells us, “has never really had a chance to know the world outside the village.” And since his wife has never really seen the larger world, he continues, she does not “give much thought” to difficult questions about her own limited world. Such commentary reveals just how closely Arab women’s presence is monitored in Jewish mainstream society, and underscores the

narrator's critical assessment of the status of women in the village.

Yet the narrator's awareness and analysis do not translate into any kind of action or desire to change the way things are. Not only is he depicted as dragging his unwilling wife back to the village, thus ensuring that she will never really experience the wider world, but once there, he refuses to inform or include her in any of his decisions. And due to the decisions he makes, she is forced to stay in a place she hates and play the part of the respectable and obedient Arab wife. These seemingly contradictory characteristics—scathing critique and acceptance of the status quo—are what best characterize Kashua's narrator and help create a feeling of unease in the reader.

While the strength of Kashua's novel lies precisely in its ability to disturb with its critical account of life in an Arab village inside Israel, *Let It Be Morning* also suffers from its reportage-like language. Without the surprise ending and the suspense, the narrative style would become a bit wearisome. Kashua is at his best when the narrative flow is interrupted by vignettes from the narrator's past. It is in these short but evocative episodes, such as his sexual awakening with the one-time bully and now gang member Bassel, that one gets a glimpse of Kashua's great talent.

Sayed Kashua wrote *Let it Be Morning* in Hebrew and, as a result, the original novel has engaged a predominantly Jewish audience. This adds another level of "disturbance," since Kashua's perspicacious authorial voice addresses Jewish-Israeli readers *in Hebrew* and effectively urges them to reexamine their cultural assumptions and expectations. This subversive linguistic element is, unfortunately, lost in the English edition. Yet despite this loss, Miriam Shlesinger has masterfully translated Kashua's journalistic and colloquial Hebrew, and thus the novel retains a great deal of the original's critical force.