

Article

The Question of Nationalism and Belonging

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Abstract: This paper situates an analysis on the commonalities and ordinariness of Jewish and Muslim experiences vis-à-vis a critique on nationalism and belonging in the literature of Edeet Ravel and Mohsin Hamid, in addition to other writers. These literary writers are highlighted by an exploration of Eran Riklis' film *A Borrowed Identity* amidst the critical perspectives of Ari Shavit, Leila Ahmed, Edward W. Said, and Justin Trudeau. The focus on Israel/Palestine is complemented by addressing sustained issues of nationalism and belonging in America that reverberate on global degrees of awareness as to how religious degrees of belonging can be reconsidered in light of understanding instantiations of cultural mise-en-scène from nuanced degrees of awareness. In turn, a multifaceted unsettling of identity, religion, and culture is posited that vividly collapses distinctions between East/West in revealing highly different ways of contemplating perceptions of Jews and Muslims in the world today.

Keywords: Islam; Judaism; culture; identity; religion; secular; globalization; difference; nationalism; colonialism

1. Introduction

"Identity is our legacy
And not our inheritance
Our invention and not our memory"

—Mahmoud Darwish (Riklis 2014)

"Nationalist agendas, however, tend to resemble each other, especially when different sides in a territorial contest look for legitimacy in such malleable activities as reconstructing the past and inventing tradition."

—Edward W. Said, *Freud and the Non-European* (Said 2003)

The Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish considers identity through the distinct aspects of legacy, inheritance, invention, and memory that unsettle typical degrees of thinking of identity in correlation to belonging. His thoughts in this instance also serve as the epigraph that frames Eran Riklis' postmodern 2014 film *A Borrowed Identity*, which continually reconsiders the perception of identity through the relationship of Eyad and Naomi in contrast to such characters as Edna and Yonatan in exploring Jewish/Muslim and Israeli/Palestinian experiences in society and the nation. This film portrays a very unique representation of Israeli and Palestinian experience in that the main characters appear

very secular and quite bereft of nationalistic leanings, yet, could it be argued that this is more a commonality than is typically surmised or perceived? Edward Said's thinking on nationalism in *Freud and the Non-European* builds on Darwish's perspective in pressuring the issue of invention in regard to tradition and territoriality. This essay utilizes the perspectives of Ari Shavit, Leila Ahmed, Edward W. Said, and Justin Trudeau as critical foils to explore the cinematic example of Eran Riklis' film *A Borrowed Identity*, the literary examples of Edeet Ravel's *Ten Thousand Lovers*, Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, and further references to other cultural products. Through these perspectives, dimensions of Israeliness, Palestinianness, Jewishness, Muslimness, Arabness, and American identity will be problematized as to how these are very fractured and incomplete terms that perhaps often only describe one limited aspect of negatively trying to ascertain religious, ethnic, racial, and/or national singular markers of difference that are always only incomplete and unfinished, without clear definition, and are in many ways imaginary. An understanding of the irresolute sense of identity will positively turn upon Edward W. Said's analysis of this in *Freud and the Non-European* in the concluding section of this essay in fostering what I would argue as very new ways to comprehend these long-standing outdated ways of how the world is perceived as being split between the "East" and the "West".

In varied multifarious communities and nations in the world, there are many different ways in which Jewish and Muslim experience is expressed and understood in ranging from religious, secular, and atheist, to nihilist understandings of affiliation. Any of these degrees of affiliation could be approached as rigid and ideological, but perhaps the most common manner of affiliation that I have noticed is one that is cultural in transcending identity and belonging as exclusion. Religion is most commonly associated with belief and tradition, whereas secularity is perceived as being without belief, but what does it then mean to speak of secular Jews and Muslims? Is it possible to clearly demarcate religious and secular experience, or is there a continual interplay between these realms of experience and orientation to cultural community life? When I use the term secular or religion, these also need to be taken lightly, as I am only using them as common frames of reference, and within these semblances of commonality, I am pressuring how they can be understood. Religion and secularity are not static or singular monolithic ideas; they are manifestations of human consciousness that make sense of the world and are continually changing through how one perceives the self and other. Are *traditions* steadfast, or is there rather a relentless sense of inventing and reinventing tradition (to echo Said's epigraph), whether religious or secular, in trying to come to terms with how one's interpretation of Judaism or Islam holds weight from one's perspective? Equally, ideas on how the nation and identity can be defined are not simplistic or clear-cut, as this immensely depends on how one chooses to identify and *belong* in a relationship, group, community, and other socio-political facets. In most nations, there is often a lingering degree of disconnect between the populace and political power. Dogmatic and exclusionary degrees of belonging create a society and nation that is discriminatory and unjust, whereas open and inclusionary forms of belonging create a society and nation where difference, creativity, and multivalent understandings of culture can flourish.

In illustrating some different orientations to life and culture in Israel, Palestine, and amidst Jews and Muslims in America and México; I reflect on being in a bar in the Nachlaot neighborhood in Jerusalem where the vibes of house music chilled the humid summer air in a warm ambience of laughter and relaxing couples and friends having drinks, at a late night private house party in the Defence neighborhood of Karachi where procured Johnny Walker Black Label and local Murree beer sprung the 20 and 30-somethings to life amidst the sounds of late 1980s Depeche Mode and Tears for Fears, hanging out in an Italian restaurant in Polanco on a lazy Sunday afternoon in Mexico City where cloisters of families and friends shared bottles of wine as street musicians sang songs from The Smiths and Oasis, unwinding in a lounge in Ramallah with a superb glass of Palestinian wine where the sounds of Bat for Lashes permeated the air, or in an Irish pub in the Lower East Side of Manhattan as pints of Harp energized a group of friends on a mellow Saturday afternoon amidst the anthems of U2 that promised liberation. Jews and Muslims are living their lives amidst their families, friends, and lovers as any other person in the world.

These might appear as simplistic observations, but what needs to be carefully considered is that far too often, Jews and Muslims are simply identified through the media as being extreme in belief and adhering to stereotypical ideas of appearance that are perpetuated through a Western lens that remains rather Orientalist and colonial in fashioning arid assumptions of how Jews and Muslims look, act, and behave as pious and austere. In this sense, this essay will often reflect on the ordinariness of Jewish and Muslim experiences through a literary and cultural analysis of film and text in the representations of relationships that challenge how one perceives Jews and Muslims, and indeed one's self within degrees of belonging, identity, and nationalism. Certainly, there are many Jews and Muslims that adhere to religious doctrine, but there are also many other Jews and Muslims that have very different understandings of how they *belong* and live in ways that are culturally vibrant and open. This interpretation of film and literature is illuminated through aspects of cultural critique with direct correlation to examples of perspectival change in today's world. I have chosen these examples of literature and film with further exemplification of music, as these cultural products demonstrate different ways of understanding Jewish and Muslim identities as multifarious within a continually changing degree of cultural *mise-en-scène* that is simultaneously local and global. The selected cinematic and literary examples tread similar territory in considering how personal/intimate relationships evoke particularly nuanced ways to consider larger political and social issues of how Jews and Muslims are represented and misrepresented on local and national levels in Israel/Palestine, America, and on the global stage. Certainly, there are other literary and cinematic examples that explore similar issues in Israel/Palestine and America, and also films and novels that might counter these perspectives, but the point in thinking about these particular cultural products is to enter into different ways of thinking that disrupt how Jewish and Muslim identities are often considered and represented in the Western media through a preconceived lens. This lens is most often one that is rife with violence, death, extremism, piety, and fundamentalism. These issues are at hand as well, but the counter perspective of this essay is to demonstrate other facets of life, and in turn how these can be considered on a global level. The trajectory of this essay begins in Israel/Palestine, and then shifts to considerations of these and other dynamics in America and the world today.

2. Dancing and Passing Identities in Israel/Palestine: Ari Shavit and *A Borrowed Identity*

In Ari Shavit's splendid 2013 text *My Promised Land: The Triumph and Tragedy of Israel*, he establishes a very different manner of narrating Israeli experience as he writes in the chapter of his text "Sex, Drugs, and the Israeli Condition" on the nightclub Allenby 58 in Tel Aviv:

"They are very good-looking, these youngsters. Here is an Israeli success story few write about. The combination of sea and sun and markedly different gene pools has created a unique sensual beauty here. And the closed, intense space of Allenby 58 makes this sexy beauty all too apparent. They are also very intelligent youngsters—quick thinkers, quick responders ... Yet at dawn at Allenby 58 these youngsters so make a statement. Without uttering a word, they make a statement through their liberation, through their sexual openness and their rhythmic ritual. They make it in trying to create a space of their own that is ritualistic, lustful, and fun. On the dance floor and on the balcony and in the darkest recesses of the club, they desperately attempt to reach some sort of Israeli totality. In a consumerist era and in a place of constant stress that doesn't offer its young authenticity or meaning anymore. This is why that are so devoted to the ritual that is Allenby 58: the Ecstasy and the ecstasy, this house music and this house of fun." (Shavit 2013).

Shavit continues to write in regard to the nightclub Hauman 17 in Jerusalem:

"It's all upside down: it's Tel Aviv in Jerusalem, night in the daytime, a bacchanal on one of Judaism's holiest days—Rosh Hashanah, the New Year. Thousands are crowded in the cavernous hall of Jerusalem's leading club, proving they can celebrate 10 or 12 or 14 hours of house music without becoming aggressive, impatient, or rough. Proving that anyone

who thinks the new Israel is a fundamentalist theocracy doesn't know what the hell he is talking about.

Without the drugs it wouldn't have worked, but the drugs can't explain it all. Many factors are at work here. Israel is an immigrant society that has no deeply rooted, nonreligious conservatism. Israeli society is a survivor society that is hungry for life. Israel is a nation on the edge. Here, at Hauman 17, the outcome is a burst of energy unlike anything seen in London, Paris, or New York. So although this Shirazi after-party is an end-of-the-spectrum phenomenon, it says a lot about the spectrum itself. It says a lot about the cultural and emotional landscape of young Israel at the beginning of the new millennium. For what one hears on the dance floor of Jerusalem's Hauman 17 is the liberating roar of secularism. What one sees is the revolt of 21st-century youngsters against the demands and decrees and constraints imposed upon them by the Zionist project. No more, they say. Let us live. Let us seize the day.

Onstage, a performance begins that only a few years ago would have been considered outrageous: an ex-boy gets down on his knees to worship the enormous erection of a boy who is still very much a boy. Outside, it's noon, the high noon of a high holiday in Jerusalem. But no one in the roaring hall seems much bothered about the lewd worship ritual taking place onstage. For this is not what matters. What matters are the other things these young people worship: liberation, freedom, the breaking of every taboo. Leaving behind their inhibitions. Crossing every boundary. Living to the extreme. Waving their hands in the air, these sweaty, half-naked boys worship at the altar of personal pleasure. Waving their hands in the air, these slim, provocative girls worship at the altar of deafening delight. And everyone in the hall is trying desperately to fashion a nation from all this. Trying to fashion an alternative nation, an alternative reality, an alternative meaning. Rising up against Israel's past. Rising up against Israel's fate. Rising up against the Israeli condition." (Shavit 2013).

There is immense worth in reflecting on Shavit's description of Israeli society in this aspect that is distinctly contrary to narratives about Israel that are portrayed and perpetuated in the Western media. In Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, there are people similar to any other in the world who are forging their own cultural identity that is not dependent on religious or political spheres. Why are these narratives often excluded from discourses about Israeli life in the global media? How do Shavit's considerations of nightclub life in Israel become expressive of life that is so very significant in regard to thinking about alternative lifestyles and different degrees of expression through gender, sexuality, and cultural revival/dissonance that indeed might be even more liberating than forms that are perceived in Western venues? Is this only unique to Israel? Certainly not, as such clubs and expressions of cultural life are very abundant in such a city as Istanbul in Turkey. From the perspective of the "West", how are Istanbul and Turkey perceived? Eastern/Western, Islamic, Muslim, secular, betwixt and between? How is Israel perceived from the perspective of the "West": is that America, or Europe, and then again from what region, city, community, or *type* of person in America or Europe? Is Israel only a Jewish nation, a Zionist nation, a secular nation, or betwixt and between? Are there bars and nightclubs in Palestine? Most certainly, Ramallah has a vibrant nightlife scene that is as liberal and liberating as in Israel. Is Palestine only Eastern, Muslim, Arab, secular, or betwixt and between? How do these questions entirely revolve around the dynamic of perspective?

Within contemplating the very liberating dimensions of cultural expression in Israel that Shavit describes in his narrative, I am also reminded of different ways to think about and reflect on how the group psychology of religion can enforce distinct issues of oppression and discrimination in regard to women, sexual orientation, and lifestyle. One example is Sebastián Lelio's 2017 film *Disobedience* (Disobedience 2017), based on Naomi Alderman's 2006 novel of the same name, which focuses on an Orthodox Jewish community in London, England. These kinds of issues can also be reflected through Shavit's perspective in regard to Israel where he states in an interview with National Public Radio (NPR):

“And most important of all, they cannot impose their own values on the state . . . We cannot let ultra-Orthodox politics and ideas endanger our relationship with our American-Jewish brothers and sisters. We need civil marriage; we need openness to all minority rights, equality [for] women, gay rights, all these things which secular Israel shares. And Israel is doing pretty well on many of these issues but the ultra-Orthodox keep wanting to push us back to their values.” (npr.org 2013).

Shavit is stressing that there is a distinctive disconnection between ultra-Orthodox Israeli Jews and secular Israelis in regard to the openness of the society that he presents in his text *My Promised Land: The Triumph and Tragedy of Israel*, which I have referred to in this section. The tensions that this creates between religion and secularity in Israeli society need to be seriously considered.

Secular Israel is explored in the film *A Borrowed Identity*, which is based on Sayed Kashua's 2002 novel *Dancing Arabs*, where the Palestinian Arab protagonist Eyad, a perceived secular Muslim, is accepted into an Israeli school where he meets Naomi, a perceived secular Israeli Jew. Their relationship builds, and they fall in love with each other in a manner that initially transcends and dims societal and national conflict, since Eyad and Naomi fall in love with each other's personalities. Religious or national/ethnic differences are rarely mentioned as they become immersed in each other, and they are also represented as very secular individuals. Naomi has no initial qualms about approaching Eyad or establishing a relationship with him, despite how he is perceived negatively as Arab and Muslim, and subject to bullying by male peers in the school. Simultaneously, through the school's community service program, Eyad meets Yonatan, a secular Israeli Jew, who suffers from muscular dystrophy, and they strike a connection that builds into a meaningful friendship that is heightened through the open secular perspective of Yonatan's mother Edna. When Eyad visits Yonatan for the first time, their friendship is distinguished through listening to music when Yonatan plays Joy Division's global anthem 'Love will Tear Us Apart' ([Joy Division 1980](#)), as he then shifts to the Israeli New Wave group Rhetorical Band (aka Lehaka Retorit). When Naomi unfortunately ends the relationship with Eyad because of familial resistance and her obligation to join the Israeli army, the song 'Love will Tear Us Apart' re-emerges on the car radio as Eyad is driving away from her, having lost the first love of his life. It is of interest to reflect on the presence of this song in the film, as can also be correlated to the thoughts of one of the founding members of Joy Division; here, Bernard Sumner reflects on the global ubiquitous impact of Joy Division that places us in the Middle East:

“Joy Division and New Order are international phenomena. Our music has permeated the globe and I'm not sure how or why this has happened: neither group could be described as a conventional pop band churning out hits and earning lots of Top Forty radio airplay. Yet for some reason we've built up a vast and loyal global following that shows no sign of diminishing any time soon, even in the most unlikely settings: only recently, I was at home watching the news footage from the Middle East of people running for shelter from a missile attack when a teenage girl ran past the camera wearing an *Unknown Pleasures* T-shirt.” ([Sumner 2015](#)).

Unknown Pleasures was Joy Division's first album in 1979, and the single 'Love will Tear Us Apart' was released in 1980 ([Joy Division 1979](#)). It is fascinating to consider how this song serves as a point of resonance between Eyad and Yonatan, as it turns to reverberating on the dissonance that arises between Naomi and Eyad. I would contend that 'Love will Tear Us Apart' serves as a critical lever of intervention to not only contemplating the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, but one that also relates to how this film can be further interpreted in correlation to the intimate ambience of this song serving as a commentary on the immense significance that personal relationships can have on public and political spheres.

The *tearing* of the love of Eyad and Naomi is a microcosm of larger societal and political implications that mark identity in only perpetuating conflict and dissonance. The meaning of including Joy Division's 'Love will Tear Us Apart' in this film is also of interest to consider; while this could simply seen as Western post-punk music, this song and the image of Joy Division's most copied image

of the cover of *Unknown Pleasures* reiterate Sumner's observation that their music is no longer simply Western, and rather that it has permeated global cultural consciousness. The tensions within the lyrics of this song capture the resonance/dissonance in personal conflict, yet this can also be imagined to be a commentary on larger degrees of societal and global conflict.

Eyad's Palestinian identity is portrayed through *Arabness* (with Muslim identity being implied) as a form of identifying the other in Israel that is continually manifested in the film in societal contexts, but equally, it is distinctly diminished in the context of his private relationships with Naomi, Edna, and Yonatan (*Arabness* will also be further discussed as to problematic connotations in correlation to Israeliness). To this degree, Eyad's *Arabness* is negatively constructed through society and the nation, whereas in the intimate exchanges of Naomi, Edna, and Yonatan, his perceived societal identity is not seen or highlighted. The degrees of intimacy that are created between two individuals are the most fascinating aspect of this film, as the emotional cadence and degrees of closeness that is established through friendship and love enable individuals to transform. As the film progresses, Yonatan's health worsens, and Eyad begins to assume Yonatan's identity so that he can obtain work as a waiter in *passing* as Yonatan and write his exams, which enable him to graduate before his death. This also suggests that the identifying of *Arabness* is rather imagined through society in influencing individual perception of the other.

In this manner, Jewish and Arab identities become interchangeable in Israel/Palestine, which also correlates to the implications and idea of Ghassan Kanafani's 1969 novella *Returning to Haifa*, in which a Palestinian Arab couple is exiled from Haifa in 1948 without their baby son Khaldun, and he is raised by Jewish parents as Dov. When his birth parents are able to return to Haifa 20 years later, they find that their Arab son entirely identifies as a Jewish Israeli, and through this reversal of identification, Kanafani posits an exacting critique on identity that relates back to Darwish's insights on identity as invention and not of inheritance or *blood*. The paramount issue also remains in that humans are compelled to believe that another person's identity and culture can be easily determined, when this is often false.

Certainly, in *A Borrowed Identity*, Eyad is initially treated as Arab, and through his own conviction and degree of *passing* as Jewish and Israeli, he is able to levitate between *Arabness* and Jewishness, yet it is also interesting to consider that once he is more so *accepted* in Israeli society as Jewish, he chooses to reside in Berlin. In turn, this possibility might never have arisen if he did not inhabit *borrowing* Yonatan's identity. It could also be suggested that Eyad's decision to leave both Israel and Palestine behind revolves around the issue that he felt compelled to be in a neutral third space. This sense or feeling also correlates to the character of Changez in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, which will be expounded upon later.

Naomi loved Eyad, who was perceived as an unwanted or undesirable alien in Israeli society, and through societal implications, their *love was torn apart*. In further considering the particularity of the relationship of Naomi and Eyad and the Israeli/Palestinian conflict through music, it is also essential to consider David Bowie's song 'Loving the Alien' from his 1984 album *Tonight* (Bowie 2010). This song was reworked into a superlative arrangement on his 2003–2004 *Reality* album tour, and can be heard on the *A Reality Tour* album. In this song, Bowie criticizes organized religion, belief, and tensions of power and conflict in the Middle East through referencing Christianity, the crusades, Judaism, Islam, and Palestine. The title 'Loving the Alien' could be interpreted most directly as a critique on belief, but this could also be seen as a possible point of resonance between people in surmounting conflict in the Middle East. As this essay treads on the tensions between private/intimate and public/social spheres, certainly the rhetoric and realities of the alien, the foreigner, the undocumented, the unwanted citizen, the wanderer, and those that are displaced or living as refugees warrant our focused attention and thinking. How might more incisive degrees of communication in personal and intimate relationships foster greater degrees of acceptance and awareness of unknown others on a global scale?

3. Edeet Ravel's *Ten Thousand Lovers*: Figurations on Identity and Ethnicity

Edeet Ravel's 2003 novel *Ten Thousand Lovers* explores further tensions in Israel and Palestine through the relationship of the lovers Lily and Ami, and how the intimate and private space of their bedroom serves as a vehicle for posing a larger societal and national critique of Israel, which can initially be considered as Ravel writes, "It isn't attachment to the land that's the problem. It's what you do with your attachment." (Ravel 2003, p. 117). One is instantly led to consider that attachment is being questioned as to how one belongs, which can be related to problems of rhetoric that create an "us versus them", as Ravel further articulates in the novel:

"It gives you a safe family feeling to use that inflection: you're not alone in the world. There's something reassuring about saying 'our language' and 'our presence' and 'our secret service'. You get swept into these things. And you never really get them out of your system. Deep down you always think, 'our forces'. Deep down you always think, 'our country'. Deep down you always think, 'our failure'." (Ravel 2003, p. 176).

This becomes the problem of nationalist rhetoric that demarcates possession and simultaneously exclusion through those that do not adhere to rigid ideologies of language and country. In this sense, ideas of citizenship and identity are formed in leading to ways of thinking that instantiate Arabness and Israeliness as actually existing as a part of the self that can be experienced or perceived. Yitzhak Laor considers Israeliness in this manner in his review of Ravel's novel *Torture in the Bedroom*:

"Because Israeliness is the topic of vigorous debate in culture programs of all kinds, highbrow and lowbrow, in both the media and municipal auditoriums, and this hunt for the essence does not stop at the level of journalism or entertainment—there are already academic experts on 'Israeliness'—the easiest thing is to say that it doesn't exist. One could see it as part of a mourning process, a process that is inevitably accompanied by a large measure of narcissism. But in the Israeli context—as opposed to the French context, for example (what is 'Frenchness'?)—there is something rebellious about talking about an Israeliness that doesn't exist. To long for it, is to long for the impossible, for some kind of 'we' as the plural of 'I', and for an 'I' that is a little sampling of this nonexistent "we". From the outset, it was a form of mourning. Hence the nostalgia for "campfire songs" and the strong connection between 'Israeliness' and memorial days, terrorist attacks, and other events, which force the collective to rally around 'information'. This information, whether it pertains to the past or the present, always becomes information about 'us'." (Laor 2003).

Laor's thinking illuminates how nationalism and belonging is formed and sustained through his commentary on the rhetoric of Israeliness, or one could suggest similar problems in regard to Arabness, where national longing or nostalgia of a lost home propel forms of ethnic identity that are masked as religious problems that revolve around sacred texts in highlighting differences in the ideas of Israel and Palestine. However, perhaps there is also a further problem at stake in that Arabness has become an ethnic or racial indicator that is not directly correlated to Palestine unlike Israeliness, which speaks to being a part of the nation. In *Ten Thousand Lovers*, this issue is compounded by the Arab-Israeli character Ibrahim and his positioning toward Lily and Ami as a means for them to question what it means to *belong* in Israel within the dynamics of citizenship and national narrativity. A critical opening needs to occur wherein individuals can decathect the attachment to nation as a religious or political response that sustains rigid ideas of *difference*, and rather shift an independent sense of mind toward inclusivity that is bereft of rhetoric that alienates others.

Ari Shavit illuminates how Israeliness can be understood in a much more humanistic and emotional way, as he articulates in his last chapter "By the Sea" of *My Promised Land: The Triumph and Tragedy of Israel*:

"As I see it, Israelis are diamonds in the rough. And Israeliness is an iridescent kaleidoscope of broken identities that come together to form a unique human phenomenon.

Somehow, something quite incredible emerged in this old–new country. That is why there is an extraordinary emotional quality to our life here. That is why we are not only creative and innovative but authentic and direct and warm and genuine and sexy. That is why personal relationships here are exceptional and human contact is remarkable.” (Shavit 2013).

Through this understanding, Shavit reiterates my focus on the power of relationships as a paramount force through which societal and political change can be invoked. Perhaps this is an uneasy route that is compounded by many other dynamics, yet the most significant one revolves around a letting go of the strictures of steadfast degrees of thinking on how one is *supposed* to identify or belong. A sense of *letting go* of your identity can in turn create manifestations of awareness on different orientations to life that one might actually reside in with more vitality than one’s *origins* in forging positive fascinations of cultural *mise-en-scène*. Is this not supposed to be the real aim of what we are dramatizing, urging toward, and pushing for in this globalized world today? Why should current retreats into nationalistic tribalism sustain dissonance and disconnection when the intersections and passion of cultural *mise-en-scène* are all that we are beckoning toward?

A. B. Yehoshua’s magisterial 2001 novel *The Liberated Bride* manifests this change as a text that continually traverses and pressures the boundaries of Israeli and Palestinian identity through the Jewish-Israeli protagonist Rivlin and his platonic relationship with his Palestinian graduate student Galya, which is juxtaposed with that of his wife Hagit (Yehoshua 2004). Through Galya, Rivlin is able to reflect more incisively on his Israeli sense of identity, and in turn come to greater degrees of awareness about the position and plight of Palestinians. *Liberation* in this novel occurs on many levels, but it can perhaps most importantly be understood as *liberating* societal and mass psychological forms of consciousness that lessen how others can be understood and engaged. Equally, and most often in this novel, being Jewish or Muslim is presented as an incidental characteristic that is certainly perhaps much more common than that which is spun through the media on a global basis.

The issues of intimate personal relationships that are portrayed in film and literature parallel problematic societal dynamics that determine how Jews and Muslims are perceived through a very narrow and limited degree of perception. For instance, how does the relationship of Eyad and Naomi reflect on our own ambitions of where one belongs and how one identifies, and in turn how Jews and Muslims (whether religious or secular) are perceived in a nation from afar, as well as in the midst of one’s own society and nation?

4. Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*: Thinking through East/West in America and the World

In thinking further on relationships in regard to issues of nationalism and belonging, Mohsin Hamid’s 2007 novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is a work that focuses on the main character Changez (who is positioned as a secular or cultural Pakistani Muslim) and his relationship to America or the West in which a beguiling sense of intimacy is brought to the novel through Changez’s relationship with an American woman by the name of Erica. Via this relationship and the obvious analogical naming, the rub of private and public realms becomes paramount to Changez’s ongoing self-analysis of his identity as it exists in a third space that is a site of intimate exchange between Pakistan and America. Hamid writes:

“Such journeys have convinced me that it is not always possible to restore one’s boundaries after they have been blurred and made permeable by a relationship: try as we might, we cannot reconstitute ourselves as the autonomous beings we previously imagined ourselves to be. Something of us is now outside, and something of the outside is now within us.” (Hamid 2007, pp. 173–74).

Changez’s intimate relationship with Erica is captivating because of the emotional register that fragments one apperceived and imagined boundaries of self in both America/Pakistan and East/West. It could also be suggested that Hamid does not situate the boundaries of these two main characters

according to easily trod definitions of religious or nationalist orientation, and more importantly, they are not highlighted vis-à-vis the typical portrayals of cultural difference, but rather through one's degrees of "cultural bearing". One's bearing refers to attitudes in how one is resistant or open to unfamiliar or unknown worldviews and cultural orientations that are different than one's own. Hamid describes this further through Changez's observations:

"I had been telling you earlier, sir, of how I left America. The truth of my experience complicates that seemingly simple assertion; I had returned to Pakistan, but my inhabitation of your country had not entirely ceased. I remained emotionally entwined with Erica, and I brought something of her with me to Lahore—or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that I lost something of myself to her that I was unable to relocate in the city of my birth. Regardless, the effect of this was to pull and tug at my moods; waves of mourning washed over me, sadness, and regret prompted at times by an external stimulus, and at others by an internal cycle that was almost tidal, for want of a better word. I responded to the gravity of an invisible moon at my core, and I undertook journeys I had not expected to take. Often, for example, I would rise at dawn without having slept an instant. During the preceding hours, Erica and I would have lived an entire day together." (Hamid 2007, p. 172).

Changez's consciousness was changed and impacted through his personal and intimate relationship with Erica, as the value of their exchange altered his overall perspective in mourning for the loss of intimacy with Erica, which enabled him to see the world differently. When he was in America, he was confronted with how to keep their relationship afloat within the problem of her illness, which is not physical, but rather of the frame that, "No, hers was an illness of the spirit, and I had been raised in an environment too thoroughly permeated with a tradition of shared rituals of mysticism to accept that conditions of the spirit could not be influenced by the care, affection, and desire of others" (Hamid 2007, pp. 140–41). This could be interpreted as a critique of the American spirit of individuality, where others that are perceived or felt as too culturally different from one's understanding of the world are marginalized. Changez's marginalization from American society occurred through the event of 9/11 in the novel, where he is racially stereotyped as an Arab and rather automatically perceived as a Muslim fundamentalist when he is neither of these. He is a Pakistani man who might or might not be practicing Islam, he might be secular or atheist, he also considers himself no longer simply Pakistani or American, but rather existing in this third space of transformation as culturally hybrid or perhaps more precisely as having an unresolved identity in a positive fashion. However, in American society he is rigidly seen as an Arab and a Muslim fundamentalist, and slowly through the mass psychology of American society, Erica perceives him in a similar manner, and their relationship begins to deteriorate. At this same time, Hamid through Changez also discusses how America began to retreat into the dangerous illusion of the nostalgia for a previous time of imagined cultural homogeneity, which certainly became the situation in 9/11 America, where people were stereotyped according to simplistic perceptions of racial, ethnic, and religious identification and subsequently marginalized or excluded from the national *fabric*. Through the process of marginalization, there was a simultaneous rise of Islamophobia and anti-Semitism in America, which perpetuated hate crimes and the rise of conflict and violence. There is a peculiarity in America in how Jews and Muslims are confabulated on the same plane of discrimination. The intensity of heightened patriotism in post-9/11 America continues to reverberate nearly 20 years later through populist nationalism that fosters and sustains forms of Islamophobia and anti-Semitism amidst horrific acts of violence and killing. What forces continue to perpetuate these forms of violence and discrimination? Is this entwined with long-lingering strains of American Puritanism that admonish cultural difference through intertwining American ideals as inherently Christian and white? Is this an aspect of cultural hegemony in regard to perceptions of East and West? Leila Ahmed clearly expresses the problematic in America and on a global basis in this fashion:

“But what is needed now is not a response to the colonial and postcolonial assault on non-Western cultures, which merely inverts the terms of the colonial thesis to affirm the opposite, but a move beyond confinement within those terms altogether, and a rejection or incorporation of Western, non-Western, and indigenous inventions, ideas, and institutions on the basis of their merit, not their tribe of origin. After all and in sober truth, what thriving civilization or cultural heritage today, Western or non-Western, is not critically indebted to the inventions or traditions of thought of other peoples in other lands?” (Ahmed 1992, p. 237).

Ahmed’s perspective is crucial here in contemplating the continued problematic stance toward non-Western cultures that transpires today through reactionary degrees of nationalism and simplistic ways of bifurcating difference as Eastern or Western. Muslims in America are perceived negatively through origin as “Eastern,” that is inclusive to generations that were born in America; through continued discrimination and marginalization, this also extends to Jews in America on the negative imagining of inferiority that might revolve around biases according to perceptions of race, ethnicity, or national origin; of course Muslims are also perceived and imagined in very problematic similar manners. Are Muslims and Jews in America entirely accepted as *belonging* in the national Western narrative of American experience? In some communities and for some people this does occur, but on the national level, the situation is dire. The contributions to the human experience that has been abstracted as being “Western” or “non-Western” have blended together to a degree where neither is recognizable or distinguishable from the other. In the contemporary globalized world, to make distinctions on this level suggests human ignorance and blindness to the immensity of cultural interchange that has occurred and is occurring. There is no perspective of seeing or experiencing the world that is singularly within only one modality of perception of being Eastern or Western.

In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Hamid illustrates a finessed comparative cultural manner of thinking through misperceptions of the East from the West:

“You seem puzzled by this—and not for the first time. Perhaps you misconstrue the significance of my beard, which, I should in any case make clear, I had not yet kept when I arrived in New York. In truth, many Pakistanis drink; alcohol’s illegality in our country has roughly the same effect as marijuana in yours. Moreover, not all of our drinkers are Western-educated urbanites such as myself; our newspapers regularly carry accounts of villagers dying or going blind after consuming poor-quality moonshine. Indeed, in our poetry and folk songs, intoxication occupies a recurring role as a facilitator of love and spiritual enlightenment. What? Is it not a sin? Yes, it certainly is—and so, for that matter, is coveting thy neighbor’s wife. I see you smile; we understand one another, then.” (Hamid 2007, pp. 53–54).

Hamid’s argument illuminates Shavit’s observations on nightlife in Israel, and how general Western perspectives can distort perspectives of Pakistan, Israel, and Palestine as only being thought of in a singular sense as repressive countries. This comparison in the novel can also be contemplated in correlation to how Leila Ahmed speaks to the myth of something as the “Islamic world”, and that Islam is imagined as being “over there” from the American perspective as she states in an interview:

“... I no longer believe that there’s an Islamic world, because where exactly are the borders? Are they in Chicago? Where are they? Where does the Islamic world end and where does the West begin? Is it in Paris, or where is it? So I do think what happens in this country is going to be as much about the Islamic world as whatever happens over there. The Islamic world is no longer over there. That’s one thing. The other thing is, I think what we do, what we Americans do, will profoundly determine what becomes of what we’re calling Islamic world.” (Ahmed 2006).

This also stresses the point of the imaginary spheres of East and West that only aid in perpetuating the dangers of dissonance between people based on misperceptions of identity and where religions

and cultures are imagined to begin and end; real boundaries of religion and culture are only imagined. How do imagined ideas of Judaism and Islam impact consciousness in the world today as to how Jewish and Muslim identities are misunderstood?

5. Concluding Global Repercussions: Unresolved Identities and Living Commonalities

Amidst these struggles and problems of perception, inspiring voices of resistance and change are now emerging in America, such as with Rashida Tlaib being the first Muslim American congresswoman to be elected in August 2018. In an article in *The Guardian* entitled “My friend Rashida: far more than the first Muslim American congresswoman”, Khaled A Beydoun spoke to her innovative perspective and actions 12 years earlier:

“Her message was intersectional long before “intersectionality” was catapulted into the prevailing social justice lexicon. Fighting American Islamophobia was her mandate before the phenomenon became a catchy buzzword. She tenaciously challenged anti-black racism years before the Black Lives Matter movement mainstreamed it into popular consciousness. Rashida defiantly stepped up against the state, and land-seizing billionaires, to defend the rights of vulnerable elements in her community, south-west Detroit, which was predominantly Latinx.” (Beydoun 2018).

He further addresses the mood when Rashida declared victory in August 2018:

“Hip-hop, salsa, Detroit house, and Arabic music thumped from the speakers. The cafe walls, where the party was being held, were adorned with the work of local artists. There were no suits or gowns, just the squeak of sneakers and blue campaign T-shirts filling the room. Tlaib’s party felt like a real party, where millennials of all races mingled naturally with middle-aged and elderly supporters that were celebrating as the results rolled in.

Everybody in the room, black and White, Muslim and Jew, young and old, citizen and undocumented hung on to her every word. Her tears met with the joyful tears of so many more in the old office space converted into campaign headquarters. And people in the room celebrated Tlaib’s landmark moment as if they were headed to Washington DC to serve in Congress. Her message was broader than her proud identity as a Palestinian and Muslim American woman, and her mission went beyond serving specific ethnic or religious communities.” (Beydoun 2018).

Rashida has been able to create a space of resonance where different races and religions can come together in America. There are also distinctive degrees of connections between Muslims and Jews (whether secular or religious) in the literary and cinematic examples that have been discussed in this article in invoking commonalities of Jewish and Muslim experiences that can forge unity whether in Israel, America, or in any country in the world. This sense of unity and positivity entirely revolves around intimate personal relationships that have the power to deflate the rhetoric and influence of societal and national pressures that adhere one to suffocating illusions of origin.

A further theoretical aspect can finesse how Jewish and Muslim identity and *origins* can be understood in closely contemplating Edward W. Said’s watershed 2004 essay *Freud and the Non-European*, where Said posits a conceptual reversal of religious and ethnic origins of identity through Moses in positing Jewish and Muslim coexistence in unsettling forms of cultural lineage that disturb the imaginings of how religion and ethnicity have been associated with ideas of the nation. Said’s lens of inquiry on identity politics is crucial as he is unsettling the exact problems of nationalism and degrees of belonging, and in turn, his perspective lends paramount understanding in reflecting on religion and identity in these literary and cinematic examples, which also correlate back to Darwish’s thoughts on identity in the first epigraph, and how Leila Ahmed spoke to the problem of focusing on the “tribe of origin”.

Said stridently interprets the thought of Issac Deutscher as a means of thinking through Freud’s positioning in *Moses and Monotheism* as he articulates:

“Another, more cosmopolitan one is provided by Isaac Deutscher’s concept of the non-Jewish Jew. Deutscher argues that a major dissenting tradition within Judaism is constituted by heretical thinkers like Spinoza, Marx, Heine and Freud; these were prophets and rebels who were first persecuted and excommunicated by their own communities. Their ideas were powerful critiques of society; they were pessimists who believed that scientific laws governed human behavior; their thinking was dialectical and conceived of reality as dynamic, not static, and human reality for them was (as in Freud’s case) typified by the *homme moyen sensuel* ‘whose desires and cravings, scruples and inhibitions, anxieties and predicaments are essentially the same no matter to what race, religion, or nation he belongs’; they ‘agree on the relativity of moral standards’, giving no one race, or culture, or God a monopoly of reason or virtue; finally, Deutscher says, they ‘believed in the ultimate solidarity of man’, even though in the late 20th century, the horrors of our time compelled Jews to embrace the nation-state (which is ‘the paradoxical consummation of the Jewish tragedy’); even though, as Jews, they had once preached ‘the international society of equals as the Jews were free from all Jewish and non-Jewish orthodoxy and nationalism.’” (Said 2003).

Said established a very porous and dynamic understanding of race and religion that is enriched in contemplating a sense of human reality that is very much in pace with the dynamics that some of these films and novels are precisely exploring. Said amplified this further in qualifying Deutscher’s perspective in that this does not only pertain to the Jewish experience, but that this is broadly embodied in human consciousness today as he further stated on identity and the human condition:

“But I would want to qualify Deutscher by saying that this needn’t be seen only as a Jewish characteristic; in our age of vast population transfers, of refugees, exiles, expatriates, and immigrants, it can also be identified in the diasporic, wandering, unresolved, cosmopolitan consciousness of someone who is both inside and outside his or her community. This is now a relatively widespread phenomenon, even though an understanding of what that condition means is far from common. Freud’s meditations and insistence on the non-European from a Jewish point of view provide, I think, an admirable sketch of what it entails, by way of refusing to resolve identity into some of the nationalist or religious herds in which so many people want so desperately to run. More bold is Freud’s profound exemplification of the insight that even for the most definable, the most identifiable, the most stubborn communal identity—for him, this was the Jewish identity—there are inherent limits that prevent it from being fully incorporated into one, and only one, Identity” (Said 2003).

There is remarkable cogency in settling into full contemplation of how this can be considered in the context of this essay, since Jewish and Muslim identity can never be thought of in a singular manner, as has been discussed in these cinematic and literary forms, and this is certainly instantiated in reality as well. Forms of orthodoxy seek to create a purified singular idea of religious identity that has very little in common with human reality and desire, which is always multivalent, ambiguous, and dynamically always in flux and changing. The tendency to “resolve identity” is where the dangerous precipice falls, as this can only lead to sustaining and perpetuating conflict and dissonance that limits how an other is perceived from afar, and lacks personal and intimate engagement. The urge in current times to retreat into ideals of nationalism enables singular ideological understandings of race and religion that codify identity and inform mass psychology through religious and political power that is in essence often patriarchal, discriminatory, and oppressive.

The culmination of Said’s thinking arose to immensely poignant reverberations as he articulated in the concluding paragraph of his essay:

“Freud’s symbol of those limits was that the founder of Jewish identity was himself a non-European Egyptian. In other words, identity cannot be thought or worked through itself alone; it cannot constitute or even imagine itself without that radical originary break

or flaw which will not be repressed, because Moses was Egyptian, and therefore always outside the identity inside which so many have stood, and suffered—and later, perhaps, even triumphed. The strength of this thought is, I believe, that it can be articulated in and speak to other besieged identities as well—not through dispensing palliatives such as tolerance and compassion but, rather, by attending to it as a troubling, disabling, destabilizing secular wound—the essence of the cosmopolitan, from which there can be no recovery, no state of resolved or stoic calm, and no utopian reconciliation even within itself. This is a necessary psychological experience, Freud says, but the problem is that he doesn't give any indication of how long it must be tolerated or whether, properly speaking, it has a real history—history being always that which comes after and, all too often, either overrides or represses the flaw. The questions Freud therefore leaves us with are: can so utterly indecisive and so deeply undetermined a history ever be written? In what language, and with what sort of vocabulary? Can it aspire to the condition of a politics of diaspora life? Can it ever become the not-so-precarious foundation in the land of Jews and Palestinians of a bi-national state in which Israel and Palestine are parts, rather than antagonists of each other's history and underlying reality? I myself believe so—as much because Freud's unresolved sense of identity is so fruitful an example, as because the condition he takes such pains to elucidate is actually more general in the non-European world than he suspected" (Said 2003).

Said's focus on "Freud's unresolved sense of identity" capitulates a perspective that is immensely positive in opening possibilities of sustained degrees of coexistence that could embody vitalities of human interaction, as identity would not be felt, imagined, or perceived as singular, ideological, and rigid; but rather as overlapping, flexible, and expressive of sharing in the commonalities of human expression. There is also a very unresolved degree of thinking in this essay, as the purposeful intention was to dwell in the fragmentary states of these immensely different narratives and critiques on the human experience in trying to think about very different ways in which Jewish and Muslim encounters can be contemplated and refreshed in the mind.

Another manner in which to contemplate these concerns is from the global perspective of the current world leader of Canada, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who sets an exemplary stance of how difference and otherness can be positively considered in creating marvelous instantiations of coexistence that can in turn transform how one perceives others and the self. This is significant to contemplate as Trudeau is fostering a unique culture and society of inclusion in Canada that opens up ways to think about how degrees of *belonging* in a nation can exist in a very positive light. Trudeau reflects on an aspect of his own transformation that occurred via an after-college trip through Europe, Africa, and Asia, as he speaks to when he gave the 2018 Commencement Address at New York University (NYU):

"It was also a really important contributor to my continued, broader education. Because it forced me, really for the first time as an adult, to meet, engage, [and] befriend people whose views and experiences, ideas, values and language were very different from my own. When a kid from Montreal meets a Korean fisherman living in Mauritania, befriends a Russian veteran of the Afghan war, or a shopkeeper and his family living in Danang, interesting conversations always happen. Now, maybe some of you have talked about doing something like a great trip like that after graduation. But I'd be willing to bet one of the first things you heard was a warning: "You can't do that in this day and age. It's not safe!" But here's my question: Is it really just the issue of physical safety that makes our loved ones so anxious at the idea of us getting out there, or is it the threat that if we look past our frames—the frames of our own lives, of our own community's structured values and belief systems—to truly engage with people who believe fundamentally different things, we could perhaps be transformed into someone new and unfamiliar to those who know and love us?" (Reilly 2018).

In this vein of thinking, Trudeau builds to a critique of tribal mindsets and the inadequacies at hand in simply *tolerating* someone, as he articulated:

“There’s not a religion in the world that asks you to “tolerate thy neighbor”. So let’s try for something a little more like acceptance, respect, friendship, and yes, even love. And why does this matter? Because, in our aspiration to relevance; in our love for our families; in our desire to contribute, to make this world a better place, despite our differences, we are all the same” (Reilly 2018).

While this may appear as yet another simplistic perspective, there is also crucial profundity at hand in this way of thinking and action that reflects directly on some of the most positive dimensions of these literary and cinematic narratives that express the human power of relationships as a vehicle of transcendence to issues of nationalism, religion, and ethnic/racial demarcations. There needs to be a very dramatic shift in thinking about how one *belongs*, which has been pressured through the interpretation and analysis of these critical perspectives that highlight how these literary and cinematic forms can be understood as exemplary in forging very positive nuances of unresolved degrees of cultural *mise-en-scène* as perhaps the most appropriate manner of situating the human condition in the 21st century.

The issues and ways of perceiving or marking identity persist which are not static forces that control behavior and inform formulae of being human, as these are continually being altered and shifting through the will of people. The human power of relationships can alter very problematic ways of how the world was wrought. In just as much as the *inventing* of ethnicity and race arose through the immensely destructive affects of colonialism in identifying otherness; nationalism was and still is the embodiment of imperialistic or neocolonial power in trying to vanquish, utilize, and occupy; postcolonial struggle became the means to reconstruct identity and how one *belonged* through the precarious postcolonial nation-state; in turn, religion was also construed as a category of thinking that figured as an inventing of trying to comprehend and negatively consolidate difference through the inventing of the idea of religion as an affect of colonialism. On the contrary, religion or even being *religious* can much more significantly be understood as a form of social justice that is expressive of degrees of liberating how one is situated in the world. To this degree, it is never only entwined with belief, as it can be more significantly considered as representing the secular cultural energy, milieu, and residues of human creativity and inspiration of a particular place and time that embodies multivalent expressions of how people carry themselves in the world, which is much more particular than that which is viewed from afar as Jewish and Muslim experiences and encounters. The interstices of desire and imagination in personal relationships are representative of something much more nuanced and complex that is always in change, always unfinished, always *unresolved*, and always revealing the passion of human expression in challenging the strictures of religion, society, and the nation. If willing, the cultural *mise-en-scène* of recent generations can only create more indelible degrees of relationships that will move beyond merely simply *encounters* of Jews and Muslims, and to something that will more profoundly reside in ordinary lived experiences of *élan vital* that reverberate on shared commonalities across human communities, societies, and nations in the world.

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