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Talking About Sayed Kashua, Arab-Israeli Writer

Alanna E. Cooper | March 21, 2019

In preparation for Sayed Kashua's visit next week, I've been reading his work and talking about it with friends.

Recently, I had the opportunity to sit down with Doron Kalir for a lively conversation about Kashua's television series "Arab Labor" and his column in Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz*. Kalir is a Professor of Law at the Cleveland State University, who moved to Cleveland eight years ago. He is a popular guest at CWRU's Siegal Center, who often lectures on Israeli politics and society. I was curious to hear Doron's take – as an Israeli Jew – on the writings of Kashua, an Israeli Palestinian.

Alanna: Doron, I know you are very eager to meet Sayed Kashua during his upcoming visit. Tell me why.

Doron: I am a big fan. I love his writings! And I don't say that about many people! To be honest, until you asked I had not thought about Kashua's writing in any systematic way. But maybe that was not a coincidence. He writes micro-stories that seem disconnected, because we read as his life unfolds. We learn a lot from him that way.

Alanna: So, you followed his columns in *Ha'aretz* as they were published?



Alanna Cooper and Doron Kalir

Doron: Yes. I looked forward to reading them each week. They had a big impact on me.

Alanna: In what way?

Doron: As a Jewish Israeli, we were taught – from K through 12 -- a particular narrative about Arab Israelis. They were presented in a binary fashion: Either they were the enemy, who wanted to drive us out of our country, or they were thankful – as they ought to be – to us for allowing them to live as welcomed guests in our own land. There were no third options; there was no nuance: they were either for us, or against us.

Alanna: Kashua's work certainly complicates those portraits.

Doron: Absolutely. He is an Israeli Arab who lives in Jerusalem, who sends his kids to Israeli schools, who speaks both Hebrew and Arabic to his kids at home, who has Jewish friends, who writes in Hebrew, and who wants to be part of wider Israeli conversation. But it's not easy. He describes the troubles he encounters in his efforts to build his own "in between" identity.

Alanna: It's interesting that he never uses words like "discrimination" or "oppression."

Doron: Right. That's part of the genius of his writing. He describes the challenges of daily life: the difficulties raising kids, keeping dirty dishes out of the sink, meeting his deadlines at work, fighting the urge to smoke and drink. He writes in a way that everyone can relate to – regardless of their ethnic affiliation, or political vision.

Alanna: So the reader does not encounter him as an "Arab," but simply as another human being.

Doron: Indeed. While most Jewish Israelis see Arabs as strangers, his writing normalizes them: from the "other," they turn into the "neighbor." No one has ever done that before. There are other Arabs who write for *Ha'aretz*, but their writing is stereotypical, political, and quite expected. Kashua's is always surprising, and he's doing that while using a very apolitical tone.

Alanna: But it is political. Isn't it?

Doron: Of course! That's where his genius lies. When he does write about the injustices he encounters, it's always through a very personal lens, and always with humor. He knows that if you just complain about your situation, the reader will quickly lose interest. So, instead, he places this funny veil over his writing, which makes it so enjoyable to read.

Alanna: I laughed out loud at many points, while I was reading his columns (I read his writing in English translation, compiled in the volume [Native: Dispatches from an Israeli Palestinian Life](#)).

Doron: You see the humor best in his television show, "Avodah Aravit."

Alanna: Which translates into Arab Labor.

Doron: That's the literal translation. But in Hebrew, it has another connotation. The term "Arab labor" has become synonymous with "shoddy work." So there's an interesting irony in Kashua calling his highly successful television series, "Arab Labor." It's as though he is explaining: "You have always used the term in a derogatory way. But now you have judged my



work – my Arab Labor – favorably.” He totally reframes how we think about the term. But not by labeling it “politically incorrect,” and policing it. Rather, by simply using it as a new expression, he has forever changed its meaning. That, in my mind, is creative genius.

Alanna: So what’s his main point - in his show and in his writing? What is he trying to get at? What’s his answer to the political impasse?

Doron: As usual, with Kashua there are no easy answers. In fact, a lot of readers have complained that he introduces conflict, but rarely offers a resolution. It is true that, at least in his weekly column, he fails to provide a grand vision – politically or otherwise. But that is precisely where his greatness lies! By *not* offering a programmatic answer to the difficult political questions, he stays above the political fray in Israel, which is extremely contentious. Currently, Israeli society is so fractured, that any solution anyone might offer would be immediately opposed by the other party.

Alanna: So instead of offering solutions, he leaves his readers and viewers with a question mark.

Doron: Yes, by leaving things unresolved, his ideas can’t ever really be attacked. But they can be pondered, and discussed in a human way. That’s fantastic in my mind. I wish there was an Israeli-Sayed-Kashua-movement.

Alanna: What would that look like?

Doron: It’s grass-roots. It’s Arab and Jews talking about their daily lives, complaining about it, laughing about it, hanging out, drinking coffee and beer together.

Alanna: I know you are looking forward to speaking with Kashua when he is here. What do you want to talk to him about? What are you going to ask him?

Doron: When he moved to the U.S. with his family a few years ago, I wasn’t surprised. But I am surprised that he’s lasted here so long. He was a celebrity in Israel! He received multiple awards, and was recognized everywhere. Here, nobody knows him. I wonder what it’s like to be just another writer here. And why he hasn’t returned. And whether he plans to. Then I’m going to ask him about his current views about Israel.

Alanna: I’m curious what he’s working on now. Is he writing now about home from a distance? Or is he writing about his new home in the United States?

Doron: We’ll find out when he gets here. I’ll be waiting at the airport to pick him up!

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