

The Israeli Palestinian Minority on Prime-Time Israeli Jewish TV

Carmit Romano-Hvid

A young, charming, educated and well articulated Palestinian woman is invited on a date in the flat of a Jewish Guy. He wants to impress her and serves a meal with known Arab dishes such as Humus and 'Tabulee'. She is offended by him not being more inventive, and blames him for being a living example of what Edward Said described in his book 'Orientalism'. The guy, who never heard of Edward Said or his seminal book, asks her if this is a cooking book...

A Jewish young man sits at the back of a van. He is getting a lift by two Palestinians and becomes anxious as he does not understand the Arabic language spoken by the driver and the man sitting in the front seat next to the driver. The man at the front seat notices this anxiety and in order to make the Jewish passenger feel comfortable, he offers him in a heavy accented and broken Hebrew a 'snack'. The word for a snack in Hebrew is 'hatif'. It is very similar to the word 'hatuf', Hebrew for kidnapped. The story gets a twist as the Jewish passenger is getting extremely frightened and believes that he is being kidnapped...

The above comic scenes are parts of two episodes of the TV situation comedy series "Avoda Aravit" (Arab Labor) which is the focus of the current article. It was written by Sayed Kashua an Israeli Palestinian journalist, author and screen-play writer. This TV sitcom was broadcasted on one of Israel's commercial TV channels 'Arutz 2'. The first season was aired in 2007-2008 and the second season in 2010. The third season is now in the filming stage. Nearly 80 percent of the dialogue in the series is in Arabic, and it attracted considerable attention in both the Hebrew and Arabic electronic media & press in Israel. It had a high rating - the prime measure of success in commercial TV broadcasting. In the series, absurd humor and irony are being used in order to deal with 'sacred cows' that characterize the relationships and attitudes prevailing among the Palestinian and Jewish citizens of Israel.

This article is a case study of the series. Its main objective is to shed light on some of the reasons which led to the decision to produce the sitcom series "Avoda Aravit" and to broadcast it on Prime-Time Israeli Jewish TV. Furthermore, in this article, an attempt will be made to suggest possible reasons for the fact that the series was so well received by its audience and perceived as a success story. The perspective studied and represented in the article is that of the Jewish majority.

The rationale for making the series was provided in an interview with Udi Leon, director of special programming and multicultural diversity at Keshet (one of the programs provider to Arutz 2) in the Jerusalem Post:

In fact, bringing uncomfortable subject matter (albeit cloaked in self-deprecating humour) to the average Israeli viewer was part of the program's mission. The point was "to introduce content that is usually not easy to digest by Israeli society...Arab representation on Israeli television is what we call in Hebrew *al hapanim* [awful], "...We proved something that Israeli broadcasters were not willing to accept until today - that doing a show about Arabs in Arabic is possible on prime time. (Rosenberg, 2008).

As understood from the above, the series was a novelty. It will also become apparent through the course of the article, that the producers actually took some calculated risks when investing resources in such type of a program.

The phenomenon of originally and locally produced entertainment in Arabic to be shown on prime time commercial TV, targeting Jewish audience, has been non-existing in Israel until 2007. Commercial TV started in Israel in the early 1990s and has been targeting first and foremost Jewish audience. Programs in Arabic targeting the Palestinian minority on commercial Israeli TV are sent on the Fridays for only a few hours and very few resources are allocated to them. Therefore, the scheduling of the series was an untimely novelty and might even be regarded as a milestone. For the first time a Jewish audience was presented in a fictional thus semi-authentic way with the life of the Palestinian minority in Israel and were given a 'mirror' in which they could see themselves in relation to the minority. At the same time Palestinian Israelis could listen to Arabic and watch characters telling their stories and concerns on prime-time TV.

As mentioned earlier, the series can be described as belonging to the genre of a drama-comedy or a sitcom. It was suggested by a viewer who commentated on the program in a Jerusalem Post 'talkback' that:

The show marks a milestone, as the first sitcom featuring mainly Arab characters speaking in Arabic on Israeli prime time. Airing on Channel 2's Keshet franchise, *Avoda Aravit* blends The Cosby Show's family fun with a dash of *Curb Your Enthusiasm's* acerbic wit. Written by and drawing on the worldview of journalist/author Sayed Kashua, the show has been both lauded and savaged in the press.

In the following we will embark on a 'journey' that will make us more closely acquainted with Kashua, the series and the background against which it was created. The article consists of four main parts. The first part discusses in some detail the significance of the name chosen

for the series and the content of the series. It also includes information about the coverage of the series in the Jewish media and reactions to it in the wider community. Part two provides some background to Palestinian lives in Israel. It deals with existing attitudes among the majority Jewish population towards the Palestinian minority. The third part turns the focus to the man behind the series and the contribution of Palestinian artists to Israeli Jewish culture. It ends with a section about three major programs illustrating a history of programs about Israeli Palestinians on Prime-Time Israeli Jewish TV. The fourth and concluding part view the initial questions in the light of the topics discussed throughout the article.

1. The series

1.1 The term ‘Arab Labor’

The name given to the series in Hebrew - ‘Avoda Aravit’ (Arab labor) is a loaded one. The term ‘Arab labor’ was used openly by Israeli Jews in the pre- politically correct era to refer to a dodgy, unprofessional and incomplete type of work which is performed by Israeli Palestinians, as a way to emphasize their incompetency. It encapsulates the prejudice, loath, chauvinistic and patronizing attitudes that exists and persists among Israeli Jews towards Israeli Palestinians.

A viewer writing a ‘talkback’ to a fellow reader who does not know Hebrew explains:

It’s a joke... “Avoda Aravit” in Hebrew slang - is an expression for shoddy, poor quality and substandard work. The kind Israeli Jews understand to be typical of Arab productivity. They can only destroy - not create anything of lasting value.

The term ‘Arab labor’ resonates in the ears of many Israeli Jews as the antonym of the term of ‘Hebrew Labor’ (Avoda Ivrit). The concept of ‘Hebrew labor’ emerged in the early days of the Zionist movement in Palestine. Unemployment among the Jewish pioneers was high and a desire to get their share in the labor market, which was dominated by Palestinian workers who were the majority, was expressed through the slogan of ‘Hebrew labor’. ‘Hebrew labor’ was part of the idealism of the socialist stream within the Zionist movement of working hard and effortless ‘to make the desert bloom’ and to strengthen the Jewish working-class. This ideology encouraged the Jewish new-comers from Europe, who were not necessarily accustomed to physical work in general and farming work in particular, to be engaged in productive physical work. The slogan ‘Hebrew labor’ was also used to protest the Jewish landlords continued exploitation of the Palestinians as ‘cheap labor’. Although there were some emerging signs of solidarity among workers, Palestinian laborers were regarded by

many of the Jews arriving from Europe as poor, primitive and uneducated and therefore it was not expected of them to produce work of high standard and quality. The term 'Hebrew labor' was also the official name chosen for a recent significant commemoration music project for Israeli Hebrew songs since the early days of Zionism. The songs collected were given a new interpretation by the younger generation of Israeli singers and were made available commercially. So 'Hebrew labor' in opposition to 'Arab labor' is regarded as a positive symbol of the achievements and success of the Zionist project and its culture.

Giving the name 'Arab labor' to the TV series can thus be regarded as rather provocative and as a trigger to reevaluate some of the very deep rooted preconceived ideas. Israeli viewers both Palestinian and Jews understood very well the undercurrents enunciated by the particular name chosen for the series.

1.2 The Series in detail

The series tells the story of an Israeli Palestinian family named Aliyan which consists of the grandparents generation Abu Amjad and Um Amjad, their son Amjad a 35-year-old man who is the main character, his wife Bushra (a social worker), their daughter Maya and a little baby boy who joins the series at the end of the first season. Amjad is a journalist and works for a local Hebrew language newspaper in Jerusalem. His best friend Meir is a Jewish photographer working for the same newspaper. Amjad's wife has a female friend a Palestinian lawyer called Amal. As the series progresses a complicated love story with many 'ups and down' develops between the Jewish photographer and the Palestinian lawyer.

At the outset of the first season of the series the three generations of the Aliyan family share a house in a Palestinian village but as the second season begins, Amjad and his family move into a Jewish neighbourhood in Jerusalem. Each chapter of the series evolves around the Aliyan family, their close friends and work colleagues. In the second season a few more characters, mainly Jewish neighbours of the Aliyan family, are added to the plot.

The first season had 10 chapters and the second season had 13 chapters. Each chapter has a main theme which is taken from the large array of known jokes, clichés and stereotypes, prejudice as well as more serious matters such as historical memory, the Naqbe, terror, discrimination and racism, which, as mentioned earlier, are all an integral part of everyday life in contemporary Israel. In each chapter Amjad is making an attempt to cope with everyday situations which can be rather challenging taking into account his position as a member of the

Palestinian minority. His Sisyphean attempts to belong, to take part in, and to have equal opportunities within the majority Jewish society, result in very funny but at the same time extremely sad situations pointing out as to how difficult, complicated and impossible it really is to be an Israeli Palestinian.

1.3 Themes of the series

As an illustration of the overall storyline we could look at the series opening chapter. It deals with the topic of traffic. This is a hot potato issue as it is a 'well known' fact that Israeli Palestinians are bad drivers and that they take the laws of the road as guidance only. Within that topic the themes of the road blocks, check points and car theft were introduced as well. In each chapter there is a text and a sub-text and in the opening chapter the subtext was among other things the prejudice and the double morality of Israeli Jews who gladly go to Palestinian mechanics and car dealers in order to save money but that at the same time they still do not trust them, regard them as thieves and their work as substandard. The themes in the series operate on many levels, some are universal; relationships within families, parents and children, husbands and wives, women's roles in the family, intermarriage. Then there is the topic of traditions, holidays and customs. The demands of modern society, work, money and success, equal opportunities are also dealt with as well as relationship among neighbours and active participation in the local society. The macro world of the series takes us very quickly into the micro world of Israel, to all those issues which are typical of Israeli society; the way people treat each other, the aggressiveness, the chauvinism and the racism. And within this micro world there are those stereotypes which are particular for Palestinians (e.g. Arabs are afraid of dogs, Arabs cannot swim) and those which are particular for Israeli Jews (e.g. militarism, hypocrisy in politics). In a deeper level all the chapters of the series deal with much heavier questions such as 'who is an Israeli?' 'Where are the borders (Internal and external, geographic and human)?' 'What does it mean to be loyal (to one's friends, to one's country)?'

As the series progressed things were taken to the extreme both in relation to the themes brought forward and in relation to the level of ridicule that they were presented. "Avoda Aravit" provided ample evidence that with big portions of humour one is willing to swallow the most bitter of medicine. One of the most central themes in the series is related to the term 'Aravi machmad' in English a 'pet Arab'. Sayed Kashua has been using the term during interviews to describe and criticize the unequal relationships between Jews and Arabs in

Israeli society. The argument goes that what Jews really want is a pet - an animal that they can 'educate' according to their standards, and that consequently it will become loveable as a result of that 'education'. The metaphor of a pet also implies loyalty and devotion but no mind of its own. The bottom line is that this is the type of Palestinian that the Israeli Jew can deal with, someone who does not put any demands and accepts his master/owner's way of doing things. Another related term is 'mishtaknes' (a slang term for a person behaving like an Ashkenazi Jew) and the argument is that should one wish to be really integrated and successful in Israeli society, one should adopt the mindset of the Ashkenazim, the descendants of European Jews who are still perceived as the hegemonious group and culture in Israel. The protagonist of the series "Avoda Aravit" Amjad the Palestinian journalist makes an enormous effort to belong and to be accepted by the Jewish part of society, efforts which needless to say do not bear fruit. Furthermore, these efforts create and result in disrespect and ridicule within his own family and society. The unresolved identity crises of 'who am I?' 'Where do I belong?' and 'whether can I belong' is a red thread that goes through the entire series and brings the viewers at the end of the road to ask themselves; should it be that difficult to find a way to live together? Are we so different from one another? Are we willing to accept each other?

1.4 Coverage in the media and reactions in the wider community

The series was debated widely in both The Palestinian and Jewish Israeli press. A certain pattern in the cultural sections of the various carbon and Internet editions of the Israeli press was firstly to have a couple of articles prior to the sending of the series announcing its forthcoming and providing information about the plot, themes and actors. Secondly, in the days following the broadcast of the series chapters, TV critics would write commentaries evaluating the series. Then, as each season drew to a close, and the final chapter has been shown, summary article appeared in the major Israeli papers. In between, one could find interviews with both the actors, the screenplay writer the director, the band that wrote the music for the series and other involved in the production. This was an expression of on the one hand a genuine interest in the series and its makers, and on the other these interviews generated public relations to the series. In the electronic editions every article was followed by a long string of 'talkbacks' in which viewers of the series commented and argued with other viewers and aired their opinion about the series. The series was overall very well received. Jewish journalists were rather positive at the outset and as the series progressed the superlatives took over. Within the Palestinian media there was a lot of apprehension to begin

with and Kashua was deeply criticized for ‘hanging the dirty laundry outside the house’ and for making an effort to please the Jewish audience in the expense of the Palestinians. But as the series progressed views in the Palestinian media and the community at large became more in favour. The society debate that the series raised was expressed in a radio event in Radio ‘Ashams’ (the most listened to radio station among Israeli Palestinians) in which the Arab speaking public could engaged in a lively debate with guests in the studio. In addition the series also entered the gates of the Ivory Towers and in the fall of 2010 a whole day seminar devoted to the issues raised in the series were discussed by academics at the Arab-Jewish centre of Haifa University. Furthermore, academics around the world started using the series as a teaching aid in their courses about Israeli society. In a talkback by a professor describing the reaction of her Iraqi students in an American university she quoted them as saying “what is so amazing about this series, is that instead of laughing at each other, the two communities laugh together”. Such comments are not surprising as most audiences outside Israel regard Israeli Jews and Palestinians as bitter enemies and they would expect them to have very little in common not to mention mutual humour and irony that is equally relevant to both communities. The series has recently began to be used in a completely different context, namely in the Israeli police academy. The series has been shown as part of a course on cultural understanding. Since the Israeli police force is comprised of both Palestinians and Jews working together it was only obvious to use the series as a meeting point and a point of departure for discussion of cultural understanding and misunderstanding. Finally a recent, rather amusing development is that another popular satire TV shows on Israel Channel 2, has began ‘to correspond’ with “Avoda Aravit”. The show “Eretz Nehederet” (the Hebrew for ‘Fantastic Country’) is an extremely popular entertainment program sent on Friday night prime-time now in its 8th season. It comments in a satirical form on current events in Israeli society. As a respond to the ugly reality of Jewish religious leaders encouraging Jewish citizens not to rent accommodation to Arabs, the program included a sketch in which a liberal left-wing young Jewish couple in spite of their political ideals, is alarmed by the fact that a Palestinian family is moving into their building. They are then relieved to discover that it was actually the workers on the set of “Avoda Aravit” who were preparing the filming of one of the episodes of the series and not a real family moving in...Such a sketch receives its satirical value, makes people laugh and above all is only possible because the same audience that watches “Eretz Nehederet” is just as familiar with “Avoda Aravit” and the message that it sends.

2. Israeli Palestinians & the media

2.1 Not TV – Reality

In order to appreciate the significance of the series, we need to establish who is actually 'the Palestinian minority in Israel'. This generic name refers to the Arabic speaking population both Muslim and Christian which holds an Israeli citizenship and which resides within the 'Green-line' (the geographical border of the state of Israel before the Six days War of June 1967). This minority group came into being as a result of the 1948 War where parts of Mandatory Palestine became the Jewish state Israel. The disastrous consequences of the war for them, known as the 'Naqbe', had a profound effect on the way in which this group developed since 1948 as a unique entity. From being a majority population with aspiration for an independent state in 1947, they found themselves as a minority within a new Jewish state a couple of years later, detached from their relatives who now resided outside the Jewish state and in some cases displaced within Israel (see Khalidi, 2007 and Kanaaneh & Nusair, 2010 for a thorough discussion of the destiny of the Palestinians). It is estimated that at the end of the 1948 War the number of Palestinians living within Israel was about 155,000. It was mostly farming communities. By 2008 the Palestinian population has risen to about 1,200,000 of which nearly 93% were born after 1948. Israeli Palestinians therefore comprise today some 20% of the total Israeli population. It is a population which can be characterised by being urban, dynamic and young. It consists of a growing group of Intelligentsia, and has a strong desire to be treated as equal citizens. Reality however is still wanting and Palestinian Israelis often feel neglected, suspected and marginalized and that they constantly need to struggle in order to attain equal status. Other traits of Palestinian minority in Israel are that they are an indigenous minority, that they are both bilingual & bi-cultural, and that their people are in conflict with their country. As a subsequence of their unique position they feel threatened and discriminated against.

2.2 Majority view of the minority

The attitudes of the Jewish majority towards the Palestinian minority in today's Israel, could be exemplified through 4 main mechanisms namely, **segregation, exclusion, discrimination** and **fear**. These mechanisms are on the one hand established by law, and on the other they are also a prevailing belief among the Jewish population as the appropriate society order. Segregation of the Jewish and Palestinian communities in Israel manifested itself until 1966 by a military administration and various restrictions on the Palestinian citizens connected to it.

Even in 2011 segregation is still visible in some domains of the society. Primary and secondary schooling and geographical location are the most apparent expressions of it, but this segregation is also live and kicking in the realm of the popular mass media. On both Radio and TV there are programs divided by language; programs in Hebrew for Jews and programs in Arabic for Israeli Palestinians. The Phenomenon of originally and locally produced entertainment in Arabic to be shown on prime time commercial TV, has been non-existing until 2007 when 'Avoda Aravit' was aired for the first time. Exclusion of Israeli Palestinians from becoming equal and full participants in Israeli society since the establishment of the state in 1948, has been discussed more openly after the 'OR Commission', headed by the High Court judge Theodor Or was appointed to investigate the death of 12 Israeli Palestinians during the violent demonstrations in October 2000. A detailed overview of the different forms of exclusions can be found in the publication "The Or Commission Testimonies" (Ozacky-Lazar & Ghanem, 2003). Exclusion is also a mechanism which is emphasized in the literature concerning the representation of minorities in the mainstream Jewish media. It has been argued that one of the main features of coverage of the Palestinian minority in the Jewish media is simply non-coverage and that when items concerning that group are available, the coverage is likely to be of negative stories dealing with crime, violence and backwardness (Avraham, 2001, 2003). Israeli Palestinians are stereotyped, mentioned in criminal contexts or in connection with security issues, are marginalised, delegitimized (foreign and strangers in the country), and being patronised. Reports in news items from the Palestinian sector of society also tend to include misinformation (ibid). Furthermore, reporting on Israeli Palestinians in the Jewish media is in general based on: fear, disrespect & disregard, prejudice, ignoring the issue, ignorance, bias (ibid). It has to be noted however, that minorities in general are underrepresented in the Israeli media. Avraham (2001) suggests that this lack of attention could be partly explained by the dominance of Jewish, Ashkenazi, secular men who were born in Israel, and who are both healthy and young professionals in the Israeli media.

Discrimination against and fear of Palestinians among Israeli Jews appears in overt and covert ways. Discrimination against Israeli Palestinians both on group and on the individual level becomes apparent when looking at the financial and other resources allocated to the sector in Israeli society. Discrimination is also visible in the realm of quality educational opportunities and integration into the job market. The recent public writings of a large number of Rabies, warning against the rent of housing to Palestinians by Jews in Jewish

neighborhoods and towns, right-wing violent demonstrations against accepting Palestinians as neighbors and warning that ‘they will take our daughters’, coupled with law suggestions in the Israeli Knesset preventing Palestinians from buying property in Jewish villages are all current expressions of everyday occurrences of discrimination. Other laws, questioning the loyalty of the Palestinian citizens and forbidding the mentioning of the ‘Naqbe’ in schools’ teaching materials and of commemorating it in any public way are also in the pipe-line. When it comes to Palestinian professionals in any type of job and on any level in the Israeli Jewish media, the numbers are very limited despite the availability of qualified and talented candidature for the various positions.

Expressions of fear among Israeli Jews of their Palestinian fellow citizens, is expressed regularly through surveys appearing in the Jewish daily press. In a survey published by the “Centre for the Struggle against Racism” which appeared in both Ynet and Haaretz Internet editions in March 2006, it is stated that 63% of Israeli Jews see the Israeli Palestinians as both a security and a demographic threat. 34% of Israeli Jews regard Arab culture as inferior to Israeli (Jewish) culture, and 50% of the Jewish population is afraid and feels uncomfortable when hearing Arabic on the street. Such surveys appear in regular intervals in the Israel press and the answers do not seem to change dramatically over time, and if they do it is usually in a negative direction. An important recent work (Auron, 2010) contains empirical research on the attitudes of high-school pupils from both communities which reestablish the findings of the more general surveys.

2.3 The discourse of Israeli Jews about Israeli Palestinian

Common phrases in the discourse of Israeli Jews that could illustrate their anxieties concerning Israeli Palestinians are for instance: “Respect them and Suspect them”, “They hate us”, “They wish to throw us to the sea”, “They are Primitive”, “They are a 5th Colon”. These phrases are to be found again and again in talkbacks in the daily press and in the argumentations of right-wing politicians. In addition to the above phrases the terms “Arab Labour” (see clarification in the introduction) and “Arab Taste” which refers to bad taste in clothing; for example colours and styles that don’t match, or styles of interior design displaying plastic flowers and plastic decorations in the living-room, and having rugs and furniture cover of ‘screaming’ colours, are also in frequent use. The ultimate expression which encapsulates the negative feeling towards Palestinians among Jews in Israel is the slogan “A Good Arab is a Dead Arab” which does not need further elaboration. The first part

of the slogan i.e. ‘a good Arab’ was used by the Israeli Jewish writer Joram Kaniuk for the title of his book about identities, longing and belonging and about the conflict of loyalties created in between Jews and Arabs that one has to struggle with (Kaniuk, 2010). The book ‘A good Arab’ was translated into many languages including Arabic and was even sold illegally in Syria where it was very popular. The journalist Hadas Bashan writing a TV critic on ‘Avoda Aravit’ and its creator Sayed Kashua, relied on the fact that every Israeli be it Jew or Palestinian knows that slogan when she chose the title for her article. The slogan is pronounced in Hebrew: ‘Arvi tov ze Aravi met’ and the title she chose rhymes with it: ‘Aravi tov hu Aravi im et’ meaning ‘a good Arab is an Arab with a pen in his hand’. This is of course a twist of the whole meaning of the original slogan since she actually praises Kashua’s (the Arab) and the series that he wrote.

It is at the background of this rather bleak reality, Sayed Kashua managed to create an entertaining and thought provoking TV series in which he was not afraid to deal with the all those ‘hot-potatoes’ issues that characterise the self-understanding of each community and its view of the other.

3. Points for discussion

3.1 Sayed Kashua

How does one cope with being a minority whose people are in conflict with one’s country? How could one be integrated and receive a sense of belonging in a society full of prejudice and fear against your language, your customs, basically everything that you stand for?

These are some of the issues Sayed Kashua has attempted to discuss through the TV sitcom. The sitcom is an example of how Sayed Kashua, chooses to illustrate the fear, prejudice and misunderstanding which occurs between Israeli Palestinians and Israeli Jews. The tools he is using to illustrate these feelings and preconceived thoughts are humor, irony and absurd comedy. He is the man behind the screenplay and the dialogues (in both Arabic and Hebrew) in the series. His artistic work as a whole, can be characterized by being humorous, ironic, satirical, and thought provoking with regard to the place of Israeli Palestinians in the Jewish state. Questions of identity and belonging are very central in his work (Hochberg, 2010) and the treatment of these themes is reoccurring in the series chapters. It would be reasonable to argue that, one cannot fully understand the meaning of “Avoda Aravit” unless one keeps in mind the unique background of the screenplay writer of that

series. In a summary of a recent documentary made about the ‘phenomenon’ Sayed Kashua, he is described as:

...one of Israel’s leading columnists, novelists and screenwriter, Sayed Kashua feels he doesn’t belong. The Jews don’t like him because he’s an Arab. The Arabs don’t like him because he’s successful. The Arabs think he’s a collaborator. The Jews think he’s a drunk. He’s always the “other” and he’s always scared. This intimate portrait follows Kashua over seven years through the upheavals and events that change his life, wandering from place to place, from nation to nation, belonging neither here nor there. (Mandell, 2009)

Kashua belongs to the younger generation of Israeli Palestinians. He grew up in the 1970s-80s in the Palestinian town Tira, geographically located in the ‘Southern Triangle’, a region populated with other major Palestinian towns and close both to the border with the West Bank and to Jewish towns of central Israel. He spent his high-school years in an elite Jewish boarding school in Jerusalem. The language of instruction in that school was Hebrew, and Hebrew is the language that Kashua is using in both his journalistic and artistic authorship (Buchweitz, Mar’I, Fragman, 2010). After studying sociology and philosophy at the Hebrew university in Jerusalem he embarked on a journalistic career. Kashua has a weekly column in the Friday supplement of the Daily newspaper ‘Haartz’ and has published three books of fiction which received considerable acclaim. Many of the themes treated in his journalistic and literary work were echoed and reappeared in the plots of the series’ episodes so the series provided an opportunity to bring those topics in a popular and probably more digestible form to audiences that would not usually consume Kashua’s journalistic and literary work. It is apparent that his bilingual and bi-cultural competencies reflected in his literary work, were also put into good use when he wrote the script for “Avoda Aravit”. Kashua’s position of moving back and forth between the two communities, languages and cultures enabled him to provide a perspective which is unique and trustworthy.

3.2 Israeli Palestinian artists

Another, not less significant, element of the series is the fact that most of the protagonist and the main characters are Israeli Palestinians actors. The Palestinian community in Israel has contributed to the Israeli performing arts scene a number of talented people which have become well known and respected actors. Palestinian actors are today an integral part of Israel’s cultural life. Being bilingual provides them with the opportunity to perform in the Hebrew-language theaters as well as in cinema and television productions. Their roles are not necessarily limited to that of Arab figures. Palestinian actors like Salim Dau, Makram Huri,

Norman Isa, Klara Huri and Mira Awad to name but a few, are well known to all culture consumers in Israel and are regarded by the Jewish audience as first rank artists. The fact that many Israeli Palestinian first rank and well known artists participated in “Avoda Aravit” as the main characters, has in no doubt contributed to the popularity and appreciation of the series. The high quality of the artistic performance resulting from the choice of actors for the series can be seen as another reason for its success. The cast of the series consists also of high-profile and well-liked Israeli Jewish performers and the interaction of the two ethnic groups of actors on the screen created a unique experience. The series gave a platform to the younger generation and to less known Palestinian actors and on top of providing employment opportunities helped reestablish their position as important participants in Israel’s cultural scene.

3.3 A history of Israeli Palestinians on Prime-Time Israeli Jewish TV

In order to understand how the creation of “Avoda Aravit” was feasible in the first place as well as the consecutive success and popularity of the series, one should look at developments during the past 25 years in the Israeli Media, and evaluate the process as reflected in media production that Israeli society has gone through. Some comparisons between “The Big Restaurant” (see below) and “Avoda Aravit” broadcasted some 20 years later would serve as illustrations of the developments in both TV production and in the way the two communities regard each other.

A predecessor which also had a predominantly Arabic dialogue was a situation comedy show named ‘the Big Restaurant’ (the original name in Arabic was “Mat'am Abu Rahmi”, lit. ‘Abu Rahmi's Restaurant’). It was produced and broadcasted in the years 1985-1988 by the Arabic language department of Israel’s national TV Channel 1. A non-commercial TV channel and at the time the only TV channel in the country. The show was on air on Saturday nights over three seasons, and included 39 episodes. Its initiators were a Jewish screenplay writer and the Jewish head of programs in the channel’s Arabic section. The plot described the daily life in a Palestinian Israeli restaurant in Jerusalem owned by a Palestinian family and employing a group of Palestinian waiters and chef. The permanent cast comprised of Israeli Palestinian and Israeli Jewish actors, originating from Arab speaking countries.

‘The Big Restaurant’ kicked off in the period preceding the first Intifada; a time of escalating polarization between Jews and Palestinians. It was the days where Rabbi Meir Kahana and his racist political party Kach (which was later banned) were pouring incitement

against Palestinians, and the rationale behind the series was to demonstrate a positive picture of co-existence between Palestinians and Israeli Jews. A decision was made to produce a series that would emphasize friendships and good neighbors' relationship among Jews and Palestinians. The Palestinian characters in the series had to be presented in a positive way so that they would evoke sympathy among the Israeli audience and serve as an anti-incitement tool. The series had great success as sheer entertainment both in Israel and in Cyprus and Turkey and was also very popular in the Arab world.

Some 10 years later, an epic documentary project "Tkuma" (Revival) marking the 50th anniversary of Israel marked a shift in the representation of Palestinians on prime-time TV. The 22 hours series was sent on Israel's Channel 1 and dealt with most aspects of Israeli society since the establishment of the state. A one hour chapter was devoted to events surrounding the 'Naqbe' and another whole chapter was devoted to the lives of Israeli Palestinians. It was the first time that those issues were openly discussed on screen and although the program had high ratings, protests from the right wing government and Likud supporters in general was quick to appear (Pappe, 2005). The series was accused of being Post-Zionist in nature and even though one could argue that producing and broadcasting this series was a sign of development and that the Israeli Jewish media was now willing to deal with some essential controversies, the public at large was not fully ready to confront with what was shown on the screen.

Around the time that the first season of "Avoda Aravit" was aired the Israel Channel 2, another program, a 5 chapters' documentary series about the real life of the whole Arab speaking minority in Israel (Palestinian, Druze, Bedouins) was sent on the same channel. The series was called "Teuda Kchula" (Blue Card- the color of the identification card of Israeli citizen). It was directed and presented by Chaim Yavin, an acclaimed Israeli journalist who has directed a number of documentary series about burning issues in Israeli society. The series "Teuda Kchula" was very harsh in that it confronted the Jewish public with all the shortcomings and the wrongdoings of the Jewish state towards that minority. The underlying aim of the series was to reevaluate Zionist ideology in relation to the place of the Arab speaking minority in the Jewish state as Israel was approaching its 60th birthday. In a review article in the Guardian the series' is described and the main concerns are brought forward:

...This gives his interviewees the chance to air grievances and concerns. "I'm angry because I'm been promised full rights for 60 years and I still don't have them," says one

professor. "They [Jewish Israelis] want me to be 'nice Ahmed', a good Arab, who serves hummus, chips and salad and not an Arab that wants his rights," expands an Arab-Israeli rapper. "How can this happen in a democracy?" asks one bewildered man, who can no longer visit relatives in a neighboring West Bank village because Israel has put the separation wall between it and him... One young woman in the southern town of Beer Sheva really lets Yavin have it when he raises some of the standard clichés. "How am I threatening to you? Get over it! Grow up!" she fires at him in her perfect Hebrew which, she relates in frustration, causes Jewish Israelis to marvel over how "un-Arab" she is. "There are so many great things about you and I want to appreciate you," she tells Yavin to tell Jewish Israelis. "But I want you to appreciate me, too." (Shabi, 2008)

Was it a coincidence? Or has Israeli society come of age (as the woman quoted above urges) and was now ready to see itself in the mirror? Does it seem reasonable to suggest that 'the time they are a changing' as the lyrics of Bob Dylan's famous song tell us. In the series 'The Big Restaurant' of the 1980s' what one saw on the screen was the 'nice Ahmed' as referred to in the quotation above. Harmful and friendly Palestinians waiters served delicious food in a lovely restaurant and the harsh reality outside the door was not allowed to enter. It is beyond the scope of this article to make a thorough comparison between 'Avoda Aravit' and 'The Big Restaurant', but it seems that in 'The Big Restaurant', no controversies or issues which are at the heart of Jewish-Palestinian relationships were presented or dealt with. The creator of the 'The Big Restaurant' was a Jewish Israeli, and this implies a different perspective all together as 'things that one sees from here one cannot see from there'. It could be argued that 'The Big Restaurant', represents a majority perspective, and that 'Avoda Aravit' represents a minority voice not heard before. Thus, enabling a minority perspective on Prime-Time TV could suggest a development but not necessarily a paradigm change.

In 2008 when both "Avoda Aravit" and "Teuda Kchula" were broadcasted, this time on commercial TV, signs of development were apparent. The controversies regarding what should be shown and how are still there, but there is no question whether such programs should be made and broadcasted in the first place. The Israeli audience both Palestinian and Jewish is more willing to appreciate and even enjoy such programs.

4. Conclusion

It is really hard to conclude that when Israel's channel 2 approached Sayed Kashua and offered him to write the series they were convinced that it was going to be a success. When we talk 'success' in commercial TV we mean high rating, that a large audience would be curious and interested enough and convinced that they are going to be entertained. As there

was no precedence in Channel 2's history of other programs of the same type, we could say that choosing the format and the content was a gamble on their part to a certain degree. Having said that, it seems plausible that the fact that Kashua was already a celebrity in the making (i.e. a well known figure for his original and witty newspaper column, books and interviews in the media) and that his personality represents a young, educated, humorous and well articulated Palestinian who does not fit into stereotypes, was an important factor in offering him the job. The producers might have envisaged that after so many years with almost no mention or treatment of Israeli Palestinian concerns on Prime-Time TV, the time was ripe in spite or maybe even because of the racist and tendencies of exclusion that prevailed. It seems that their trust in Kashua's proven talent, combined with the availability of a large arsenal of talented actors who were very well suited for the characters in the series, have contributed to their decision to produce the series.

As for the question of why the series gained its popularity and success, some of the reasons mentioned above for producing it in the first place, are relevant here too. Kashua and the group of actors simply 'deliver the goods'. In spite of Kashua's concern with the deep existential and essential questions, which is a recurring theme in all the series episodes': "should Israeli Palestinians really accept the position of a 'nice Ahmed' or 'Aravi machmd' in order to receive their acceptance and rightly demanded share in Israeli society?" Kashua very cleverly avoid the issue of demands or complaints and through the effortless and naïve ambitions of the main protagonist Amjad he illustrates so very well the absurd situation that Amjad imposes upon himself in his ever growing attempts to please everyone and to cope with the prejudice of the Jewish majority on the one hand and its unrealistic expectations on the other.

Criticism in the series is very subtle and this is where Kashua's enormous talent is at work. The strength of the series is also to be found in the fact that it did not create antagonism, on the contrary. The participation of very well known and acclaimed actors who are not controversial personalities combined with the fact that the themes raised in the series are already debated one way or another in Israeli society created a sense of familiarity (i.e. we know the actors, we know what they are talking about and what is being referred to). In addition to the familiarity which could provide the audience with a feeling of security and openness, the series did not evoke feeling of anger or the need to defend one's position as

there were no directly articulated blames or demands expressed in the series. A viewer's summary can illustrate the type of feelings and thoughts that the series evoked:

I love this show. It is funny, humanizing without being preachy, and shows the racism, stupidity and backwardness of both Israeli Jews and Palestinians. With a few minutes of comedy and many awkward moments of having to feel what it is to be an Arab in Israel, I hope this show has an impact on both peoples.

There is a real danger here that Jews and Muslims are going to realize they have both been (historically and in the present) victims of bigots, and recognize the other's humanity.

This show is a wonderful cultural development in Israel. I hope it changes racial attitudes in the same way that *All in the Family* did in 1970s America.
(<http://www.mepeace.org/forum/topic/show?id=661876%3ATopic%3A31026>)

The series (like Sayed Kashua's other artistic and journalistic work) is multi-layered and full of self-irony. It was composed by a person who knows the society he lives in 'inside out' and is able to provide intelligent and insightful comments on the themes which are so central to the relationship between the Palestinian minority and the Jewish majority in Israel. With the vehicle of humor, the most painful, absurd and hypocritical issues that characterize the encounters between Palestinians and Jews in Israel are brought into the living-rooms of Israelis. They cannot stay oblivious to the truths that the series put in front of them. The popularity of the series proved that there is curiosity among Israeli Jews and a desire to know more about the lives of Israeli Palestinians. On top of providing quality entertainment the series was able to facilitate a public debate within the respective communities and created a dialogue between Palestinian & Jews since on the series' web-site a forum was available in which viewers could discuss the episodes in the series. This virtual 'meeting place' was used extensively by people from both communities.

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Carmit Romano-Hvid is an assistant professor in Modern Hebrew & Israel Studies at Copenhagen University. For her PhD in Applied Linguistics she studied at the University of Edinburgh and the Department of Modern Languages at CBS, Denmark. Her current research interests are Arabic-Hebrew bilingual schooling in Israel and Jewish-Palestinian encounters in the Israeli Media.