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Passing as hybrid: Arab-Palestinian teachers in Jewish schools

Liora Sion

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In this paper I examine how Arab-Palestinians who teach Arabic in Jewish schools appropriate performative identity strategies through passing as hybrid to gain inclusion into the schools. The paradox is that although these teachers are recruited specifically because they are Arabs, they are expected by teachers and students to conceal their Arabness. I argue that because of the ethno-national bright boundaries in Israel, which do not encourage integration but hybridization into roles defined by the state, Arabs cannot and mostly do not want to pass as Israeli-Jews but as good Arabs who do not reside beyond the binarism Jew/Arab but are in-betweens.

Keywords: hybridity; passing; Palestinians; good Arabs; schools; Israel

Introduction

And I wanted to ask her if she knows what to do. How she should behave. To make sure she knows how to take care of herself. I wanted to tell her to be careful outside, to pay attention to the people around her, that if she’s traveling by bus and her phone rings, she’ll know from the number on the screen whether she can answer in Arabic or ignore the incoming call. ‘Even if it’s me,’ I wanted to tell her, ‘filter it, until you’re alone, in a safe place.’ My daughter has the right Hebrew, and nobody would ever know. I wanted to tell her that we’re experiencing a difficult period, to remind her of the woman who was beaten up at the light rail station in Jerusalem because she’s an Arab, to tell her about the gang of young men who mercilessly beat an Arab sanitation worker from Jaffa. I wanted to make sure that she doesn’t get confused, that she knows that no matter how she dresses, speaks, what music she listens to and which school she attends, that she still knows she’s different, and that she can never be sure. Does my big girl know all that?

This quote by the Arab-Israeli writer Sayed Kashua1 (from an article in Haaretz on 3 July 2013) encapsulates the main issues and dilemmas regarding Arab passing and hybridity. Kashua asserts that in order to take care of herself, his daughter should know how and when to pass through wearing the right dresses, having the right Hebrew and knowing when to speak in either language. But can this Arab-Palestinian girl pass as Israeli? Is she encouraged to mimic Israelis when Israeliness is perceived as Jewish?

Passing is not just a politically viable response to oppression, Ahmed (1999) tells us. Instead, any identity involves passing in some form. It involves assuming an image that has no proper ‘fit’ with the structure of the subject. Ahmed suggests that
rather than simply understanding identification as something that has already taken place in the formation of subjectivity, we can consider how identifications perpetually fail to grasp ‘others’ in social encounters.

The concept of hybridity has been important for valorizing the identities of those who successfully occupy culturally ‘in-between’ spaces, such as Israel-Arabs. Hybridity as a point of view is meaningless without the prior assumption of difference, purity, and fixed boundaries; meaningless, argues Pieterse (2001), not in the sense that it would be inaccurate or untrue as a description, but that, without an existing regard for boundaries, it would not be a point worth making. Hybridity as a third term or in-between space is determined by the very structure of the colonial address that demands both the disavowal and affirmation of difference (Bhabha 1994). According to Bhabha (1994), the mimic man, the non-white native, does not ‘re-present’ but rather repeats and imitates the discursive effects of colonial discourse. On the one hand, the colonizer demands that the other approximate, through mimesis, the norms of the colonizing power, norms associated with whiteness. On the other hand, in order to continuously naturalize, justify and authorize his power, the colonizer must constantly maintain the difference between himself, as a white man, and the other. In other words, colonial discourse moves between the recognition of cultural and racial difference and its disavowal.

While there are two ethnic groups under the regime of the Zionist state, albeit with a great power differential between them, the Jewish hegemony as part of its colonial strategy divides Palestinians into ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Arabs. This key concept is prevalent in the Israeli discourse and following Cohen (2009) can be traced back to the 1948 war when Israel established a system of collaborators in the Arab community. ‘Good Arabs’ (or pet Arabs as they are sometimes called) are perceived as loyal to the Jewish state. Research has found that even children categorize Arabs into good and bad – based on their positive or negative attitudes towards Israel (Bar-Tal 1996). ‘Good Arabs’ are also expected to adopt Israeli features such as the Hebrew language, preferably without oriental accent, wear western clothes and should be secular or non-Muslim. At the same time ‘they should know their place’ and not aspire to pass as Jews or demand national rights or full civil rights.

While moderate Jews often divide Arabs into good and bad – for example, after fifty rabbis signed a declaration letter urging Jews to boycott anyone renting apartments to Arabs, a ‘moderate’ rabbi sought a compromise by dividing Arabs into good ‘loyal’ Arabs, who would be allowed to rent apartments, and bad ‘Israel haters’ (sonei Israel). For extremist Jews there is no ‘good Arab’ and as a familiar blatant racist slogan says ‘a good Arab is a dead Arab’.

In this paper I examine how Arab-Palestinians who teach Arabic in Jewish schools appropriate performative identity strategies through passing as hybrid to gain inclusion into the schools. The paradox is that although these teachers are recruited specifically because they are Arabs, they are expected by teachers and students to conceal their Arabness. I argue that because of the ethno-national bright boundaries in Israel, which do not encourage integration but hybridization into roles defined by the state, Arabs cannot and mostly do not want to pass as Israeli-Jews but as good Arabs who do not reside beyond the binarism Jew/Arab but are in-betweens.
This paper adds to the literature on passing and hybridity by offering a new meaning to the relationship between them. Contrary to Ahmed (1999), one does not pass through hybridity, but as hybrid. That is, the process of miming and approximating is not of the identity of another, but the identity of the hybrid.

Furthermore, analysis of the contemporary postcolonial discourse in Israel reveals that most of the research focuses mainly on oriental Jews (Shenhav and Hever 2002; Shoshana 2011). This paper aims to add to the postcolonial discourse by focusing on Palestinian-Arabs and not taking national discourses, agendas, loyalties and histories for granted, without problematizing them or making them an object of an analysis in its own right (Wimmer an Glick 2002).

**Research design and methodology**

This article is based on data that I collected in 2012 through in-depth interviews with ten Arab teachers from the north of Israel who are part of the Abraham Fund teaching initiative, which promotes coexistence and equality among Israel’s Jewish and Arab citizens.5 The research was approved by the Ministry of Education. I chose the teachers through snowball sampling; some of the names were given to me by Abraham Fund and others by the teachers. The interviews were conducted in Hebrew and lasted between one and three hours. They were recorded and transcribed. Names and other details were changed in order to ensure teachers’ anonymity.

Positionality and identities certainly played a role in how I was perceived, how people interacted with me, what they said to me, and what they did not say (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995). Being a Jewish Israeli equips me with background knowledge that facilitated the research yet may cause teachers to feel less comfortable saying certain things to me. However, the teachers felt eager to talk and during my long stay with some of them I felt that we opened up to each other.

An analysis of the emotional negotiations between researcher and respondents can illuminate aspects of reflexivity, giving new insight into how the social interaction between me and those I study shapes knowledge and interpretation (Esseveld and Eyeman 1992). As a child in the 1980s I studied the same amount of hours in Arabic and English from fourth to ninth grade. While I cannot say a sentence in Arabic, I remember how badly our Arabic teacher was treated. It was clear that she was the only teacher in school who had even less power than the students we had. These memories inspired this research.

**Passing as hybrid**

‘Passing’ is generally regarded as the ability of a member of a disenfranchised group to render ‘invisible’ those traits used to oppress them culturally and institutionally. Following Spradlin (1998, 598), ‘Passing’ is how one conceals normal information about oneself to preserve, sustain, and encourage others’ predisposed assumptions about one’s identity.’ Such actions have the potential to subvert traditional notions of identity and belonging, and create new forms of identification, opportunity and difference. Passing serves to reinforce hegemonic norms of race and ethnicity or whether it ultimately posits passing as a viable survival strategy, which has the
potential to disrupt the enclosures of a unitary identity (Ahmed 1999). Hence, passing can represent viable means of survival and self-transformation (Bennett 2008).

Homi Bhabha (1994, 318) states that in colonial societies mimicry emerges ‘as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge’. The mimic man – the non-white native – does not ‘re-present’ but rather repeats and imitates the discursive effects of colonial (or racist) discourse. In order to continuously naturalize, justify and authorize his power, the colonizer must constantly maintain the difference between himself, as a white man, and the other.

‘Hybridity’ refers to the cross-bred outcomes that characterize intercultural encounters and especially the dual and multiple modes of life involved in inhabiting liminal life spaces. The multiple ambivalent identities in these spaces are seen as emerging from the complex relations of inclusion and exclusion, translation, imitation and ongoing negotiations of becoming (Shoshana 2011). The discourse of hybridity thus tries to move away from the fetishism of boundaries toward a life experience of fluidity, towards a ‘temporality of passing through and between identity itself without origin or arrival’ (Ahmed 1999, 97–98).

The hybrid space is portrayed as enabling an alternative selfhood, or ‘another otherness’:

it is both a site for defying and resisting the hegemony’s demand that the self be eradicated, which means opposing the necessity to eradicate Arab otherness, as well as for constructing an alternative that does not insist upon eradicating Arab otherness. (Ahmed 1999, 97–98)

Thus, ‘hybridity’ is the outcome of intercultural encounters and of crossing boundaries, as well as of the hyphenated identities that they imply. In Bhabha’s (1994) account of hybridity as destabilizing, hybridity does not ‘belong’ to the mixed-race subject. Rather, hybridity is determined by the very structure of the colonial address that demands both the disavowal and affirmation of difference. The colonizing mission is a civilizing one: it assumes that the colonialized subject can reflect back and values the practices of the colonizer. And yet that civilizing mission must have its limits if it is to maintain the structure of authority that secures whiteness as the sign or mark of privilege.

Bhabha (1994, 90–93) describes the agents of hybridity as cultural brokers who talk from at least two spheres at one and the same time. These are the same agents that distance themselves from boundary fetishism, which itself creates camouflage and heresy. It would seem that the life sphere of hybrid language is the ‘third space’, an ambivalent arena that incorporates ‘identity effects’ that do not have a positivistic or binary nature.

The Palestinian citizens of Israel face strong social and symbolic boundaries that are vigorously policed and can only be crossed at a social or symbolic cost (Alba 2005). As a result, argue Lamont and Bail (2007), Palestinians define their collective identity based on particularistic criteria having to do with Islam and the Palestinian cause rather than with universalistic criteria that would be inclusive to Jews, such as a common Israeli national identity. Therefore Arab-Palestinians’ sense of dignity is
secure because it is derived, by choice, from external sources of collective identity, that is the greater Arab nation.

Bright boundaries do not encourage integration but allow hybridization into roles defined by the state. The ambivalence or contradiction underlying the assumption of the Zionist state can be restated in the following way: you cannot identify as Arab while aspiring to be Israeli. This contradiction, which actually constitutes the hegemonic category of ethno-nationalism, proves to be an effective way of policing ethnic borders (Ahmed 1999).

Hence passing as a Jew erupts the cosmological order. It imperils the Palestinians’ strong national identity and threatens the Jewish collective. Israeli public discourse seeks to mediate or resolve the contradictions of the position of Arabs (as these contradictions are understood through this discourse) by generating a form of hybridity that challenges and even assaults Arab-Palestinian cultural identity, making the process of coexistence more difficult. Arab teachers, who do not want and cannot escape their Arab-Palestinian national identity, pass as hybrids – as ‘good Arabs’, a social category that is imposed by hegemonic norms and helps ensure that subjects do not transgress ethno-national boundaries. Indeed, passing as a ‘good Arab’ maintains the bright social boundaries, yet it does not guarantee social assimilation and good Arabs are still marked as different (Ahmed 1999).

**The Palestinian citizens of Israel**

The Palestinian citizens of Israel are caught between the illusion of inclusion derived from Israel’s democratic regime and its discriminative characteristics embedded in its definition as a Jewish state. Caught in this tension, they are expected to accept their inferior status and to adopt a civic identity that politically rejects them and their collective memory (Al-Haj 2005).

They are socially excluded by powerful social and symbolic boundaries in the sites where daily life unfolds: residence, land ownership, labour market participation, housing and political representation (Ghanem 2002). As a group, they occupy Israeli society’s lowest strata. Sociopolitical boundaries are strengthened by geographic segregation (Yiftachel 2009). The social sites that offer opportunities for mundane encounters between Arab and Jews are limited. One major site is the labour market, yet ethno-class and occupational divisions separates the two groups (Lewin-Epstein and Semyonv 1993). Hence Arab-Palestinian teachers in Jewish schools offer a unique opportunity to study a social site in which Arabs are supposedly equal and even superior when it comes to Jewish students.

One of the sites of hybrid experiences that is able to simultaneously sustain conformism, resistance and imitation is the education system, which is divided into separate educational sectors while most of the Jewish students complete their studies without meeting any Arab teacher or student. The Jewish and Arab educational systems are not equal in terms of per capita expenditure for students, teaching hours, facilities, professional resources and special curricular programmes and opportunities. Conversely, the educational outcomes in the Arab system tend to be poorer than they are in the Jewish system (Abu-Saad 2004).
Throughout Israel’s existence, the message internalized by Jewish students is that Israel is a state of, by and for Jews; there has been no attempt to foster a civic culture in which the Arab citizens are a separate but equal component. At the same time, Arab students are called on to accept this situation and identify with the state, although its nature remains vague. Unlike Jewish students, they are not called on to play an active role in it. In this sense, the deeply divided society has produced a deeply divided curriculum (Al-Haj 2005).

The current curriculum still employs mechanisms of exclusion towards the Arab minority and their collective narrative. Although the main theme of the curriculum for Jewish schools focuses on national content, the curriculum in Arab schools has been sanitized of any national content. For example, the Nakba (‘catastrophe’ in Arabic), which represents for Palestinians the loss of the homeland in 1948, is ignored by the Jewish-Israeli narrative (Sa’di 2002). In 2011, a new legislation, known as the Nakba law, prohibits any state institution or state-funded organization to mention the Nakba and hence infringes on the Palestinian-Arab minority’s right to free speech and equality with regard to its historical memory.

Bar-Tal (1998) concluded that the textbooks in Jewish schools reflect the ‘intractable conflict’ in which the education system creates an ethos that supports the continuity of the conflict and produces psychological conditions that enable students to cope successfully with a state of conflict. The curriculum in Jewish schools is based strictly on primordial-particularistic principles that obstruct the possibility for alternative narratives. Studies of Israeli Jewish textbooks and children’s literature find Palestinians and Arabs to be portrayed in many instances as ‘murders’, ‘rioters’ and backward (Al-Haj 2005).

### Arabic language in Israel

Although Arabic, the language used by Arab Palestinians who make up a fifth of the population of Israel, has a formal status as the second official language of Israel, it is marginalized, as are Arab citizens. To speak Arabic is to mark oneself as an outsider to the state.

The discourse concerning the issue of Arabic studies in Israel centres on notions of communicating with the ‘alien’ and of ‘understanding the other side’ and portrays Arabic as the ‘language of the enemy’. Arabic studies have been subjugated to the needs of the defence establishment, rather than being taught from a cultural and linguistic point of view. The Military Intelligence vigorously lobbies to strengthen Arabic instruction at Jewish schools. Although officially Arabic language is compulsory as a second foreign language in Jewish schools, only a quarter of the students study it. Only 13% of Arabic teachers are Arabs.

In 2010, a new government programme introduced a pilot initiative in schools in northern Israel in which Arabic language classes are compulsory in the fifth and sixth grade. The programme was developed by Abraham Fund, which promotes coexistence and equality among Israel’s Jewish and Arab citizens. This programme is currently studied among 23,000 students in 220 elementary schools in Israel, most of them in the north. The students learn twice a week in one-hour classes (Landau Tasseron et al., 2012).
Abraham Fund-developed *Ya Salam* (‘How Fantastic’ in Arabic) curriculum is based on learning Arabic language and culture in order to create ‘an honest and informed dialogue between the two communities, in an atmosphere of cooperation and mutual respect’. Most teachers in the programme are Arabs and are selected and trained by the Abraham Fund initiatives in cooperation with the Ministry of Education (Sion forthcoming).

**The teachers**

The teachers in this study live in the north of Israel, yet they vary in gender, religion and class. Nine are Muslims and one Christian. Two come from upper-middle-class families in a mixed Jewish-Arab city while the others live in villages. All the teachers assimilate into the dominant Jewish culture in their modes of dress and style of speech. Two of the teachers are men. The low number of men reflects the low number of male teachers in Abraham Fund’s programme.

For women, working as teachers was almost the only job option and teaching in Jewish schools is especially prestigious because they are perceived as more professional and career oriented. Jamila said: ‘You are more respected if you teach in a Jewish school because there are many teachers in the Arab sector, about two teachers per student and usually those who were bad in school become teacher.’ Jewish schools are perceived as a good career move and most of the teachers plan to use their experience as a step towards managerial and higher-status jobs. The schools are also perceived as a unique opportunity to meet the ‘others’ – Jews.

Most of the schools were in the geographical and socio-economic periphery. The teachers were self-selected by Abraham Fund according to their accommodating worldview – that is, integration, expression of mild political opinions and positive beliefs towards coexistence and the state of Israel.

The majority of teachers came from a conservative background and are the first generation of education and even literacy in their families. Although most of them studied in Jewish colleges, they did not have Jewish friends prior to their work. This is because the geographical and social segregation that exists between Palestinian-Arabs and Jews leaves limited space for encounters and direct contact between the groups. Jamila said: ‘Although we are so mixed we are so distant from one another and you cannot really grasp it until you enter the school.’

**Passing as a ‘good Arab’**

Arab teachers are motivated to pass by a desire to shed the identity of an oppressed group to gain access to social and economic opportunities (Ginsberg 1996). In that sense the performance of passing is voluntary. Yet a teacher may not necessarily want to pass as a ‘good Arab’, but that is how one will be read within the schools’ codes of identification and surveillance systems.

As we shall see in the next sections, the perceptions of the ‘good Arab’ are of an ethnic Arab who lacks ‘Arab characteristics’ – that is, being able to pass as Israeli without being suspected to be a Jew. That includes having no oriental accent, wearing modern clothes, not being Muslim and accepting Israeli culture – eating like Jews and
acting like Jews. A ‘good Arab’ is also muted, having no national desire and being pro-Zionist.

**Performance**

Passing as a ‘good Arab’ – that is, an Arab who carries no Arab/oriental/Muslim characteristics – means performative changes in behaviour, speech, accent and dress.

**Behaviour**

The shift from what the Arab teachers perceive as a conservative and primitive society to the more advanced Jewish society causes them to change their behaviour, or in Amir’s words, not to behave like ‘barbarians’. By contrasting the superior ‘Jewish mentality’ with the primitive ‘Arab barbarianism’, Amir internalized the construction of the orient as inferior when ‘the East came to view itself through the West’s distorting mirror’ (Shohat 1988, 25).

On behaviour, Amir said: ‘You need to adopt the Jewish mentality and abandon the Arab one… in the way you dress, your behaviour… Be more open in our behaviour… don’t behave like Arabs, like a barbarian… be less authoritarian, hug the children.’

Next to being less authoritarian and more affectionate, behavioural changes also include politeness, order and punctuality. As Amin said: ‘Arabs shout and laugh in a loud voice, not like Jews… you can’t hear them… Jews are more organized than Arabs. They come on time and finish on time. Arabs are more carefree [*hafi*].’

**Vocabulary**

In passing, the act of assuming another (imaginary) identity is not just reforming, it is transforming (Ahmed 1999). Indeed, passing includes the embracing of a whole new attitude and vocabulary of correctness, as Jamila stated:

> The inspector observed my class and told me that I acted like a fifth grade student… she offered me help and changed everything for the better. She gave me a vocabulary to use, how to speak in class. For example, you are not allowed to tell a child that he is not allowed but to look at him and say it is not acceptable, you should say sit quietly instead of shut up. I didn’t have this vocabulary although I taught before in schools… you need to work on yourself and dramatically change.

**Dress code**

The teachers wore short sleeves, miniskirts and tight jeans that did not give them away as Arabs. As part of what Bourdieu (1984) calls ‘taste’, women’s dress has played a central role in the discourse of modernity and acceptance (Secor 2002) where cleavages and miniskirts were perceived as the opposite to ‘primitive’:

> Arab female teachers need to dress like everybody else, not with head cover but like Jewish teachers with trousers and showing their hair. Children will treat differently a teacher with her hair covered. You have to act like the other side. (Amir)
They can see that not everybody is primitive... because I dress in a modern way like you, with cleavages and vests and no head cover and they love it. (Jamila)

Veiling, the covering of women’s hair and sometimes face and form, has figured prominently within colonialist and orientalist representations of Muslim societies (Ahmed 1992). The veiled woman plays a central role in the oriental imagination as staged for western audiences and is emblematic of the supposed barbarity of Muslim societies (Kahf 1999). It is not forbidden in Israel and married practising Jewish teachers cover their hair, yet Arab teachers feel that it marks them as others: ‘Yet passing is not becoming. In assuming the image of another one does not become the other. The fit does not constitute a proper identification; it is not a painless merger’ (Ahmed 1999, 23).

For example, Salwa who was ‘complimented’ by Jewish teachers for looking ‘Jewish’, expresses her ambivalence towards the wish to be ‘like you’ while maintaining a proud Arab identity:

Although I’m Arab I dress the same as the Jewish teachers so they tell me that I’m Israeli and not Arab, that I’m a Jew... some people could not accept that I’m Arab, you are ours they say. This ‘our’ surprised me.

This example demonstrates that mimicking may weaken the boundaries or reveals that they are not bright, as formerly assumed by the national-ethnic community. In that sense mimicking is a subversive act.

Accent

Passing as a ‘good Arab’ means not having an oriental accent. Minority accents are often disparaged or held to be signs of ignorance or lack of sophistication (Murno, Derwing, and Sato 2006). This is especially relevant to Arabic, which is perceived not only as inferior but as the language of the ‘enemy’ (Brosh 1993). Arab/oriental accents are considered as a barrier for integration in the Jewish job market.6 Amira, who is blond, dressed in tight jeans and generally passes as a Jew, stated:

The students were surprised when they first saw me. They told me how pretty I am. My looks made them feel that Arabs are like you, modern and dress well. It helped me...[but] my accent didn’t help me at all... children laugh at my accent... they asked me to say P because we cannot pronounce it and laughed. They also laughed at my R.

In one of his books, Kashua writes about a boy’s desperate attempt to approximate the gestures, aspirations and tastes associated with Jewish Israeliness. Next to buying himself clothes in a ‘Jewish store’, as well as a Walkman and some cassettes in Hebrew, he decides that he must get rid of his Arabic accent in Hebrew. In order to do this he needs to learn how to pronounce the letter p, which does not exist in Arabic and is usually pronounced as if it were b. He begins to practise by holding up a piece of paper to his mouth and telling himself: ‘If the paper moves, you’ve said a p’ (Kashua 2004, 102, cited in Rottenberg 2008).
Food taboos

Food is an important tool in the negotiation and production of social relationships and acts as a symbol of the complex power relations between Arabs and Jews. Food sharing is a powerful way of imagining connectedness with others or it may symbolize dichotomies and exclusions (Gill and Longstaff 1998). By embodying a ‘traditional’ Jewish kosher identity, the food in the school staffroom represents an example of a process of ‘othering’, marking Arab teachers who are not familiar with kosher rules as ‘different’, in which difference is constructed as negative and inferior (Said 1978). Yara said: ‘I didn’t know that you can’t eat milk with meat; I used to come with my salami sandwich and drink coffee and didn’t understand why it’s wrong until teachers told me.’

Food policing includes not only eating but also discussing the ‘right’ food. In order to pass as ‘good Arabs’, teachers have to be careful not to disclose preference for any ‘forbidden’ food. They are policed by colleagues, students and parents:

The students asked me if I eat meat with milk. I have no problem to eat burger with cheese but I won’t say it loud out of respect… they won’t understand that as a Muslim I’m allowed so I avoid the issue by telling them that I read that it is not healthy to eat meat and milk together. (Abel)

I didn’t know that prawns are not kosher and told the students that I like it and they said wow. One mother… called and told me that… it is not acceptable and not kosher… I knew that you are not allowed to mix meat with cheese and to eat pork but not this. (Camila)

Thus, food provides a vehicle to articulate disparaging, often discriminatory comments, towards those who express a preference for other types of food, while also denying Arab teachers the opportunity to express their own identities through the food that they consume.

Yet the teachers do not assume the image of the ‘good Arab’ at any cost. When it comes to alcohol they do not try to pass, even at the cost of being marked as Muslim and primitive. Dina said: ‘On holidays they raise a toast but I’m not because I’m Muslim and not allowed to drink alcohol… It is difficult… I can’t grasp if I’m here or not. After all I’m different.’

Passing as non-Muslim

The image of the Arab-Palestinian is ‘split’ into what is perceived as the ‘modern’ Christians and the ‘primitive extremist’ demonized Muslims. The Christian Palestinian community, although it constitutes only a small minority, is largely urban and better situated economically (Sa’ar 1998). Muslim teachers are conscious about their ‘spoiled’ Muslim identity (Goffman 1963) and try to conceal it by emphasizing instead a more inclusive Arab identity that constitutes Islam and Christianity. Camila explicated how Islam is signified by religious conservatism (covering hair) and political extremism (supporting Nasrallah, the Hezbollah leader):
From experience I chose not to say that I’m Muslim… when you say that you are Muslim they think that it is wrong. A teacher in our seminar told them that she is Muslim and they asked why she doesn’t cover her hair, who is your god and do you believe in Nasrallah. It takes you into places where you don’t want to go.

Dina said: ‘I say that I’m an Arab who celebrates all holidays. I don’t want to tell them that I’m Muslim… it’s personal.’

Yet the construction of a universal Arab identity can also be read as challenging the hegemonic discourse of the Israeli society. The Palestinians perceive the Israeli state as trying to fragment the Palestinian minorities into religious groups, as part of the state strategy of ‘divide and conquer’. Israel does so by conceiving of its Christian citizens (as well as of its Druze citizens) as distinct from the Muslims (Sa’ar 1998). This may be another reason for teachers to insist on presenting a unified Arab-Palestinian identity. Amira said:

The students ask me all the time if I’m Christian or Muslim and I insist not to disclose my religion because I want them to accept me as a person… although if I did tell them that I’m Muslim it could contribute to the Muslim image, seeing that not everybody is primitive or terrorist.

Silencing the Palestinian narrative

‘A good Arab is a mute Arab’

Passing as ‘good Arabs’ also means that the teachers must silence their national narrative and pass as pro-Zionists. The Arabic book Ya Salam (valestra, e. and Falach Elias, e. Ya Salam studio effective.) focuses only on non-contentious topics such as ethnic food, religion, debka dancing and olive picking. The book silences issues such as Palestinian history, the Israeli–Arab conflict and the Nakba. Silencing refers to the formal and informal ways that schools control who can speak, what can and cannot be spoken, and whose discourse must be controlled (Castagno 2008). School-based silencing precludes official conversation about controversy, inequity and critique (Fine 1991, 33). Arab teachers perceive silencing as the price that they must pay in order to fit in. Dina said: ‘I’m very careful in what I say, very very careful.’

In opposition to the notion of being silenced is the notion of ‘voice’ (Castagno 2008). Voice refers to having the power to name the world around you and ‘the ability to construct, articulate, and therefore shape one’s experience as it is presented to others’ (Quiroz 2001, 328). Importantly, however, for voice to be powerful, it must be heard and not simply spoken (Castagno 2008). Arab teachers do not dare voice their thoughts because they know that they are reprimanded to silence. Amir said: ‘I’m not allowed to talk about the Nakba… the students don’t know. They know that Israel won the war and that Arabs don’t exist here… I don’t talk about politics in class.’ Amin said: ‘I can’t tell my version of the history because the other side is stronger than me.’

Contrary to bilingual schools in Israel (Bekerman and Tatar 2009) and mixed-religion schools in Northern Ireland (Donnelly 2004), the teachers have to silence
their narrative, and are pressured into subsiding Jewish anxiety about Arabs and containing their fears regarding the conflict:

They test me all the time. When there is a terror attack or missile I’m ready for the children’s questions… even if they response in an insulting manner I know that they are children and that I need to contain [lehachil] their fear. (Yara)

Some teachers went a step further and passed by distancing themselves from the Arab-Palestinian narrative. They did so by drawing a symbolic boundary between those ‘who lost land’ during the 1948 war and therefore feel enmity towards the state of Israel and those who did not lose nor had nothing to lose; those who witnessed ‘the war and occupation’ and those who perceive it as a distant memory, which liberates them from its burden:

Since I was a child I felt gratitude toward the state. I grew up in a family of seven children and my father was on disability benefits. We had no land, not like those who their land was nationalized and they are against the state. When my grandpa was a child he inherited land but the head of the village stole it… without the benefits my father couldn’t have provided for us. (Abel)

My family wasn’t damaged [in 1948] because they kept their houses and we have buildings. We were not educated that land was taken away from us, not like in the villages where their property was taken. (Lilian)

I like living together and don’t care about politics. it is not only that I want to keep my job, I’m an Israeli citizen, I was born here, I don’t want to live with Arabs, I’m here, my roots are here, my parents. Even if my grandpa cared and saw everything, war and occupation, I don’t care. Yet next to silencing and acceptance there is ambivalence and protest. National events force the teachers to confront with their alienation and remind them that despite their effort to pass and fit in they are not accepted as full members of the collective. (Salwa)

National events make you feel like you are not here, don’t exist and when they sing the national hymn you stand but it doesn’t acknowledge you at all. It is like drawing black spots on your face, black stripes even. Am I here or not…. It is difficult when I see, feel their happiness but can’t grasp if I’m here or not. (Dina)

**Facing hybridity**

As we saw, the ‘good Arab’ is hybrid, a third place between Jewish-Israeliness and Arabness, which mediates or resolves the contradictions of the position of Arabs. Yet the acceptance of the ethno-national bright boundaries means that by passing as hybrid the teachers do not distance themselves from boundary fetishism. On the contrary, they embrace the boundaries and try to operate inside them, however not without a price.

Despite their efforts to pass, the teachers are not fully accepted by students, parents and teachers. As a minority in Jewish-dominated schools, most of them feel lonely, isolated and vulnerable:
I often felt that the teachers look down at me and don’t respect me. A teacher screamed at me in front of the children… I feel that they let themselves hurt my dignity all the time because I’m Arab and the weakest link. (Camila)

The cleaner and I are the only Arabs in school. Some schools don’t even have an Arab cleaner and then you are alone. You are alone among the teachers as well. (Jamila)

The Arab teachers’ efforts to pass highlight the Zionist state’s ambivalence towards them. Following Bhabha (1994, 91), by rearticulating colonial ‘presence in terms of its otherness, that which it disavows’, the ‘good Arab’ can potentially disrupt the self-grounding assumptions of Jewishness, disclosing the way in which otherness always inheres in presence. Teachers’ mimicry stresses the fact that they are not Jewish and hence cannot be completely accepted into the Israeli collective. As Dina stated, exposing the tension between the wish to be included, yet failing the primary demand of being Jewish:

It sometimes hurt… I’m inside the group that I’m outside. I feel that they want to include me; even the children sometimes ask me if I celebrate holidays with them, do you build a sukkah? Do you have a menorah? (Dina)

Passing as a ‘good Arab’, what from a Jewish-Israeli perspective is an effective figure of mediation, is perceived quite differently by an Arab audience and exposes the complex identities that are both in congruence and in conflict with one another, reflecting the internal conflicts to which Israeli Arabs are exposed. Some Arab-Palestinians reject Israeliness because, as Bishara (2001, 59) argued:

It had been undermining Arab identity, does not lead to equality (for there can be no equality for Arabs in a Jewish state) but only to a distorted, marginalized Arab identity. Retreating from national positions in order to win the approval of the Jewish public opinion means destroying national gains and returning to a relationship based on groveling in exchange for crumbs.

Echoing Bishara, in a discussion about a bilingual Jewish-Arabic school, an Arab father who rejects this initiative wrote:

I’m annoyed by Arabs’ ‘courtship’ of Jews because of its grovel, that many of my people are not aware of (or maybe financial possibilities blind them)! … this is another desperate attempt on our side to be accepted into the ‘Israeliness’ which was dictated to us and not the citizenship we aspire. In other words, it is an Arab surrender.8

This father reflects Arab parents’ fear that their children will assimilate into Jewish society in bilingual schools and hence their competence in Arabic will diminish (Bekerman and Tatar 2009).

This perception is complicated further by the fact that the teachers teach Arabic, which may be used by the Israeli intelligence against the Arab collective, and hence may mark the teachers as traitors. Amir said: ‘[My friends] asked me do you betray us? And I said no.’ Salwa said: ‘You think that people around me don’t call me a
traitor who teaches Arabic to Jews? Once even my husband said it jokingly but I knew that he means it because in every joke there is some truth.’

Conclusions

The Arab-Palestinians in Israel are a ‘trapped minority’ who lives as formal citizens of a nation state hegemonized by others, while the majority of its mother nation exists outside of the state borders (Rabinowitz 2001). Hence most of the research focuses on the tension between their Arab-Palestinian national identity and Israeli civic identity.

Their identity places them in the position of ‘an enemy within’ for the Jewish majority; yet at the same time they are considered suspiciously ‘Israelified’ Arabs by Palestinians outside Israel. In spite of these difficulties, it does not seem that Arabs in Israel collectively abandoned either their Israeli or their Palestinian orientation. The recognition of this phenomenon has brought scholars to identify and investigate the diverse strategies that enable the Arabs in Israel to cope with the tension created by their sensitive location in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (Sorek 2005).

The separation thesis suggests distinguishing between emotional (Arab-Palestinian) and formal instrumental (Israeli) elements of identity (Rouhana 1988). Yet with time the Israeli identity is more than instrumental, even though it is perceived as contradicting Palestinian identity (Bishara 2001).

According to the substitution explanation, Arabs in Israel tend to distance themselves from clear national or civic identities and instead to emphasize non-national identities – communal, religious, clannish or local (Bishara 2001). This distancing is facilitated by their peripheral status vis-à-vis Jewish-Israeli society, as well as being Palestinians living outside Israel.

In applying postcolonial theories, this paper aims to go beyond these categories by arguing that Arab teachers cannot and do not want to inhabit the place of the other. There is no possibility of assimilation for Arab citizens, because the very intelligibility of the ethnic landscape in contemporary Israel (and thus the ‘Jewishness’ of the state) depends on maintaining the Arab–Jew divide.

To continue Ahmed’s (1999) argument that in passing for another the subject’s movement constitutes the force of hybridization, I argue that one may actually pass not for another but as hybrid. This is especially relevant in the case of bright boundaries, when the majority and minority fetishize boundaries, where the disciplined subaltern version of the Arab takes from Israeli-Jewish identity but do not aspire to become a member of the majority. Hence, good Arabs do not reside beyond the Jew/Arab binarism but are in-betweens and passing does not threaten the hegemony but subsides it. I hope that further research continues to systematically compare how hybridity and passing manifest themselves in the context of rigid boundaries.

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Notes

1. Kashua is part of a new generation within the group of Arab authors who write in Hebrew (see Rottenberg 2008; Shimony 2013).
2. Aravi machmad
3. http://www.mako.co.il/news-israel/education/Article-0a0e9345a83ec21004.htm
4. See also http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4015645,00.html
8. http://dugrinet.co.il/node/14805

References


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