



Neither Here nor There: The Voice of Young Arab Women on the Border Line Between Perilous Identities

In *A Place of Our Own*, Iris Hassid's new photography project, she reveals the lives, the questions, and the old/new dilemmas of Arab identity within the state of Israel. This time, it is from a woman's point of view. She documents the divided lives and the search for a "third space" that would reconcile those identities.

Conversation / Reem Ghanayem August 5, 2021

There is no easy answer to the question of what is the focus of Iris Hassid's new photographic project, *A place of Our Own* (recently published in three languages - Hebrew, Arabic, and English).

The book documents a photographic endeavor that started about eight years ago when Hassid noticed the presence of young Arab students in her Ramat Aviv neighborhood. They have come to study at Tel Aviv University. "Some were religious, wearing hijabs, and others were secular and could be recognized since they spoke Arabic, not Hebrew," Hassid says. In this project, as in her earlier ones, she addresses identity, culture, gender, and the representation of young women from different backgrounds.

Cover-Iris Hassid book- A Place of Our Own.jpg



IRIS HASSID

A Place

مكانٌ يخصّنا

of Our Own

מקום משלנו



Schilt Publishing

[1]Cover of Iris Hassid's A Place of Our Own, Schilt Publishing

Hassid has followed Samar, Aya, Saja, and Majdoleen, four young Palestinians, throughout their time at the university. Over time spent together, questions arose about their divided identity, about the



meaning of being Arab, Palestinian, Israeli, Muslim, or Christian. Thoughts float about stereotypes, friendship, citizenship, Israeli society, Arab society trapped between tradition and progress, assimilation, and constant anxiety rooted in the Nakba's spiritual, rural, political, and social memory. This project poses many questions, problems, and insights about the multiple identities of the Arab woman in Israeli society and their validity: can we still ask questions about co-existence? Can the voices of the young Arab women meet the challenges of divided identity and break the barriers and restrictions of tradition, the legacy of the Nakba, and Israel's stereotypes, and build a bright new future in which their identities are part of the process of undermining the tired political discourse?

On the occasion of the book's publication, I spoke with Hassid – an artist and photographer with a B.A. degree in political science from Tel Aviv University and an MFA from the University of Haifa. She is a co-founder and co-director of Binyamin, a collective contemporary art gallery. We talked about issues led by the young women and other questions raised by Manal Shalabi, a feminist scholar, and Gilad Melzer, a researcher of culture and art, in their essays in the book.

[סמר, סג'א, מג'דולין, סלאם וסומא, עיריית תל אביב, ככר רבין, תל אביב, 2019.jpg](#)
[2]



[3]Samar, Saja, Majdoleen, Salam, and Soma

[4] [סמר, בנות ובני דודים, נרגילה, מרפסת בית סבתא, נצרת, 2018.jpg](#)



[5]Samar, cousins, hookah, the terrace at Grandmother's house, Nazareth, 2018

Reem Ghanayem: Where did it come from, the idea to befriend, photograph, and publish a whole book about young Arab women living in Ramat Aviv, and what has been added to this idea as the project developed?

Iris Hassid: I have been living in the Ramat Aviv neighborhood, where the university is located, since I was a teenager, after living with my family in several places worldwide, which had left me with a sense of otherness and complexity. Several years ago I started noticing young Arab women on the street and in the area, students who have come to study at Tel Aviv University. Several were religious, hijab-wearing women, and others were secular and could be recognized because they spoke Arabic, not Hebrew. I would see them walking alone or in small groups – a new sign of independence. They lived in university dormitories or rented apartments, carrying suitcases on weekends as they returned home. Most came from towns and villages with homogeneous Arab communities.

It was intriguing and refreshing to hear Arabic spoken on the streets of my neighborhood by a new generation of young, self-assured women who were so different from how they were presented in the Israeli media. And yet, hearing Arabic on the street attracts attention and stares. I had wondered why it seemed strange to hear Arabic on the streets of Tel Aviv more so than in mixed cities such as Jerusalem.



[6] [סמר, מג'דולין וסג'א, מגבות, דירה של מג'דולין וסג'א, רמת אביב' 2015.jpg](#)



[7]Samar, Majdoleen, and Saja, towels, Majdoleen and Saja's apartment, Ramat Aviv, 2015

R.G: Why do we label people by their language, name, accent, look, and nationality?

I.H: Until about eight years ago, on the hill in front of my house, you could see remains of houses of the Palestinian village Sheik Muanis, which residents were displaced and some left in 1948. Now student dormitories (Broshim) and a shopping center stand in their place. There is no sign of the houses, and the street names are of Jewish dignitaries. Tel Aviv University also stands (in part) on top of this area, with no mention of the erased village.

R.G.: and so, another layer has been added, which would be interesting to investigate.

I.H.: My projects are about identity and culture, the idea of womanhood, and groups and communities of women of different ages in Israel. It seemed only natural to approach the Palestinian women in the neighborhood and present these youths, in their late teens or early twenties, living



alone, far from home. I wanted to explore their lives, to ask what it means to be young Arab women living by themselves, and to show what I have seen: the hardships of life here in Tel Aviv, far from their protective community, in this multi-layered, complex reality.

My method was to approach them as I saw them on the street and invite them to participate in a photographic project. It was not straightforward. Most refused me, and the project was not advancing until someone referred me to Samar from Nazareth, who had just completed her film studies at the university. We set a date, and to my great joy she showed up for the meeting with her cousins and two close friends, Arab students living in the area. I realized I had found the group with which I had wanted to work.

Gradually, we developed a relationship of personal connections and dialogues – it offered me a window into their worlds and grew into a project they took part in as equal partners. Their stories present a multifaceted reality, humane and intimate, loaded with historical, social, and political baggage. The idea of a book took shape about two years into the project. A monograph is a medium I like very much. It allows an intimate reflection on the photos and the words, it stays with you, perceived and contained very differently than in an exhibition.

[מג'דולין, חדר, על הרקמה העגולה רקום בערבית המילה - חירות-, רמת אביב, 2015.jpg \[8\]](#)



[9]Majdoleen, room; the round needlepoint contains the Arabic word for 'freedom,' Ramat Aviv, 2015

R.G.: Samar, Aya, Saja, and Majdoleen: four young women representing four worldviews that meet and retreat simultaneously. Are there questions regarding collective identity, personal identity, the self versus the other, the self in self-reflection? Arab society encompasses cultural, political, and traditional values that are very different from those of the Jewish society, yet they wish to be part of Israeli society. How do you view their internal conflicts today, and have they succeeded in resolving them?

I.H.: All through the project, cooperation has been part of every interaction. The goal was to represent, in an unprecedented way, the world of young Arab Palestinian women in Tel Aviv. Using photographs and snippets of spontaneous conversation I had with the subjects over the years, I wanted to subvert the image and stereotype of the Arab woman, to put up a mirror and reflect to Israeli Jews their preconceptions, and at the same time do that to Arab society.

The desire to belong is a potent motif in their lives. The anxiety about things getting worse is always in the background; the Nationality Law that canceled Arabic as an official language came into effect while the project was in progress, shaking up their self-assurance and hope for the future.

And yet, they strive to live independently and not as part of a traditional community. They want to belong in the big city, with its Western attributes, where the better career opportunities are and where it all happens, be it a major architectural firm and working on large international projects for



Majdoleen, or chances for acting roles in movies and T.V. series, for Samar.

Different from the conflicts experienced by young Jewish Tel Avivians, the complex, torn identity is present in every gesture, act, or feeling of the Palestinians. For example, the first photograph in the book shows Samar wearing a *Keffiyeh* around her neck. In the final one, she demonstrates government intervention in violence against women at Charles Clore Park, with a masked face, a pink ribbon tied around her neck. The social, political, and gender identities are all entangled together.

Another photograph in the book shows Majdoleen at Tel Aviv university's Nakba ceremony. She is wearing a white top with a sticker proclaiming Nakba Day and the year 1948. There is a conversation with Majdoleen toward the end of the book: she says she has stopped going to demonstrations, and now she wants to focus on her life, her architecture job, and her paintings.

Political and social events significantly impact the formation of their identity – the MeToo movement, the Nationality Law, and other events throughout the world.

[מגידולין, טקס יום הנכבה, כניסה לאוניברסיטת תל אביב, כיכר אנטין, רמת אביב, 2017.jpg \[10\]](#)



[11]Majdoleen, Nakba Day Ceremony, entrance to Tel Aviv University, Antin Square, Ramat Aviv, 2017



[jpg.2018](#), ירושלים, כיסויי חיג'אב, ארון בגדים של איה, [12]



[13]Aya's wardrobe, hijabs, Jerusalem, 2018



R.G.: The women's voice is present here, powerfully but ambivalently: living in the village under one identity, in the city under another, existing on the borderline between the two while at some point a choice will have to be made. What were your concerns during the conversations and while spending time with the women, and what new insights have you gained about this society?

I.H.: Throughout this project and the work with my subjects, it was apparent and crucial to me that they approved every photograph and every conversation piece. The whole thing is about full cooperation and a process of building trust. It has been and still is vital that they felt they were representing themselves in the photographs. It was crucial that their families would know and that they would be safe. Many images and stories they had told me were excluded from the book; I decided not to include them to avoid hurting them.

The captured moments are not "real" ones - they happened. They are something new we have created together. They play themselves. The conversation excerpts reflect a particular moment and thought, not their complete worldview - which might change and turn around the next day.

They face questions about where they would live in the future and a deep concern that the sense of alienation of not belonging would remain unchanged. After I have met the families of the young women and have talked with them, I can identify a trend of change and acceptance of their wish to live a more Western life and develop careers in their aspired professions. There is a willingness to help them achieve their goals and to help advance changes in Arab society, regardless of the recognition of the price it would exact from everyone.

R.G.: What challenges await these women in the future? And you too, if this project is to continue?

I.H.: Regarding the participants, on one level, the challenges they face are similar to those of their Jewish counterparts in Tel Aviv. They are at the age of dreams and anxiety about not realizing them, of struggles and difficulties. But in contrast to other young women, being a Palestinian Arab and an Israeli citizen is a much more complicated struggle.

I think the main issue is deciding where to live and how to hang on to their career hopes. Will they continue to try to fit in, despite their sense of alienation and not belonging in Tel Aviv? Or will they move to a city like Haifa, where a mutual life is more likely? Or perhaps they will settle in a village or an Arab town when they marry and return to living in a homogeneous Arab society?

In the deliberations whether to continue the project and follow these women's lives, the main issue is artistic - how to keep it fresh and exciting. Should I expand the circle of subjects? Should I also focus on the young Palestinian men in Tel Aviv?

[\[14\] סמר, שטח אדמה של המשפחה, כפר מחול, 2019.jpg](#)



[15]Samar, family land, Kafr Makhoul, 2019

[16] [סמר, חדר, פוסטר פלסטיין, תל אביב, 2017.jpg](#)



[17]Samar, room, Palestine poster, Tel Aviv, 2017

R.G.: What else has not been said in this project about Israeli society, co-existence, the faded hope of living together and resolving the conflicts? And about the multiplicity of identities, we all live within?

I.H.: A significant problem, in my opinion, is the sense of suffocation, that there are not enough mixed cities for Arabs and Jews. Those who have left the Arab towns and villages, have lived in Tel Aviv or elsewhere, and wish to live a mutual life in a new place - there are hardly any solutions for them.

The desire to leave the homogeneous Arab society and contribute to a shared future in Israel runs into obstacles on the Jewish-Israeli side and non-enabling political structures that avoid designing diverse cities and towns. As neighbors rather than separately, the possibility of a shared life is, for me, the key to change.

Furthermore, recognizing the Palestinian narrative and the sense of injustice experienced by Arab Israeli citizens is the basis for developing a sense of belonging in the state. Even something like posting a plaque in a place that used to be a Palestinian village or town can help build a sense of belonging for members of the Arab society.



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