

New Arab fiction

Exile is another country

Three new novels focus, with considerable success, on war, exile and grief

Let It Be Morning

By Sayed Kashua. Translated by Miriam Shlesinger

Grove Press; 288 pages; \$13. Atlantic Books; £8.99

The Illusion of Return

By Samir El-Youssef

Halban; 154 pages; £12.99

Dreams of Water

By Nada Awar Jarrar

HarperCollins; 240 pages; £14.99

WHO would be an Israeli Arab? A non-Jew in a Jewish state; a citizen with most, but not all, civil rights (it is almost impossible for Arabs to buy state-owned land); regarded with suspicion by many Jewish Israelis; envied, disliked, even labelled as traitors by Palestinians on the other side of the 1967 border: this is not a fate that many people would choose.

Yet despite these burdens, Israel's Arab minority (or "Palestinian citizens of Israel" as many now define themselves) enjoy the greatest civil and political freedoms in the Middle East. In "Let It Be Morning", a provocative and memorable novel first published in America last year and only now coming out in Britain, Sayed Kashua, an Arab journalist for *Haaretz*, a left-wing Israeli newspaper, exploits them to the full.

Mr Kashua's narrator is also a young Arab journalist, returning to his home village with his wife and baby in search of a quiet life. He has been steadily marginalised on his paper, downgraded from a staff position to contributor, his desk taken over by the fashion department. Mr Kashua is sharp, if bleak, on the narrator's growing self-loathing as he tries without success to ingratiate himself with his supposedly liberal editors.

But things are anything but quiet when the Israeli army blockades the village. Water and electricity supplies are cut off. Telephone lines and the mobile network stop working. Even the sewage pipes are sealed. Society, and the everyday bonds of community, rapidly collapses. Neighbour turns on neighbour, and the mob takes over the streets. The village elders, seeking to appease the Israelis, round up the illegal Palestinian workers, strip them to their underwear and force them to march towards the Israeli lines where a number of them are shot and killed.

Mr Kashua's pacy narrative keeps the story moving to a clever and blackly humorous climax. The water and power are turned back on. The telephone lines work. The village, it turns out, is no longer part of Israel but has been handed over to Palestinian control under the terms of a secret peace treaty. Its inhabitants greet the news not with jubilation, but with horror. "The Jews have sold us down the river," shouts the furious grocer.

Samir El-Youssef is a Palestinian, born in Rashidia refugee camp in Lebanon. Like Mr Kashua, Mr El-Youssef is interested in exploring present-day scenarios rather than the refugee camps' myths that the old Palestine will be reborn. Mr El-Youssef co-authored "Gaza Blues", a well-received collection of short stories, with an Israeli author, Etgar Keret. His first novel, dedicated to a British Jewish novelist, Linda Grant, is a slim but potent meditation on memory and exile.

"The Illusion of Return" is rich in double meaning: the first illusion is that the Palestinians can ever return to their home villages, many of which now lie buried under Israeli housing estates and industrial parks. The second explores the question of whether anyone can properly revisit the past, even if just in their own memory.

The narrator meets his friend Ali at London's Heathrow airport, after a gap of 17 years. Both are haunted by the past in Lebanon: the narrator's beloved sister Amina killed herself, while Ali

became an Israeli collaborator. The first-person narrative cuts back between the past and present, which sometimes results in too much “telling” rather than “showing”. But Mr El-Youssef's vivid portrait of life in wartime Lebanon, and the temporary refuge provided by friends, is poignant and evocative. It is left to Bruno, an elderly Holocaust survivor, to help Ali find some inner peace. “Life”, he says, “is a one-way journey: there is no going back.”

Except sometimes there is. In “Dreams of Water”, Aneesa, a young Lebanese woman, flees Beirut for London after her brother Bassem is kidnapped and is never seen again. Crazy with grief, Aneesa's mother adopts a young boy who looks like Bassem, believing that he is her son's reincarnation. Adrift in London, Aneesa finds friendship, even platonic love, with Salah, an elderly Lebanese man. Their relationship is touchingly drawn, as they take excursions in the rain, longing for the tastes of home and the tang of the Mediterranean, but grateful that nobody is shooting at them.

This beautifully written book is powerfully evocative of the human cost of war and the longing for love that, despite the shooting and shelling, never fades. As with much of the literature of exile, the city itself is a character. Ms Jarrar's descriptions of Beirut—the fishermen on the Corniche, the palm trees waving in the sea breeze, the wind flowing through the apartment buildings—are both lyrical and precise. Eventually, Aneesa returns to Beirut and to her mother. All human bonds are transitory, it seems, except those of blood. Together, mother and daughter find a kind of peace. Each of these novels touches the reader's heart. Exile and displacement, whether within one's homeland, or outside, may be painful, but it can also inspire fine literature.

COPYRIGHT *The Economist*, 1 February 2007