

# “Facing the Forests”: A Critique

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Short story title: “Facing the Forests”

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Tel Aviv

Hakibbutz Hameuchad

1963

257 pages

This essay presents a critical reading of Abraham Yehoshua's short story “Facing the Forests.” Yehoshua, a leading contemporary Israeli author, was born in Palestine ١٩٣٦, a fifth generation Sephardic Jew. He studied philosophy and literature at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and served as a paratrooper in the occupation forces during the 1967 War.

“Facing the Forests” is one of the first Israeli attempts to present a critical perspective of the Zionist official discourse; it generated debates in the Israeli state and internationally. This essay addresses the main themes of the novel and describes the issues that touch on conflicts within Israeli society and among Israeli intellectuals. The first section presents an analytical narration of the main events and turning points in the novel, the second section analyzes the major and subordinate themes of the novel, and the third section lays out the conclusions of the paper.

## The Plot

“Facing the Forests” narrates the story of a young Israeli man who searches for solitude. Frustrated and jobless, he tries “to renew his acquaintance with words ... But words weary him; his own, let alone the words of others.” (p. 203) His friends suggest that he works as a fire watcher in a forest, where he can find solitude and the determination he needs to complete his doctorate program. The young man signs a contract with the afforestation department for six months: spring, summer, and half the autumn. He is told that he will be sent to one of the largest forests in the region and that “he won't be alone there but .(with a labourer, an Arab” (206

On the first night of his arrival to the forest, the young man starts his job as a fire watcher and feelings of restlessness and fear of failure start accompanying him.

starts accompanying him. On his second day, he meets the Arab and his daughter. “The Arab turns out to be old and mute. His tongue was cut out during the war.” (209) After this encounter, the fire watcher returns to his room and gazes fearfully into the woods. His fears make him restless, and he imagines a fire spreading into the forest and burning its trees to ashes.

It is important to note the shift which takes place when the main character is transformed from being a mere frustrated young man, into a fire watcher whose duty it is to protect the forest. The transformation, yehoshua moves smoothly from **describing** the inner and personal struggles of Israeli youths, to **describing** and tackling the collective struggles and fears of Israeli intellectuals.

The fire watcher starts to explore the forest; he sees pine trees standing erect “like a company of new recruits awaiting their commander.” (p. 215) He stumbles upon rocks inscribed with names of donors:

“The names cling to him like the falling pine needles.” (215) It is noteworthy that the author does not name any characters in the novel, but donor names are inscribed on rocks throughout the forest:

“It had never occurred to him that this wouldn’t be just some anonymous forest but one with a name, and not just one name either..... Louis Schwartz of Chicago, the King of Burundi and his people.” (215)

Yehoshoa describes the fire watcher’s observations of the pine trees throughout the story. Pine trees represent the aesthetics of forests in the west and they were used for afforestation by the Jewish National Fund. Hence, the pine trees were utilized to embody the role of a soldier combating to dominate Palestinian land, and to shape the new features of the settler colonial state whilst effacing the indigenous topography.

The other main character in the novel is the Arab, whose tongue was severed in 1948, an appropriate symbol for the elimination of the Arabs’ voices in the official Israeli narrative and history writing. The silence of the Arab does not indicate an original attribute of passivity; the Arab was silenced by a deliberate and violent act.

The fire watcher’s worries change as a hikers delegation approaches him and asks about an Arab village; “Where exactly is this Arab village that is marked on the map? It ought to be somewhere around here, an abandoned Arab village. Here, they even know its name, something like... Actually, it must be right here, right in the forest.” (p. 219) The fire watcher asserts that the village does not exist in the forest and concludes “the map must be wrong.” (p. 220). Nevertheless, the fire watcher becomes haunted by the name of the Arab village; “the name floats back to his mind of a sudden and he is seized with restlessness.” (220) Promptly, “he feels his way in the dark to the bed of the Arab” (220) and whispers the name of the village in his ear repeatedly. The hopeless Arab points at the forest through the window.

The map that identifies the location of the Arab village predates current maps that eliminate the presence of the Palestinian villages. The presence of both maps causes restlessness and conflict in Israeli society as a whole, and especially in the minds of Israeli intellectuals. The tools available to settler colonial regimes -- demolishing Palestinian villages, expelling their residents, and planting nonindigenous trees – cannot erase the past. Israeli society remains haunted by all the truths it prefers to bury.

A ceremony takes place in the forest, where people pay “homage to the memory of themselves... a gleam of scissors, a flash of photographers, ribbons sag. A plaque is unveiled, a new little truth is revealed to the world. A brief tour of the conquered wood.” (p. 220) By the end of the celebration, the fire watcher encounters the old man in charge of afforestation. The man asserts, “I don’t think there has ever been a fire at all in this forest. Nature itself is harnessed to our great enterprise here, ha-ha.” (221) The fire watcher asks about the ruined Arab village, and the man responds; “There used to be some sort of a farmstead here. But that is a thing of the past.” (222)

The fire watcher becomes full of suspicion; his concern for the forest and his duty to protect it wanes, while his interest in the village buried underneath it grows stronger. He finds a way to communicate with the Arab without words. The fire watcher demonstrates to the Arab how to light a fire and teaches his daughter the word “fire” in Hebrew. The days pass by and a close friendship develops between the two.

By the middle of autumn, it’s time for the firewatcher to leave the forest but the Arab is missing. The fire watcher looks for him in the woods and sees the him moving like a “silent dagger.” (231) Suddenly an unexpected fire erupts. “The Arab is setting the forest on fire at its four corners ... rushes through the trees like an evil spirit.” (231) The fire watcher is filled with excitement, the Arab is speaking to him out of the fire saying everything at once. “The ruined village appears before his eyes; born anew in its basic outlines as an abstract drawing, as all things past and buried.” (233)

The police investigate the fire and determine that it was deliberately set. They interrogate the fire watcher for several hours before “he breaks in their hands, is prepared to suggest the Arab as a possible clue.” The police incarcerate the Arab, leaving his daughter behind. The fire watcher returns to his house and becomes a stranger among his friends and in his own once-familiar town.

By the end of the novel, the Arab was able to speak loudly and clearly through his action; he had no need to use words, for he breathed life into his buried village. He was able to tell his story, which is the story of Palestine.

### Major and Subordinate Themes

Researcher Gilead Morahg argues that “Facing the Forests” represents an early effort to expose the profound guilt underlying the denial of the Israelis’ connivance the Israelis’s deliberate in decimation of the Arab presence in Palestine. The author seems to imply that mute Arabs occupy the subconscious of Israeli society; readers are forced to tackle repressed issues within Israeli society. In other words, the Palestinian village was buried under the forests, just as Palestinians are buried in the subconscious of Israeli society.

The dominant Israeli narrative aims to make the Arab invisible and mute , as symbolized in the novel by severing the Arab’s tongue. “Facing the Forests” narrates a story of an Arab who breaks the anticipated silence. Yehoshua uttered part of the unspoken truth of Israeli society. It is noteworthy that the Arab did not burn the forest alone; the fire watcher participated in the burning by teaching the Arab how to light a fire and by choosing not to stop the fire.

### Forest as Symbol

Forests have always had symbolic connotations that exceeded their material role in the Zionist narrative. In Hebrew culture, trees have significant symbolic value. While uprooting indigenous trees in the region, Zionists promoted their own planting of trees as a symbolic representation of Jewish nationalism’s revival and entrenching roots in their “ancient homeland.”

The Jewish National Fund implemented an forestation project over Palestinian land and villages about 100 years ago. The fund worked with the Jewish Agency to portray planting trees as a sacred activity that would lead to the “redemption of the land.” It still calls on international donors to plant trees in the region in exchange of issuing certificates with their names.

The physical and symbolic roles of afforestation worked hand in hand in eliminating the Palestinian presence. Their joint objective is to make the Palestinians’ existence in the land invisible and to silence their voice in history. In the novel, the forest represents the Israeli official discourse; as Hillel Barzel notes, “It is not the burning forests that are important but rather what is symbolized by them.” In his view, “the forest does not represent the physical Land of Israel, or the political state of Israel, but rather it symbolizes the story of the State on the land ... it is the story that a culture tells itself about itself.”

In other words, the forests represent the Israeli narrative of history, while the fire uncovered the ruined Palestinian village on which the trees had been planted and stripped the Zionist narrative of its sham.

### Inner conflicts and collective struggles of Israeli society

We turn now to explore Yehoshua’s main character,; the fire watcher.

The fire watcher’s duty is to guard the forest. In another sense, he guards the Israeli narrative, which is the expected duty of Israeli writers and intellectuals --in fact, the expected duty of Yehoshua himself.

Yehoshua describes the inner conflicts of the fire watcher and the evolution of his understanding in the course of the story. During his first days as a fire watcher, he was restless because he was afraid that he would fail in his duty – being unable to stop forest fires. He slowly starts discovering the forest – first the pine trees and the names of the donors, but later he discovers the old map and the name of the Palestinian ruined village. Thus, the cause of his restlessness shifts and he becomes eager to know more about the silenced reality in the Israeli history. Restlessness transforms into excitement when the Arab burns the forest and enables him to see a glimpse of the buried village he lives above. By the end of the novel he feels like an outsider in his hometown.

The fire watcher struggles between the duty that obliges him to protect the forest and maintain the Israeli narrative, and his underlying desire to start a fire that would strip the wood of its trees and bare Zionism of its narrative.

The author suggests that Israeli intellectuals also struggle with a desire to discover part of the truth that settler colonialism aims to bury. As Gilead Morahg notes, *Facing the Forests* is a story about the emotional and psychological struggle involved in the effort to go beyond the confines of the dominant discourse and get to the true essence of things.

The novel depicts the struggles of Israeli intellectuals in their reaction to the truth they know, manifested in the fire watcher's evolving relationship with the Arab. The fire watcher's first communication with the Arab was about the ruined village. The fire watcher experiences discomfort specifically when the Arab tries to speak. His words are conveyed by \_\_\_\_: "He wishes to say that this is his house and that there used to be a village here as well, and that they have simply hidden it all, buried it in the big forest. The fire watcher ... Gradually he moves away, pretending not to understand. Did there used to be a village here? He sees nothing but trees." (229)

In a debate that took place in the 1980s between Yehoshua and Anton Shammas, a prominent Palestinian writer who lived in the Israeli state at the time. Yehoshua suggested that Shammas could fully find expression of his Palestinian identity only in a Palestinian state, which would be created one day outside of the Israeli borders. Shammas's response was conveyed in his novel *Arabesques*, published in 1986. Through the satirical character Yash, Shammas ridiculed the inability of many Israeli intellectuals, such as Yehoshua, to acknowledge the Palestinian national identity within the Jewish state. In other words, Yehoshua's suggestion was little more than a continuation of the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians living in the state of Israel, a process that began in 1948.

Four years after publishing "*Facing the Forests*," Yehoshua served as a paratrooper in the occupation forces during the June 1967 war. By the end of the war, the Israeli state had expanded its control over the remainder of Palestine and as well as territories in Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt. These facts make one wonder why Yehoshua referred to the second main character in the novel as "the Arab"?, this question accurs due to the namelessness of the character is consistent with the Israeli discourse that claims that sees Arabs as amorphous, able to be shuffled to Palestine. Palestinians can live in any other Arab country, while the State of Israel should remain a haven for world Jewry.

## Conclusion

"Facing the Forests" is significant because it was published at a time when the official Zionist narrative was dominant. It presented controversial questions a quarter of a century before Benny Morris published *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem 1947-1949* in 1989. The introduction of the book included a map that showed the location of hundreds of ruined and depopulated Palestinian villages (the Nakba) and a map of Jewish settlements established after the creation of the Israeli state in 1948.

The short story exposed conflicts from which Israelis suffer individually and collectively. It also tackles the conflicts of Israeli intellectuals caused by the contradictions between the truth they know and their role in a settler colonial project. In other words, it may be considered as a reflective script that meditates on the psyche of settler colonials. It is an attempt of an Israeli intellectual to express the feelings of guilt repressed in the subconscious of his society. Yehoshua displayed a glimpse of the truth before the eyes of the available to Israeli society, in the same way he in his displayed a glimpse of the ruined Palestinian village before the eyes of the firewatcher. This moment of truth reflects his quest for inner peace and the need to release some of his, and his society's subconscious guilt and restlessness, though, without trying to change the structure of the settler colonial state they live within.

The firewatcher's character represents Israeli intellectuals, and specifically Yehoshua himself. They seek to expose a part of the truth, whereby they cling to it at times and overlook it when it is inconvenient. They try to deal with their anxieties and restlessness by unveiling what is buried underneath a land upon which their own colonial reality was created. Hearing the voice of the Arab does not reflect their

attempt to change his reality, rather, it is an attempt to deal with his ghost that haunts them and haunts the subconscious of the colonial society. It is a conflict between the quivering sound and the unwavering silence. In other words, despite the Israeli attempts at collective oblivion, they cannot forget the original Palestinian villages and their inhabitants, rather it makes their existence impossible to forget. Hearing the voice of the Arab while denying his right to exist is no more than an attempt to find balance amidst the battle of colonialism. Declaring partial truths while insisting on contradicting oneself does not disturb the colonial system, rather, it helps to maintain it. What are the results of uncovering truths? Is exposing partial truths enough to free a critic or an intellectual from his position in a settler colonial structure, which continues to displace Palestinians? Finally, what is the destiny of the village? Will it be buried again? Or will the voices of its descendants breathe life into it again?