

Foreword

Under Suffering's Glow: Palestinian Writing after Oslo

Colonial violence ruptures Palestinian writing. The post-Oslo moment will be recounted *not* the way the Palestinian elite see it: as peace negotiations and diplomatic recognitions. The last quarter of a century in Palestinian history will be remembered in a manner closer to how it is articulated by contemporary Palestinian writers and poets: as an attack on Palestinian life and limb; a negation by force of ordinary existence. This is what a closer look at a new generation of writers, that has taken the mantle of representing Palestinian reality in all its socio-political and moral complexity, clearly shows.

Consider Najwan Darwish's magnificent poetry collection *Nothing More to Lose* (2014) – written under the intense mark of "suffering's glow", that wonderfully evocative phrase for a post-millennial Palestine.¹ Darwish's poetry captures many post-Oslo feelings: anger, disillusionment, betrayal and despair. Death and destruction bang loudly in his verse. "Let me lie down / and rest my head on pillows of despair" (90). Or: "and all mankind is against me / and reality too is against me" (49). Or: "My Lord: Is this life that limps toward me / or a supermarket of deformities?" (61). With destruction comes wilful distortion by enemies who cynically package colonial injury as fabrication. Mass suffering is compounded by Palestinian betrayal: the elite honours itself with awards called "the Order of the Patient Donkey" (92) and is seen "rejoicing in defeat" and "welcoming disgrace" (55). So the poet responds to a Palestine where "everything is lacking / but injustice" (42) by accounting for injury and by suffusing his work with his Jerusalemite biblical imagery of redemption. Faced with the dead of Gaza, Lebanon, and Sabra and Shatila, Darwish holds up challenge, struggle, and anticipation: "Despite all this/ it is still my duty to say a few words poisoned with / hope, here in this assembly of despair" (78). It is hard to live without showing those who have internalized defeat that resources of resistance will never be depleted – so long as injustice exists. "Tell this to those / who say we've been defeated" (40).

Darwish's distinct and powerful poetic language thus bears the weight of Palestinian suffering today. At exactly this moment, it does something else as well. It embodies all human oppression, denial, and resistance. So with Palestine's increasing reach as a global moral cause, Darwish embraces universalism:

¹ Najwan Darwish, *Nothing More to Lose*, trans. by Kareem James Abu-Zeid (New York, NYRB, 2014), p. 15.

There is no place that resisted its invaders except that I
was of one its people; there is no free man to whom
I am not bound in kinship; and there is no single tree
or cloud to which I am not indebted. And my scorn
for Zionists will not prevent me from saying that I
was a Jew expelled from Andalusia, and that I still
weave meaning from the light of that setting sun. (9)

Rather than responding to Israel's colonial exclusion in its language of particularism, he does what many Palestinian writers have done before him: sees his local as universal. It's that tone that allows him to construe his own identity not as national or particular, but as human. Not in solidarity with other oppressed: but *as them*.

One can hear the same emphasis on destruction in contemporary writers from Gaza. Under siege, under rubble, and with nowhere to escape, Gazans have been subjected to a decade of concentrated Israeli cruelty. Far too many Israeli wars, mini-wars, military incursions, in addition to economic strangulation and collective punishment have left the most populated place on earth in mass despair. Here too literature is strongly marked by the effects of colonial violence, as *The Book of Gaza* (2014) shows.² At the forefront is a generation of women writers like Samah al-Shaykh and Asmaa al-Ghoul who chart their varied forms of unfreedom and voice their determined will to live without any form of injury or domination. As Najlaa Attallah says in her short piece "In Gaza We Are Not OK": "My tragedy is that I don't just want to live. Nor do I want life to simply go back to the way it was. Nor do I want to go on waiting for a new war where we say at the beginning, 'tomorrow, the war ends,' and say at the end, 'we just want to live.' I don't want that war to begin in the first place." Such appeals mean absolutely nothing for the 96% of Israelis who supported Israel's war on Gaza in 2014: a horrific statistic that registers Israel's settler colonial barbarism, and conveys how the dehumanization of the Palestinians lies at the root of the conflict.

With more than 70% youth unemployment in a place where 2/3 of the population is under the age of 24, a high percentage of besieged Gazans want to leave - but can't. Hope is here hard to come by - as Gaza's most talented young writer Muhannad Younis (1994-2017) knew all too well. His posthumous collection of short stories *Ruins Leave Footprints Behind* was published two years after his

² See my 'Gaza Fractures', *Social Text Online* (24 October 2017).

suicide. One sentence in particular condenses a whole milieu of collective and individual pain and suffering: "Sleeping improved and became more regular a few days ago. I began to regain my sense of happiness as if I had forgotten that I was Palestinian, as if nothing has been happening in Syria, Iraq and Gaza for the last 10 years. But now here I am, awake just after 3 in the morning".³ As another short story affirms, hope has become false and nauseating. For Gaza's besieged, another war is always lurking around the corner and their cruel isolation might never end.

Politically, Israel's colonial strategy of divide and rule compounds this systemic violence. Hamas now rules Gaza and the Palestinian Authority dominates the West Bank, and it acts, through security coordination, as Israel's colonial enforcer. Both regimes are authoritarian and internally repressive, disabling free collective association and mobilization. If separation describes the reality between Israelis and Palestinians after Oslo (permanent closure, segregation, and *de facto* annexations), it also speaks to the divide between colonised Palestinians themselves. Occupied Palestinians live in increasingly fragmented and isolated enclaves, separated by checkpoints, roads blocks, walls and fences. As Israeli settlements continue to increase and expand, Palestinian territory shrinks. Different forms of confinement and restriction have come to define what it means to be Palestinian today: Gaza is an open-air prison and the West Bank is a collection of bantustans.

Even if the realities of this violent period have their distinct features, the specific nature of a settler colonial injury is not new to the Palestinians. How can it be for a rightless, dislocated, dispersed people, defined by the mass expulsion and on-going effects of the *nakba* of 1948, and living under wildly different conditions across the world – endlessly dispossessed from (what turn out to be temporary) abodes like Kuwait, Iraq, and Syria? In the long story of Palestinian dispossession, what can be new or radically different about today's moment?

There are striking developments in the global scope and dimension of Palestinian culture: its multiple sites and languages of production. Palestinians now write in English and in all the other European languages, in the many different countries where they find refuge, including France, Germany, and Chile (which has the largest Palestinian community outside the Arab world). With several generations being born in exile after the *nakba*, the sources of Palestinian writing have simply

³ Muhannad Younis, *Al-Athar Tarsem Khalfuha Aqdam* (Ramallah: A M Qattan Foundation, 2018), p. 55.

proliferated and multiplied. The Palestinian *shatat* (exiled diaspora) is articulating the varied forms of Palestinian experience across the globe. Even if most Palestinians live in Palestine or the Arab world, significant changes in the substance and geography of cultural representation can be clearly discerned. And this has affected both the range and forms of Palestinian narrative.

There is, for example, a whole new Anglophone genre of writing dedicated to charting the realities and travails of Palestinian life – by Palestinians and non-Palestinians alike. Raja Shehadeh's *oeuvre* is an on-going rumination in English on restriction, spatial imprisonment, and national loss in the occupied West Bank, most famously in *Palestinian Walks: Notes on a Vanishing Landscape* (2007). Shehadeh's work has been extremely well received in the Anglophone world and has become a permanent feature on academic syllabuses in English and Postcolonial Studies. There is also Suad Amiry's *Sharon and My Mother-in-Law* (2005), widely reviewed, and seen as a protest against 'the absurdities and agonies of life under occupation and curfew', and Atef Abu Saif's *The Drone Eats with Me: Diaries from a City Under Fire* (2015) from a violently besieged Gaza. Also from Gaza is Asmaa al-Ghoul's powerful testimony (written with Franco-Lebanese Selim Nassib) *A Rebel in Gaza: Behind the Lines of the Arab Spring, One Woman's Story* (2018) – challenging Israeli occupation as well as Palestinian forms of authoritarianism, social oppression, and corruption. Through Ahdaf Soueif's subtle translation, Mourid Barghouti's *I Saw Ramallah* (1997; trans. 2000) is a good example of a recent non-fiction text that has received extensive literary critical attention. It details how a return to the Palestinian homeland is distorted by conquest and a flawed peace deal. Followed by another successful account entitled *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here* (2009; trans. 2012), Barghouti has come to be indelibly associated with the new reality of troubled exilic returns. Similar themes of remembrance and flawed reconnections mark Ghada Karmi's *In Search of Fatima: A Palestinian Story* (2002) and *Return: A Palestinian Memoir* (2015) – where a growing estrangement is registered alongside an unwavering commitment to justice.

Palestinian suffering's glow has also seen the proliferation of a solidarity literature in English that is gaining widespread circulation. More and more writers and activists feel compelled to come to Palestine, account for its colonial realities, and connect to its traditions of resistance. A few examples will suffice. Rachel Corrie's *Let Me Stand Alone: The Journals of Rachel Corrie* (2008) chronicles Corrie's encounter with occupied Palestine before she was murdered trying to courageously block the demolition of a Palestinian family's home in Gaza. Ben Ehrenreich examines Palestinian life in the West Bank in *The Way to the Spring: Life and Death in Palestine*

(2017), and Andrew Ross accounts for the neglected Palestinian construction workers in *Stone Men: The Palestinians Who Built Israel* (2019). Another example is Arthur Neslen collective portrait of Palestinian identity mapped through different interviews in his *In Your Eyes a Sandstorm: Ways of Being Palestinian* (2011).

For the last decade, a new mode of literary solidarity and encounter has been organised by Ahdaf Soueif through the unique activities of the Palestinian Festival of Literature. As a travelling festival, PalFest took over 200 writers and literary professionals from around the world to Palestine to read from their work and meet with Palestinians. The aims of the festival were: “showcasing and supporting cultural life in Palestine, breaking the cultural siege imposed on Palestinians by the Israeli military occupation, and strengthening cultural links between Palestine and the rest of the world”. *This Is Not A Border: Reportage & Reflection from the Palestine Festival of Literature* (2017) is a selection of writing that shows how deeply consequential and productive this journeying to Palestine has been. Especially, for Soueif, in order to witness what in Jerusalem she calls the *ihlal* or substitution of one people by another – employing the violent logic of “We instead of you”. As a journey through culture and political geography, Marcello Di Cintio’s *Pay No Heed to the Rockets* (2018) belongs to this solidarity genre as well.

Under suffering’s glow and in the context of the criminalisation and demonization of Palestinian resistance in the West (including the non-violent resistance of the Boycott Divestment and Sanctions movement), more Palestinians are resorting to writing about their life and history in English. The emergence and proliferation of the Palestinian novel in English as a new genre is noteworthy here. Brewing for the last decade, it has been increasingly coming into its own as an effort to reach across borders, times, and ruptured family histories. Historical chronicle mixes with present-day setting in order to account for the breadth of Palestinian dispersal and modes of reconnection. There is: Randa Jarrar’s *A Map of Home* (2008); Susan Abulhawa’s *Mornings in Jenin* (2011) and *The Blue Between Sky and Water* (2015); Selma Dabbagh’s *Out of It* (2011); Ahmed Masoud’s *Vanished: The Mysterious Disappearance of Mustafa Ouda* (2015); and, most recently, Hala Alyan’s *Salt Houses* (2017) and Isabella Hammad’s staggeringly praised historical novel *The Parisian* (2019).

What is striking about these new novels is that most of them are written by women. Indeed, women have been contributing in increasing numbers across many different cultural forms. More women writers are gaining prominence in the Palestinian Arabic novel. For example, Husama Habayeb’s recent work has been compared to the founding generation of Palestinian novelists. Her third and latest

novel *Velvet* won the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature in 2017. *Before the Queen Falls Asleep* (2011) is widely regarded as the most important novelistic representation of Palestinian refugees since Ghassan Kanafani. Other notable contributions are Maya Abu al-Hayat's *No One Knows Their Blood Type* (2013) and Adania Shibli's *Touch* (2002; trans. 2010) and *We Are All Equally Far from Love* (2004; trans. 2012).

There are also many notable recent novels by men worth highlighting – with significant thematic innovation and generic development. Like: Raba'i al-Madhoun's troubled return to his homeland in *The Lady from Tel-Aviv* (2009; trans. 2013), which won both the International Prize for Arabic Literature and the English Pen Award; Ala Hlehel's historical novel *Au Revior Akka [Acre]* (2014); and Abbad Yahya's *Crime in Ramallah* (2017) that charts millennial life under occupation and was banned for its explicit sexuality and gay representation in the city. Add to that prominent Lebanese novelist Elias Khoury's on-going examination of Palestine from *Gate of the Sun* (1998; 2006) to *My Name is Adam: Children of the Ghetto* (2016; 2018), and Ibrahim Nasrallah's recent novels, such as *Time of White Horses* (2007; 2016).

Most visibly, it has been cinema that has seen not only an exponential rise in significance and cultural reach (with new films by founding director Michel Khleifi and by post-Oslo directors like Elia Suleiman and Hany Abu-Assad) but also a growing crop of internationally recognised women directors as well. There is: May Masri's post-Beirut work, including her films on refugee life in Lebanon, like *Children of Shatila* (1998); Annemarie Jacir's three features, including her brilliantly realist *Wajib* (2017); Cherien Dabis's *Amreeka* (2009); Suha Arraf's *Villa Touma* (2014); Maha Haj's intimate stylised *Personal Affairs* (2016); and Maysaloun Hamoud's feminist and feisty *In Between* (2016). In the absence of any Palestinian national funds for the development or support of a Palestinian film industry, what these productions convey is an individual determination to excel in new forms of self-expression. Aesthetically and politically varied and diverse, these new films respond to harsh socio-political realities and mediate new modes of Palestinian being and belonging.

Post-millennial Palestine, then, has seen a proliferation of independent Palestinian voice ranging across all major forms of cultural production. Palestinian culture is no longer located *in* Palestine, though it continues to be pulled by the destructive realities of present-day suffering there. And Palestinian voice can no longer monopolised by one political party, official representative, or court sanctioned

writers. If this multiplicity can be read as fragmentation, it can also be seen as a form of sharedness: that Palestine is a project in common.

For a refugee people, such cultural multivocality has its political virtues. It clearly affirms that the only form of politics that can accommodate dispersal and varied condition is democracy. Political substitution is not a basis for collective representation. In the formulation of a common destiny, no one entity or locale can have more weight or speak on behalf of another: neither the occupied on behalf of the *shatat* nor the reverse. To mirror diversifying self-representation in culture is to uphold the right of Palestinian self-determination in politics. That's the main lesson I take from a post-millennial Palestine. That deep-rooted self-organization of Palestinians across the world has to be part of a future strategy for Palestinian emancipation. Suffering's glow will end: by acts of imagination quite as much as by new forms organization and mobilization – to borrow Raymond Williams's phrasing.