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Al-Nakba-- Dark Ruins of the Tribal Poets: Tragedy Expressed Via New Literary Forms Infuses Half a Century of Palestinian Poetry

By Judith Gabriel

For a people whose love of poetry has been rooted in their land for centuries, it is no wonder that the loss of Palestine in 1948 marks the emergence of contemporary Palestinian poetry, impacting the very nature of literature throughout the Arab world, and ultimately, attracting a growing Western audience.

Half a century has gone by since the onset of the history-shattering events Palestinians refer to as al-nakba - the 'uprooting,' the 'catastrophe' that befell their homeland with the carving out of the state of Israel, the 'disaster' that still infuses their poetry.

After the loss of Palestine in 1948, the voices of the tribal poets were stunned into silence for some time, as they, too, became refugees, wanderers in exile or subjects under siege. But once they picked up their pens again, their poetry would break existing molds, changing the very state of the art, and infuse the suddenly evolving stream of Arabic literature with specifically Palestinian themes.

Palestinians have written about their loss and their aspirations from throughout the widely differing arenas of their scattering: in refugee camps, under occupation in the West Bank and Gaza, in the Arab ghettos inside Israel, and in generation-spanning exile in the Arab world or the West.

A large body of their work is now accessible to the American reader, with a growing body of translations, as in the "Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature," edited by Salma Khadra Jayyusi (Columbia University Press, 1992). The book was prepared under the auspices of PROTA, Project of Translation from Arabic, of which Jayyusi is the founder and director. The hefty volume covers prose as well as poetry, and includes a section on poets writing in English.

Another book, "Palestine and Modern Arab Poetry" (Zed Books Ltd., London, 1984) by Khalid A. Sulaiman of Yarmouk University in Jordan, couches a representative collection of translated poetry in a chronological political and historical context, with selected segments in the original Arabic, beginning with the prophetic warnings issued by nationalist poets such as Muhammad Is'af al-Nashashibi, Ibrahim Tuqan and Abu Salma in the earlier decades of the century.

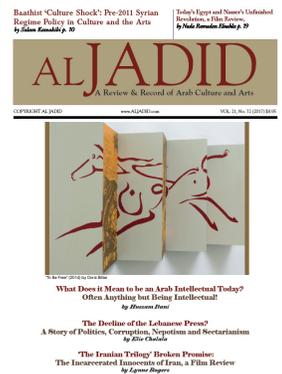
"The loss of Palestine formed the tragic reality which determined the climate within which Arabic poetry has developed since the late forties," writes Sulaiman. "The Palestine experience has radiated a new poetic tone, a new symbolism, a new angst which forms a subterranean level of modern poetry."

The 1948 defeat, with the overwhelming psychological and physical upheaval it produced, came as a surprise for the poets, as well as the people. The immediate response, according to Sulaiman, was often characterized by "impotent fury, an overwhelming sense of injury and despair." The nakbabe became the sole concern of the poets, who often, in the years immediately preceding it, pointed the finger of blame directly at themselvesBthe Arab nation.

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While the poetry written after 1948 relied, as did earlier 20th century Palestinian poetry, on the evocative power of words, it was still dominated by rhetoric and fiery phrases, according to Sulaiman. The noticeable difference between those poems written before 1948 and those after can be seen "in the spirit of sadness caused by defeat which pervades the later works."

New expressions appeared: terms such as jurh (wound), khayma (tent), manfa(exile) and awdah (return) became symbols for the Palestinian tragedy itself, and poets throughout the Arab world composed variations on the theme of the refugee. Probably the very first on the subject was written in October of 1948 by Kamil Sulayman of Lebanon. Entitled Laji'a (The Refugee Woman), it describes how during the terror in her city, a woman whose husband had just been killed became so frightened that as she fled with two of her children, she left a baby behind at home.

Titles throughout the Arab world reflected similar ordeals: "The Caravan of the Wretched, A Refugee Girl in Custody, and The Orphan Refugee." But the representation of the refugee as a downtrodden victim gradually gave way to a more complex picture, reflecting a growing sense of restlessness and resistance. Before long, the poet refugees were voicing rejection of a fate that cast them only as unworthy losers, wandering from place to place while passively awaiting mercy from heaven. The poet crystallized the core identity of the people, giving voice to the protest that signals the return of psychic vigor to those depersonalized and benumbed with victim mentality.

The endless journeying of the Palestinian exile, and the longing to return, were tandem subjects taken up with passion by several poets. Fadwa Tuqan's poem "The Call of the Land," written in 1954, tells how one spring night, a refugee leaves his tent and heads for his land. Mesmerized by the lights of Jaffa in the distance, he crosses the border, knowing this means he will lose his life, but it will be on the soil of his homeland.

Throughout the Arabic-speaking world, the words of Palestine's poets would be memorized, turned into songs, read in far-off corners of the ghurba, the diaspora; read by simple people, and by intellectuals and scholars. Poetry helped overcome the pain of being marooned by the world. It stirred national consciousness, celebrating the land and its traditions. Palestinians throughout the world wrote about the lost villages and uprooted olive trees, as if, through words, to recreate a sense of nearness to the homeland.

Other predominant themes in the ensuing years were driven by a successive round of defeats, leading ultimately to poetry reflecting the rise of resistance. The words of the poets became, if not weapons, at least powerful tools, for as writer and critic Jabra Ibrahim Jabra wrote, while poetry might be condemned as too weak a toy against guns, but "in actual fact it was often as good as dynamite. It gave point to a whole nation's suffering and wrath. It crystallized political positions in telling lines, which, memorized by old and young, stiffened popular resistance and provided rallying slogans."

The Palestinians found in poetry a resource and a process with which to try to understand themselves, and to explore the moral and psychological changes that were impacting the artist, the society and the individual after the loss of Palestine.

New generations emerged to write about the realities of life under occupation. From flimsy tents of those first winters to the continuing outrages of deportation and demolition, Palestinian poets drew on their rousing, haunting gifts, pouring them into radically new poetic forms.

Taking their unique nakba wounds with them into exile, as well as their openness to experiment with new literary forms, Palestinian writers interfaced with their counterparts in Europe and the Americas. They also came into direct contact with the movements that dominated Arabic writing since the fifties, comprising one of the richest periods in the Arab literary renaissance that began in the 19th century. The acceleration paid off, artistically. "Exiled Palestinian poets are now among the foremost avant-garde poets of the Arab world," according to Jayyusi.

As a result of these movements, free verse and certain schools of symbolism became the rage in the 50s, with poets being influenced by modernists such as T.S. Eliot, and particularly "The Wasteland." Jabra often analyzed its appeal to Palestinian poets: "Eliot found his myth in one of the most ancient rituals of manBand one of the most enduring throughout all civilizationsBthe restoration of fertility to the dead land through the blood of the gods. The world was a wasteland and it had to be revived." It was a fitting symbol for Palestine.

Jabra's translation of James Frazer's volume "Adonis" from "The Golden Bough" re-introduced Eastern mythology to Arab writers, providing the Arabic text of the Tammuz myth which partly underlay Eliot's poem. "As the myth originally belonged to our part of the world it seemed natural that Arab poets would incorporate it in their work. Thus the dominant theme in the Arabic poetry of the fifties was that of the parched land waiting for rain; of fertility restored through the blood of Tammuz, murdered by the wild boar; of death and resurrection." Tammuz was flanked by Gilgamesh and Sinbad, Ishtar and Sisyphus in the pantheon of allusions in Palestinian poetry.

PREVIOUS ISSUES



Use of the new prose poetry form was pioneered by poets such as Tawfiq Sayigh, who shunned the stiff poetic diction of tradition, using language that was closer to the way modern Arabs spoke. He also discarded the idea of the poet as hero and prophet, seeing himself instead as a victim of the times, a victim filled with the sorrow and alienation of the refugee. In "Qasida 14" he recalls the home he had to leave in Tiberius in 1948, and protests that "My feet are torn / and homelessness has worn me out. / Park seats have left their marks / on my ribs." The new poetry was intensely conscious of the individual's experience.

The intoxication with modern free verse poetry schemes, according to Issa J. Boullata, writing in his collection of essays, "Critical Perspectives on Modern Arabic Literature" (Three Continents Press, 1980) was not a rejection of rhythm. Poets like Jabra and Sayigh, he said, considered the traditional rhythm too monotonous to embody modern life. Traditional rhyming held the risk of "numbing the feeling and adumbrating the thought by creating in the reader or hearer a certain entrancing thrill...so that the attention can be distracted from the meaning."

Whether these contemporary poetic trends came about as a direct result of the social changes impacting the Palestinian and the rest of the Arab world, or were an imitation of Western modes, has often been debated by literary analysts, and several essays dealing with the contemporary metamorphosis of Palestinian and Arab literature can be found in Boullata's collection.

But pointing to the cataclysmic changes it wrought, Jabra maintains it was no accident that the great change in Arabic poetry started more or less with the Palestine disaster. "Suddenly, with the shock and the bitterness, young people all over the Arab world not only saw things in a new light but had to express them in a new way, more immediate, less form-ridden, taking Western innovations in their stride in a struggle for a freer imagination."

Then came the June War in 1967, a defeat to which poets initially responded with a sense of shock, setting off another round of self-criticism and self-condemnation. Sulaiman notes that many poets seemed "stunned and dumbfounded, and expressed themselves in nightmarish visions. The mood of sadness in their works became deeper than it was before the defeat."

That mood was transformed with the emergence of the resistance fighter, the Fida'i, which soon became as important a figure in poetry as the refugee had been after 1948. For a time, the poetry written by Palestinians living inside Israel was, by its very nature, referred to as "resistance poetry," a genre which Sulaiman counts as the most significant literary outcome of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Those living inside "concentrated on stirring up national consciousness among their people, and to re-state constantly their immutable adherence to their national identity."

At the same time, the borders between Israel and the West Bank and the Gaza Strip were opened, and in Jayyusi's words, "the two wings of Palestinian culture on the soil of Palestine itself were reunited, and each side then fully understood and identified with the experience of the other."

In fact, it was not until the mid-sixties that the first connection was made between the Palestinian poets and writers inside Israel with their expatriate countrymen and women. "The diaspora writers discovered, with apparently unexpected joy, the presence of an already powerful poetic activity behind the iron walls that divided the Palestinian people."

To the rest of the world, however, it still seemed that the Palestinian people did not exist, except as remote statistics. Mahmoud Darwish became the main exponent of the literature of resistance in the sixties, and was, like many fellow poets, often imprisoned by Israeli authorities. He earned international acclaim for his poetry on the Palestine experience, etching with the details of human moments rather than ideology, but constantly imbued with a drive for his people's dignity.

When his poem "A Lover from Palestine" was going to be published, he presented it to the Israeli censor, who crossed out the word 'Palestine' and replaced it with 'Eretz Israel.'" The insistence on his identity later prompted him to compose what is probably the most internationally-celebrated Palestinian poem, Bitaqat Hawiyya [Identity Card], in which the poet, in the voice of a worker, addresses just such a bureaucrat: "Write down! I am an Arab."

It would not be until the intifada that the West would put a more human face on its perception of Palestinians. The story is far from over; resolution remains elusive. Yet it is significant that as the century draws to a close, there is increasing interest among non-Arab audiences in the poetry written by Palestinians and their descendants. Translations from the Arabic, as well as the growing number of new poems written in the tongues of adopted homelands, are instrumental in reaching the general public, as well as literati, in libraries and bookstores, and through formal readings and public radio broadcasts.



Palestinian poets in the U.S., such as Naomi Shihab Nye, who writes about her father planting a fig tree in his new Texas home, and her aging grandmother's isolation in Jerusalem, have garnered major literary recognition. This free-verse history and first-person journalism has the power to confront the world with the courageous reality of Palestinian humanity, as captured by the poets' highly sensitive recording abilities. The rest of us, daunted by years of geopolitical wrangling that passes for coverage of the Palestine issue, are made privy to the universal human moment from within the experienter, as if we, too, cannot shake off the desolation of the tent and the tremble of border crossings; and we, too, toss at night with mirages of ancestral olive orchards gone belly up, and the nightmares of orphans and prisoners.

Who should bear hearing such a wail? Such is the job of poets. Through the alchemy of their art, poets transform the unbearable, making it possible for civilization to trod the proverbial mile in the sandals of the uprooted, and to share in some of their dignity.

Judith Gabriel is a Los Angeles based journalist, writer, and playwright. She was the news director at Pacifica, Los Angeles, where she also produced and hosted "Middle East in Focus" for five years.

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