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# A Land Made of Words

*Fakhri Saleh on Palestinian Writers*

*In Memory of Mahmoud Darwish*

The Palestinian catastrophe lies at the heart of many Palestinian writers' oeuvres. Through a variety of literary forms and genres, they have attempted to show the world the looming horrors of a people dispossessed, exiled, and crippled. In particular, the poet Mahmoud Darwish (1941-2008) and the novelists Ghassan Kanafani (1936-1972), Jabra Ibrahim Jabra (1920-1994), and Emile Habiby (1921-1996) stand out by virtue of the uniquely innovative literary styles through which they capture the Palestinian Nakba (catastrophe): the tragedy of a people who lost their land.

Palestine was once the site of a rich literary production including even highly stylized forms of poetry, drama, and novels. But Palestinian literary life was dramatically cut short with the founding of Israel in 1948. Only a few printed books and manuscripts were rescued; instead, it was up to historians to reconstruct the rich literary scene that existed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For this reason, the literature produced by Palestinians after 1948 was mainly a literature of exile. Palestinians have been forcibly driven from their homeland. The first time in 1948, when the Israelis slaughtered tens of thousands of Palestinians and sent to exodus hundreds of thousands more; the second time when Israel invaded the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1967, forcing the many Palestinians who were (for the most part) living in refugee camps to start another journey of exile and banishment from their homeland. And Palestinian expatriation continues even today: through deportation, but sometimes even voluntary exile in response to the deteriorating social, political, and economic situation in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, or for Palestinians living in Israel.

Although the great luminaries of Palestinian literature—Mahmoud Darwish,

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**Fakhri Saleh** is a leading critic of contemporary Arabic literature. He studied English literature and philosophy at the University of Jordan and contributes regularly to *Al-Hayat* (London) and other newspapers and magazines in the Arab world and beyond. He is now the head of Arabic publishing at Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation Publishing. Previously, he served as the Vice President of the Arab Writers Union and acted as the Head of the Cultural Department at Ad-Dustour newspaper (Jordan) from 1997 to 2010, where he was also managing editor from 2002 to 2014. The author of many books about Palestinian literature, the Arabic novel, poetry, and literary criticism, Saleh has also published two books on Edward Said and translated Terry Eagleton's *Criticism and Ideology* and Tzvetan Todorov's *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle* into Arabic.

Emile Habiby, Fadwa Touqan, Sahar Khalifeh—wrote from inside Palestine, the bulk of this people's literary output came from the diaspora, i.e. the Arab world, Europe, or the United States. Those born in Palestine before 1948 attempted to trace their homeland from their own faint memory; those born in the diaspora accessed their distant home through the vivid stories told by their fathers, mothers, grandfathers, and grandmothers. Their Palestine is one that finds a new existence in literature: in the poetry, short stories, and novels written by members of several different generations during the second half of the twentieth century. Taking into consideration the recent Palestinian divisions and deadlock, one cannot deny that literature—which pulled Palestine from its remoteness and affirmed its place in the collective imagination—has been of singular importance in sustaining hope in the Palestinian cause.

In this sense, Palestinian literature is a literature of exile, a quest for identity in a hostile world, a writing of fractured lives and displaced hopes, a record of a human tragedy. The Palestinian is the exile—the diasporic creature—par excellence. In *After the Last Sky*, Edward Said (1935-2003) offers a spirited portrayal of the lives of Palestinian individuals and distant, dispersed, and dispossessed communities. He gives voice to their deep sense of exile and vulnerability: "the stability of geography and the continuity of land—these have completely disappeared from my life and the life of all Palestinians. If we are not stopped at borders, or herded into new camps, or denied reentry and residence, or barred from travel from one place to another, more of our land is taken, our lives are interfered with arbitrarily, our voices are prevented from reaching each other, our identity is confined to frightened little islands in an inhospitable environment." Palestinian literature, on the whole, echoes this sentiment. It gives voice to an acute sense of loss, of instability and vulnerability, regardless of whether it is written by Palestinians who live as "home-exiles" in the occupied territories or in refugee camps or ghettos in the diaspora.

The reference to exile as a restraint and annihilation of identity, indeed, is a recurring motif in Palestinian literature. In his poem "Lover from Palestine," Mahmoud Darwish expresses the sense of exile indirectly; he develops a metaphor for exile by chronicling a love story. But is the poet talking about his beloved or trying to express his agony and deep-seated horror? Although the poem was written during Darwish's stay in Palestine before he left to the Arab world in 1972, the "I" of the speaker could be taken as a symbol of the chorus of the expelled and marginalized Palestinian people at home and abroad. The loss of home, the sense of expatriation and endangered identity is expressed magnificently in one of this great writer's best-known poems:

Your words were a song  
 And I tried to sing, too,  
 But agony encircled the lips of spring.  
 And like the swallow, your words took wing,  
 The door of our home and the autumnal threshold migrated,  
 To follow you wherever led by longing  
 Our mirrors were shattered,  
 And sorrow was multiplied a thousand fold.  
 And we gathered the splinters of sound,  
 Mastering only the elegy of our homeland!  
 Together we will plant it in the heart of a lyre,  
 And on the rooftops of our tragedy we'll play it  
 To mutilated moons and to stones.  
 But I have forgotten, you of the unknown voice:  
 Was it your departure that rushed the lyre or was it my silence?

The Palestinian cannot be cured of this sense of not belonging and living as a stranger in the world. This sad existence has become entrenched in the writings of Palestinians regardless of where in the world they dwell. Edward Said, in his reflections on exile, attempts to discern the threads that make up the Palestinian experience. Departing from his own sense of agony and alienation, Said describes exile as a strangely "compelling" thing to think about. Yet it is undoubtedly a "terrible experience"; exile is:

the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home. Its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever.

This notion also runs through the work of Emile Habiby, whose masterpiece *The Secret Life of Said: the Pessoptimist* (1974) chronicles the lives of Palestinians under Israeli rule in historical Palestine. *Said the Pessoptimist* is a satire of the Palestinians' precarious existence in their own homeland; the life of the Israeli Palestinian is still the life of an exile and in that sense mirrors the experience of their fellow Palestinians in the diaspora. In *Said the Pessoptimist* and other novels stemming from the same social and political context, Habiby articulates the sufferings of the Palestinians inside historical Palestine, the sense of un-belonging and being a double agent: being a Palestinian and not a Palestinian, an Israeli but without Israeli rights. In addition to the existential locus of Habiby's work, he also revolutionized the novelistic genre in Arabic culture, fusing characteristically Western forms of storytelling with traditional Arabic forms like Maqama, the *One Thousand and One Nights* fables, and

poetry recitals. This kind of writing—the amalgamation of Western and Arabic forms—is almost a cure for the deep division inside Habiby's Arab-Israeli characters. It is a writing that responds to the Zionization of Palestine.

And then, there are two great writers who behold the Palestinian tragedy from the vantage point of the diaspora. Ghassan Kanafani is a novelist, a short story writer, a dramatist, and a scholar, whose family was uprooted and moved to Syria in 1948. (His own car, meanwhile, was bombed by the Israelis during his exile in Beirut.) He depicts the tragedy of Palestinian refugees and seeks at the same time to foster national consciousness and explore paths of liberation for his people. The Palestinian predicament is told in powerful images and symbols to convey a sense of the betrayal that the Palestinians have suffered; his *Men in the Sun* (1963) and *All That's Left to You* (1966) symbolize the Palestinian exodus and tragedy following the 1948 Palestinian catastrophe. In addition to his novels, Ghassan Kanafani wrote four collections of short stories and three plays that focus on the human subject's turmoil as well as the suffering of his people at large. Kanafani, like Mahmoud Darwish, treats Palestine and the Palestinians as symptomatic of the human condition—by framing their tragedy as a human tragedy.

Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, another prominent Palestinian novelist, short story writer, poet, literary critic, and translator from English into Arabic, wrote about the Palestinian individual in diasporic communities. His writing reveals the bewilderment of Palestinians living under the constant threat of annihilation and loss of identity. The feeling of siege abounds in Jabra's verse and fiction, and the need to break out of it is a major trait of that great Arab writer who succeeded in the amalgamation of the portrayal of Palestinian exile and understanding modern humanity. Jabra's novels—*Hunters in a Narrow Street* (1960), *The Ship* (1969), and *The Search for Walid Massoud* (1978)—bring together modernity and the liberation of the Palestinian people, at home and in the diaspora.



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