POETRY OF RESISTANCE

IN

OCCUPIED PALESTINE

TRANSLATED

BY

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PALESTINIAN LITERATURE

Translated from: *Resistance literature In Occupied Palestine*

By Ghassan Kanafani

The fall of Palestine to the Zionists in 1948 led to a disastrous change both in the number and the social structure of the Arab population in occupied Palestine. Nearly three quarters of the 200,000 Arabs who continued to live in their homeland were peasants. The cities were mostly evacuated either during the war or soon afterwards. This led to a shocking deterioration in Arab social conditions due to the fact that the cities had been the centers of both political and cultural effusion.

As the Zionist occupants closed their military ring, they started to impose their oppressive measures; the atmosphere was convenient for them. Their chief purpose was to eradicate every trace of the Arab personality and to implant the seeds of new trends which might grow and integrate within the Zionist political and literary life.

Palestinian Literature, up to this tragic fall had been part of the mainstream of the Arab literary movement which flourished during the first half of the century. It had got its sources from and had been influenced by Egyptian, Syrian and Lebanese writers who led the literary movement then. Even renowned Palestinian writers had been indebted for their fame mostly to the Arab capitals which used to receive them and patronize their productions. Several factors had in fact contributed to diminishing the value of Palestinian literature at a time when Palestine was enjoying a prominent position in the political arena and the struggle for Arab nationalism.

After 1948, Palestinian literature succeeded in laying the foundations of a new literary movement which may be better described as the literature of Exile rather than Palestinian or Refugee literature. Poetry, the chief element of this movement, has been able during recent years to witness a remarkable progress in quality and technique. The short period of silence after the 1948 war was followed by a
great awakening, and national poetry poured out reflecting the people’s national fervor. It interacted with Arab and foreign literary trends and gradually broke the traditional rules of technique, rejected the old sentimental outbursts and emerged with a unique feeling of profound sadness more commensurate with the realities of the situation.

On the other hand, resistance literature inside occupied Palestine was confronted with radical differences in tenets. The backbone of Arab literature in Occupied Palestine had disappeared with the emigration of a whole generation of writers and men of culture. The non-emigrants constituted a society which was mostly rural and was subjected to Political, social and cultural persecution unmatched anywhere else in the world.

The following points may shed some light on the real situation of the Arabs inside occupied Palestine:

1. The majority of the Palestinians who remained were not, owing to their social condition, up to the cultural standard which allows for the creation of a new generation of writers and artists.

2. The Arab cities which used to receive and encourage the talented young men coming from the rural sector were transformed into prohibited cities of the enemy.

3. The Arab population was completely isolated and had no contact with the Arab countries.

4. The Zionist military rule imposed on the Arab population tyrannical restrictions, and censored their literary productions.

5. Publishing and distribution means have been either limited or under tight restrictions.

6. Opportunity for Arabs to learn foreign languages is nonexistent. Very few are allowed to enter high schools and almost none are allowed to enter university.

It should be borne in mind when reading the literature which has been able to emerge, that the Arab population has been struggling through the dim night of persecution and torture to consolidate its existence and to express itself. It has now succeeded in forming its own expression crystallizing it into a palpitating literature of resistance.

Under this hard siege, it is quite easy to realize why poetry was the first harbinger of the resistance call, for poetry spreads from mouth to mouth and lives without publication. This also
explains why this poetry was at the beginning restricted to the traditional form which is easier to learn by heart and quicker to appeal to the sentiments. The first outburst was mainly characterized with love lyrics, but side by side with the traditional poetry, popular vernacular lyrics began to appear to form the first kernel of resistance manifestation. In fact, popular poetry played a big role in the history of Palestine since the twenties and was famous all over the Arab world. Nearly every Palestinian knows and recites the following popular lyric which was extemporized by a Palestinian struggler just before he was executed by the British Mandate in 1936:

Night, stay a little longer, until the captive
Finishes his song.

By dawn, his wing will flutter
And the hanged man will swing
In the wind.

Night, lessen your pace,
Let me pour my heart to you,
Perhaps you forgot who I am and what my troubles are.

Pity, how my hours have slipped
Down your hands.

Do not think I weep from fear,

My tears are for, my country
And for a bunch of fledglings
Hungry at home
Without a father.
Who will feed them after me?
And my two brothers,
Before me swung on the scaffold.
And how will my wife spend her days,
Lonely and in tears?
I did not even leave her bracelet
In her wrist
When my country cried for arms.

Popular lyrics dominated the scene for almost ten years after 1948 before any standard well-developed literature appeared. It was the medium by which the defeated people expressed themselves. It dominated every manifestation of their life. Wedding mornings, evening sittings and all other gatherings were transformed by the effect of those lyrics into fierce demonstrations heedless of the firing squads. Many popular poets were put in prison or confined under severe restrictions. And as the trend of popular poetry grew and expanded, the occupying forces extended their tyrannical measures, killed some poets and prohibited all Arab gatherings. Such measures could not anyhow uproot this trend of resistance but rather kept it dormant for almost five years to burst anew with intense force and vitality. With the beginning of the sixties, surprisingly enough, a remarkable new wave of literature appeared to light. The tenets of this new wave were courageous, full of vitality and optimism and highly charged with the spirit of defiance, unlike the literature of the exile poets of the same period, which was mostly sad and vehement.

The decade which preceded this new outburst can better be described as the period of integration of the personality and the identification of the Arab personality with the cause of struggle. The defeated and the helpless that had resorted to love poetry during the few years which followed 1948 began at the advent of the sixties to develop into a real force of resistance, dauntless, brave and hopeful.

Love poetry was the outcome of the bitter feelings of loneliness and deprivation which overwhelmed the Arab population after 1948. The feeling that they were a defeated minority began with the passage of time to change into a feeling of defiance, and they succeeded in confronting their hard circumstances face to face.

Resistance was not an easy choice; it was rather a daily battle with a ferocious enemy who considered it a question of life and death. And as the measures of persecution became fiercer,
resistance consolidated. Contrary to the poetry of exile, the poetry of resistance emerged with an astonishing revolutionary spirit completely free from the sad and tearful trend. Strangely enough, it quickly reverberated with all the political upheavals of the Arab countries.

Resistance poetry did not only witness a change in purport and poetic effect but also in form and technique. It rejected the traditional poetic forms and adopted modern techniques without losing force. As to purport, resistance poetry resorted to various mediums of expression:

1. Love: The love for woman is completely integrated with the love of the homeland. Woman and Earth are completely assimilated in one great love and transformed into the great cause of liberation.
2. Satire: The enemy and the henchmen are ridiculed and the acts of suppression are expressed with bitter irony. This trend expresses a lively and an unconquerable spirit which considers all happenings as an ephemeral and transitional condition which sooner or later must and will be changed and put back to normality.

3. Defiance and challenge. The enemy is exposed and put face to face with the staunch and fearless spirit of the fighters. It is noteworthy that resistance literature is chiefly characterized as leftist. This is the outcome of the circumstances which dominated Palestinian life, which can be summed up as follows:

1. The majority of the Arab population is rural and deeply involved in the revolutions and uprisings which took place in Palestine before 1948 against the British Mandate. It is they as well who received the hardest blow in 1948.

2. The very bad living conditions in which they live and the harsh tyranny which they meet in their struggle for daily bread.

3. The fact that the existence of the enemy is the outcome of the imperialistic, capitalistic schemes and that its continuation is mainly sustained by capitalism. Moreover, resistance poetry is a challenge to all Zionist beliefs. It deals with them all and discards them one after the other. It is a closely welded literature based on reasoning and not on sheer emotion. Above all, it remains an important link in the chain of the permanent Arab revolution and goes hand in hand with the Arab progressive movement. It has been able, despite all hindrances and obstacles, to grow into a real literature and to present the personality of the fighting poet.
THE IMPOSSIBLE

Tawfiq Zayyad

It is much easier for you
To push an elephant through a needle’s eye,
Catch fried fish in galaxy,
Blow out the sun,
Imprison the wind,
Or make a crocodile speak,
Than to destroy by persecution
The shimmering glow of a belief
Or check our march
Towards our cause
One single step.............

____________________________________

(2)

A LOVER FROM PALESTINE

Mahmoud Darwish

Like a thorn in the heart are your eyes
Lacerating, yet adorable,
I shield them from the storm
And pierce them deep through night and pain,
The wound illuminates thousands of stars
My present makes their future
Dearer than my being
And I forget as our eyes meet
That once we were twins behind the gate.
Your words were my song
I tried to sing again
But winter settled on the rosy lip.

Your words, like a swallow, flew away,
My door and the wintry threshold
Flew away behind you, longing for you
And our mirrors broke
Sorrow grew
So we gathered the splinters of sound
But only learnt to lament the homeland
We shall plant it together
On the strings of a guitar
And on the roof of our catastrophe,
we shall play it
For distorted moons and stones
But I forgot, O you whose voice I do not know
Whether it was your departure
Or my silence
That rusted the guitar.

I saw you last at the harbor
A lonely voyager without relatives
Without a bag
I ran to you like an orphan,
Asking the wisdom of the ancestors:
How could an orchard be banished
To a prison, to an exile or a harbor
And yet remain, despite the journey
And the smell of salts or yearnings,
Ever green?

And I write in my diary;
I love oranges and hate ports.
Then I write again:
I stood at the port
Winter was pouring
We only have the peel of oranges,
And behind me
There is the desert.
I saw you at the thorny mountains
A sheepless shepherd being chased
And among the ruins
And you had been my garden
And I was a stranger
Knocking at the door, my heart
Knocking my heart….
The door, the window, the cement and the stones
Stood up.

I swear
From eye lashes I shall weave
A kerchief for you
And weave on it a poem for your eyes

I shall write on it a sentence that is
Dearer than martyrs and kisses;
“She was a Palestinian and she is still so”!

I flung the doors open to the storm

Virgin mate, faithful wheat,
Palestinian are your eyes and tattoo,
Palestinian is your name
Palestinian are your dreams and concerns
Palestinian is your scarf, your feet, your form,
Palestinian are your words and your silence
Palestinian is your voice
Palestinian in life and in death,
I hold you in my old books
A fire for my songs………..
THE EXILE

Salem Jubran

The sun walks through the border
Guns keep silent
A skylark starts its morning song
In Tulkarem
   And flies away to sup
With the birds of a Kibbutz
A lonely donkey strolls
Across the firing line
Unheeded by the watching squad
But for me, your ousted son, my native land,
Between your skies and my eyes,
A stretch of border walls
Blackens the view!

SAFAD

Salem Jubran

I am a stranger Safad
And you too,
The Houses greet me
But their dwellers
Order me to go away
Why are you roaming through the streets, Arab,
Why?
If you say hello
Nobody would answer you
Your relatives had been here
Then went away
And nobody stayed
A funeral of a morning
Sits on my lips
And in my eyes
There sits a lion’s humiliation
Farwell
Farwell Safad!

(5)

A LETTER FROM A BANKRUPT

Sameeh Al Qassem

I may lose my daily bread, if you wish
I may hawk my clothes and bed
I may become a stone cutter, or a porter
Or a street sweeper
I may search in animal dung for food
I may collapse, naked and starved
Enemy of light
I will not compromise
And to the end
I shall fight.

You may rob me of the last span of my land
You may ditch my youth in prison holes
Steel what my grandfather left me behind:
Some furniture or clothes and jars,
You may burn my poems and books
You may feed your dog on my flesh
You may impose a nightmare of your terror
On my village
Enemy of light
I shall not compromise
And to the end
I shall fight.

………………………………
……………………………..

Enemy of light
The signs of joy and the tidings
Shouts of happiness and anthems
Are there at the port
And at the horizon
A sail is defying the wind and the deep seas
Overcoming all the challenges
It is the return of Ulysses
From the lost seas
It is the return of the sun
And the return of the ousted
And for their sake
I swear
I shall not compromise
And to the end
I shall fight!

(6)

THE REACTION

MAHMOUD DARWISH

Dear Homeland

My chains teach me

The vigor of the eagle

And the tenderness of the optimist

I hadn’t known that under our skins
There is a birth of a storm

And a wedding of rivulets.

They shut me in a dark cell

My heart glowed with suns of torches

They wrote my card’s number on the walls

There grew a pasture of corn ears on the wall

They drew the face of my killer on the walls

The face was soon erased by the shades of braids

I carved the picture of your blooded face

With my teeth

And wrote the song of the departing pains

I plunged my defeat in the flesh of darkness

And put my fingers in the sunny hair
The conquerors, on the top of my roof,

Could only open the valves

Of my earthquakes.

They will not see except the glow of my forehead

They will not hear except the rattle of my chains

And if I were burned on the cross of my cause

I would become a saint in the garb of a struggler.

(7)

THE OLIVE TREE

Tawfiq Zayyad

Because I do not knit wool*
Because I am always hunted
And my house is always raided.
Because I cannot own a piece of paper,
I shall carve my memoirs
On the home yard olive tree.

I shall carve bitter reflections,
Scenes of love and yearnings,
For my stolen orange grove
And the lost tombs of my dead.

I shall carve all my strivings
For the sake of remembrance
For the time when I’ll drown them
In the avalanche of triumph

I shall carve the serial number
Of every stolen piece of land
The place of my village on the map
And the blown up houses,
And the uprooted trees
And every bloom that was crushed
And all the names of the experts in torture
The names of the prisons…..

I shall carve dedications
To memories threading down to eternity
To the blooded soil of Deir Yasin
And Kufur Qassem.
I shall carve the sun’s beckoning
And the moon’s whisperings
And what a skylark recalls
At a love deserted well.

For the sake of remembrance,
I shall continue to carve
All the chapters of my tragedy
And all the stages of Al-Nakbah
On the home yard olive tree!

* Reference to Madame Lafarge, who used to knit the names of the traitors and send them to the French revolutionaries during the French Revolution.
TO CHRIST ON HIS BIRTHDAY

Fadwa Tuqan

Lord, glory of the universes
On your Birthday this year
All the joys of Jerusalem are crucified
All the bells, O Lord
Are silent!
For two thousand years,
They haven’t been silent on your birthdays,
Except this year
The domes are now in mourning
Black is wrapped in black
On the Via Dolorosa,
Jerusalem is whipped
Under the cross
Bleeding
On the hands of the executioner.
The world is adamant to the tragedy
The light has departed from that lost ruthless master
Who did not light one candle
Who did not shed one tear
To wash the sorrows of Jerusalem
The vinedressers have killed the heir, O Lord,
And usurped the vine
The vinedressers killed the heir, my Lord
The bird of sin has feathered
Within the sinners of the world
And flew to desecrate Jerusalem’s chastity
What a cursed devil he is,
Even hated by the Devil.
O Lord, glory of Jerusalem
Out of the well of agony
Out of the abyss
Out of the recesses of night
Out of the horror
Jerusalem’s groaning ascends to you
Mercy, lord
Spare her this chalice!

(9)

ANTIGONE

Sameeh Alqassem

One
Two
Three
Forward
Forward
Victim of blind Gods
Immolation ram
At the alter of the lusts
Of this Dark Age

One
Two
Three
Hand in hand
Let us cross this lunatic path!

O Father
There are still two eyes
In your face
And you still have
Two feet on your land

So strike, across the night,
The worst catastrophe in the history of man
Let us create
Across the night
A dawn for life.

O Father,
If the devil of sorrows
Plucked your eyes
I am for you your night lamp
Drinking from the oil of faith
And tomorrow, father, I swear
I will bring you back
What the pirate’s sins
Have stolen from you
I swear, father, in the name of God
And the name of Man!

One
Two
Three
Forward
Forward!

(Ever Alive)

My beloved home land
No matter how long the millstone
Of pain and agony churns you
In the wilderness of tyranny,
They will never be able
To pluck your eyes
Or kill your hopes and dreams
Or crucify your will to rise
Or steel the smiles of our children
Or destroy and burn,
Because out from our deep sorrows,
Out from the freshness of our spilled blood
Out from the quiverings of life and death
Life will be reborn in you again………
(11)
IDENTITY CARD

Mahmoud Darwish

Write down
I am an Arab
My card number is 50,000
I have eight children
The ninth will come next summer
Are you angry?

Write down
I am an Arab
I cut stone with comrade laborers
My children are eight
I squeeze the rock
To get a loaf,
A dress and a book
For them.
But I do not plead for charity at your door
And do not feel small
In front of your mansion
Are you angry?

Write down
I am an Arab
I am a name without a title
Patient, in a country
Where everybody else is very angry
My roots sink deep before the birth of time
And before the beginning of the ages,
Before the time of Cypress and olives
Before the beginnings of grass,
My father belonged to the family of the plough
Was not of grand stock
My grand father was a farmer, without a pedigree
He taught me the grandeur of the sun
Before reading books
My house is a hut
Made of reed and stalk
Are you satisfied with my rank?
I am a name without a title!
........................................
........................................
Write down
I have been robbed of my ancestral vines
And the piece of land I used to farm with all my children
Nothing remained for us and for my grand children
Except these rocks
Will your government take them?
So it is
Write down  
At the top of the first page  
I hate nobody  
I do not steel any thing  
But when I become hungry  
I eat the flesh of my marauders  
So beware….beware  
My hunger and fury!

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(12)

ALETTER FROM PRISON

Sameeh Al Qassem


It pains me, Mother  
That you burst in tears  
When my friends come  
Asking about me  
But I believe, mother  
That the splendor of life  
Is born in my prison  
And I believe that my last visitor  
Will not be an eyeless bat  
Coming at midnight.  
My last visitor must be daylight……

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