

Let me begin with a personal anecdote:

In late June 2008, I met with the poet Mahmoud Darwish for the last time. Our dinner, enjoyed in a fish restaurant along the Acre beachfront was, in retrospect, a sort of last supper, even though held in public.

Immediately after receiving the news of his death in mid August 2008, I recalled his mentioning at that meeting some memories that he still carried with him, of Acre, but especially its prison, where he had been subjected to various harassments during the Israeli military government's rule. The respective scenes were from the 1960s, on the eve, during and after the June 1967 war. That same set of memories repeatedly comes to my mind, as if raised to consciousness by some mental conveyor belt.

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Darwish made his reputation in the Arab world – along with a number of Arab poets in Israel – after that same war, thanks to, among other things, the volume *Protest Literature in Occupied Palestine* by the Palestinian author and literary scholar Ghassan Kanafani, published in Beirut before 1967. Later, this book became one of the factors influencing his decision to leave Israel, never to return.

We should recall that in the previous year, 1966, the Arab world had almost totally ignored the Arabs who had remained within the "Zionist entity", together with their works. Since the early 1950s, the question of identity had been the main theme uniting Palestinian poetry in Israel. Through the majority of poems there ran a subsidiary thread, identification with the greater Arab people, in whose heart the State of Israel had been established to include an Arab minority. This identification was also expressed in Darwish's early poems, as we see from his collection *A Lover from Palestine* from the early 1960s:

*Yes! We are Arabs  
And we're not ashamed of it!  
We know how to grasp the sickle's handle  
We know how to fight back without arms  
We know how to build a modern factory  
A house  
A hospital  
A school  
A bomb  
A missile!  
We know how to write  
Beautiful music and the finest poetry  
Polished and full of passion and thought*

As the years passed, the main theme of the majority of his poems became clear: identification with the Palestinian people, a people first ripped in two and then into shreds. Despite its earlier appearance in the works of Palestinian poets in Israeli, this theme became increasingly focused as Palestinian identity crystallized, particularly after the June 1967 war.

Despite the initial impression, we should make no mistake: Darwish did not write with haste. His poems express considerable talent and perhaps even more patience; the reader must be very knowledgeable and possess special tools in order not to miss his point. But what especially interests us here is the fact that numerous generations of Palestinians and Arabs grew up and were educated on the poetry written by members of his generation, but especially on Darwish's poems. With respect to my generation – the second generation after 1948 – what symbolized more than anything else the work of Darwish and his fellow poets was their ability to return us, on the wings of their poems, to the days before the 1948 Nakba, to what had been and was now almost totally erased. In other words, they returned us to the lost regions of Palestinian normality, a situation that the events entailing the Nakba had made abnormal and which continue to be abnormal up to the present. We can therefore credit whatever is "normal" in Palestinian life to this literature.

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Darwish merged poetry with his own personal memories. He took upon himself to go back to "my beginnings and to his beginnings" (in the words of a poem in his collection *Why Did You Leave the Horse Alone?*)<sup>1</sup>. His personal memories nevertheless quickly became collective memories.

Despite the fact that Darwish was universally considered the national poet of the Palestinian people, his poetry also expressed the here and now, not the least because he was a great poet. We can therefore say with considerable certainty that Darwish was the exception that does not prove the rule. Stated simply, in order for there to be a national poet recognized by the entire world and not exclusively by his own people, he must first be a poet. The majority of scholars studying his poetry agree on at least one major fact: The secret behind his status as national poet does not rest solely on the production of "a combative poetry, replete with national pathos"<sup>2</sup>; it also rests on his ability to transform the Palestinian experience into an allegorical metaphor or, in the words of one researcher

1 Mahmoud Darwish, *Why Did You Leave the Horse Alone?* tr. Jeffrey Sacks (Archipelago 2006).

2 See the comprehensive research conducted by Shimon Balas, *Arabic Literature in the Shadow of War* (Tel Aviv 1978): p.78-87. In Hebrew.

– into a new Odyssey, simultaneously universal, national and personal. If this were not sufficient, we should add that Darwish carefully viewed all activity, including political action, as creative work. The rest, however important, represented only minor details.

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The hardships suffered by Darwish and other Palestinian writers and artists of his generation at the beginning of their careers in Israel were not very different from those that befell Arab culture throughout Israel against the backdrop of 1948 and the subsequent events. And so, we can read the history of his work and that of his fellow poets from various points of view but certainly not in isolation from the history of Arab culture in post 1948 Israel.

As is we all know, one outcome of the 1948 war was the expulsion of the majority of Palestinian Arabs from their homeland. According to the “dry” statistics, out of a population of more than 800,000 living in Palestine before the war, only 156,000 remained within the “green line” in its wake. After establishment of the State of Israel, those who remained were transformed into a national minority within a state that continues to see its main objective as the realization of the Zionist dream, with everything that implies from a social, national and cultural perspective.

Among the victims of that war were a group of artists and intellectuals, including quite a few authors and poets, playwrights and painters who had already achieved a considerable reputation. However, the greater part of those remaining were peasants, concentrated in their villages. This distribution indicates something about the meaningful changes undergone by the socio-economic structure of the Palestinian community remaining in Israel, but also about what this change meant for the community's culture and art, implications that we can compare to the outcomes of a particularly strong earthquake.

It is important to note here that the major Arab cities in mandatory Palestine, but especially Jaffa, Acre and Haifa, were intellectual, cultural and artistic centers long before 1948. The activity that took place there made a significant contribution to the main literary streams appearing in the Arab world during the first half of the 20th century.

After 1948, a sort of literary vacuum materialized. This period of silence ended in the early 1950s, with renewal of the literary life of Palestinian residents of Israel, considerably due to the flowering of the Arab mass media, such as the newspaper *al-Ittihad* and the literary journal *al-*

*Jadida*, both published by Israel's Communist Party. Poetry functioned as a pioneer, disrupting the “cycle of vacuity.” The great weight of Palestinian literature published in Israel and elsewhere since has been comprised of poetry (although in recent years there have appeared numerous volumes of short stories as well as novels and plays).

Since then, Palestinian literary life in Israel has been characterized by continuity rather than renaissance. Although poets realized that they were faced with a new political-social reality and treated the State of Israel as a *fait accompli*, they nonetheless continued to stress the fact that they were heirs of the Palestinian poets and artists active before 1948. This perspective is expressed, among other things, in the essays published by the poet Tawfiq Ziad (who was to become a member of the Israeli Parliament and the mayor of Nazareth) at the beginning of the 1960s under the title *Basic Notes on the Poetry of Protest in Israel*:<sup>2</sup>

*It is incorrect to say that we poets, who remained in our homeland after the tragedy [of 1948], began anew ... we poets, who started out as a only a handful... continued along this route... the same route traveled by poets prior to 1948 who had also continued the path of their predecessors, for instance, Ibrahim Tuqan, Abu Salama, Abed el-Rahim Mahmoud, Mutlaq Abd el-Khaleq and others [Palestine's leading poets in the era before 1948-AS].*

In addition, most Arabic poetry in Israel, primarily after the mid-1960s, expressed national pride, honor as well as attachment to a Palestinian Arab identity. Under the influence of these feelings, Arab poets developed the motif of “attachment to the land”, considered a foundation of Palestinian identity. This motif nurtured a “poetry of protest” or a “poetry having a confrontational character and infused with national pathos.” Samih al-Qasim<sup>3</sup>, considered the foremost Palestinian poet in Israel since the 1970s, declared that: “The poet and the hero are twins.” This statement succinctly captures how Palestinian writers perceived their role in the literary milieu in Israel and abroad. In an interview given to a Lebanese literary critic in the mid-1960s, al-Qasim noted that due to “the reversals confronted by Palestinian poets who remained in Israel [conditions that were the direct outcomes of the 1948 events], they were suddenly forced to preserve the rhymes and rhythms appealing to the masses within modernist poetry.”

Within the framework of all these events, a special place

has been kept for Darwish in Palestinian literature, a place he retains thanks to what he was and the fact that he had left all other poets far behind.

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This attitude characterized many of the people I met at Darwish's funeral in Ramallah.

I had decided before setting out not to participate in the official funeral service to be held in an area of the Mukataa, attended by the leaders of the PLO and the Palestinian Authority, family members and the diplomatic corps. I walked directly toward the crowds who had come to escort Darwish along his final journey, the majority of whom were young people – the next generation, enraptured by the charm of his poetry and expressing the meaning of the continuity previously mentioned.

After the burial service, masses of people surrounded the fresh grave for quite some time. I heard some saying that an important part of their lives had been placed in the ground and that from now on, "it would be missed." Darwish himself had expressed such a feeling a decade earlier, in the eulogy he had prepared in honor of the late author Emile Habiby, who lay buried in Haifa as instructed in his will. Others were annoyed by the fact that Darwish's will, scattered throughout his poetry, had been disregarded. His desire was to be buried in al-Birwa, the village of his birth, located in the western Galilee, from which he and his family had been deported to Lebanon in 1948, and on whose ruins Kibbutz Yasur and Moshav Ahihad now sit. But his poetry did carry him back to his native village: During the service in Ramallah, a number of young people had held a symbolic funeral there.

In 1969, in the first interview he gave to an Israeli journalist, Darwish explained that he found it very difficult to share any joy over the founding of kibbutz Yasur with that journalist: The source of that joy was built on the ruins of the village where he was born. He had added: "Although this belongs in the past, it continues to be incised in the depths of my heart."

Through his poetry, Darwish engraved and continues to engrave that same feeling within the heart of each and every Palestinian, and perhaps every person, whoever he may be. This may be the very feeling toward the past that motivated another Palestinian poet, Taha Muhammad Ali, who was also banished from his village, Suffurriya (Tzippori after 1948), to warn, from where he lives and works Nazareth, that "my joy has nothing to do with joy."<sup>3</sup>

### Warning

*For those who like hunting*

*For those who seek prey*

*Do not point your rifles*

*At my joy!*

*For it isn't worth the cost of a bullet*

*(Which would be wasted on it)*

*What you see*

*Elegant and fast*

*As a deer*

*Fleeing in all directions*

*Like a partridge,*

*Is no joy.*

*Believe me:*

*My joy*

*Has nothing to do with joy!*

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Next to reflecting reality, poetry, like literature and art in general, is tied to happiness, as the works of numerous writers and artists bear witness. For these, who personally experienced the past, like Taha Muhammad Ali, who later confessed in another poem:<sup>4</sup>

*And thus...*

*It took me*

*Fully sixty years*

*To realize:*

*That water is the tastiest of drinks*

*That bread is the most delicious of foods*

*And that no art has any true value*

*Until it brings joy*

*To the human heart!*

Against this background it may be possible, perhaps, to identify some personal aspects in Palestinian literature and art.

And if we are to deal with the personal, it is definitely appropriate to mention the Palestinian literature from the Diaspora. More than anyone else, Ghassin Kanafani, a native of Acre (1936) symbolizes this literature. Kanafani died outside his home in Beirut (1972), the victim of an explosion resulting from a booby-trapped automobile, apparently set by Israeli government "death squads" as part of the assassination policy it holds so dear. Then as now – perhaps to the surprise of many – it remains part of the continuing bloody conflict between the two peoples.

Kanafani, as we all know, belongs to that group of writers whose works represent an integrated whole (a common phenomenon in Palestinian and Arabic literature). In other words, he was a "recruited" author, according to the majority of Israeli researchers who have reviewed his work. Kanafani dedicated his entire literary oeuvre (short stories, novels and plays) to the Palestinian cause, in parallel with his political activity as a pillar of the People's Front for the Liberation of Palestine (led by Dr. George Habash). His writings on the Palestinian issue represent such a clear juncture that numerous literary scholars tend to divide the trans-Palestinian and trans-

3 Taha Muhammad Ali, *Poems* (Tel Aviv: Andalus, 2006), p. 65, tr. Roaa Translations.

4 Taha Muhammad Ali, "Amaird" in *Fire in the Convent Garden File* (Tayibe: The Arabic Heritage Revival Center 1992), tr. Roaa Translations.

Arabic literature on this subject into two totally different periods: before and after Kanafani.

Kanafani became prominent in 1963, with the publication of his first novel, "Men in the Sun".<sup>5</sup> The novel's structure is as simple as its plot: Three characters are in search of work; their search leads them to die in the desert inside a burning water tank on the winding road to salvation in the Kuwaiti emirate on the Persian Gulf.

"Men in the Sun" was published in the broad cultural and intellectual climate in which the Palestinian issue provided a distant backdrop for the ruminations of the Arab cultural elites. As a result, the texts produced by this same elite veered toward abstraction, a quality that endowed their descriptions of the Arab-Israeli conflict with a good measure of vagueness, distanced the issue from its true historical and national context, and positioned it upon a platform of mournful concepts such as "the Palestinian tragedy" and "the Palestinian disaster." The literary works written in such an atmosphere tended toward exaggerated abstractness, too. Kanafani spearheaded the process of returning the Palestinians to earth.

This he accomplished not in any simplistic or stereotypical fashion but by transforming the image of the Palestinian from a vague, mythological hero into a literary character that moves in historical, personal, political, social and other spheres, parallel to collective historical space. The latter is expressed in Kanafani's work more

in the form of a complex memory than a straightforward, arid chronology.

This brief survey is sufficient, I believe, to prove that Kanafani aimed toward cultural production that would surpass if not oppose the hegemonic culture. At the same time, he also aimed toward creating a culture that would not separate political from social practice, but offer the conceptual framework necessary to nurture awareness of particularist reality. Such an awareness, he believed, was more important for conducting a "conflict" than was surrendering to illusions about that same reality. Kanafani directly experienced that reality; the truth is clearly visible in his writings. But he was not the only witness.

Kanafani was also involved in research. His main objective, as divined from his various projects, including those that dealt with the Palestinian protest literature appearing in "Occupied Palestine" (i.e., Israel) and in "Zionist" literature, was to place the cornerstones for the birth of the new Palestinian. He sought those bases not in any abstract individual or Palestinian, but in a real Palestinian who was aware of the causes of the 1948 "disaster", was familiar with the Arab world but also with that of another – the Zionist world with which he was in conflict. He searched for the normality that had been lost but which literature, like art, was attempting to serve on a tray of a pure, fluid works.

5 Ghassan Kanafani, "Men in the Sun," in *Men in the Sun & Other Palestinian Stories*, tr. Hilary Kilpatrick (London: Lynne Rienner, 1999).