



SEMINAR ON LITERATURE

freedom of expression and journalism:
"A still small voice – a big echo"

House of Literature, Oslo, Tuesday 13 September 2011

TrAP

Office for
Transnational
Arts Production

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INTRODUCTION

The literature seminar A small voice – a big echo was one of two seminars during VIEWING PALESTINE 2011 13 through 18 September in Oslo – a collaboration between Transnational Arts Production (TrAP) and Sabreen Association for Artistic Development.

The seminar presented and discussed the Palestinian literature in general, its place in the world of literature, today's writers and traces/directions – as well as freedom of speech/-expression in a situation of external and internal conflicts, censorship and self censorship.

Relevant issues/questions were:

- What is Palestinian literature? – roots, development, message and achievements
- A country of words between diaspora and homeland: frontiers of imagination and the boundaries of censorship?

These two questions cover and combine almost all issues: freedom of expression, censorship, self censorship, the complicities of creating an "imagined community" and the perils of living under occupation...etc..

Hassan Khader was our main partner and advisor regarding the literature program and -seminar of Viewing Palestine 2011. He held the key note of the seminar bridging the questions of national, cultural and individual identity with the rich world of Palestinian literature and linking present writers to the Palestinian literature and its place in the world of literature – with his knowledge, experience and gift of encouraging personal and professional expressions.

We also thank Truls Lie (editor, filmmaker and film critic) who was the excellent moderator throughout the seminar; encouraging, intriguing and focusing on obvious and less obvious issues concerning Palestinian literature, but also the obvious links to the Palestinian situation; stating that this week would make clear the importance of Palestinian culture in the political struggle, in the building of a state, but also how important it is for artists to meet and exchange ideas.

The seminar gave interesting and deeply engaged discussions based on Khader's keynote and unique presentations from writers and journalist with different standing points, experiences and visions.

We also thank Diane Oatley, who perfectly mastered the assignment of giving a report based on the atmosphere of the seminar and its content.

Quoting from the conclusion of this report:

It is not surprising that when one gathers a group of artists, activists and intellectuals with a common cause in one room that the energy is electric, full of enthusiasm, that the discussions become animated and dynamic. In this particular case however, the atmosphere was further charged by the fact that many of the participants had had knowledge of one another but had never before had the opportunity to meet, and as such the seminar provided a valuable forum for contact and creative exchange.

Palestinian identity is a modern construct, and one which exceeds definitions of nationality by virtue of geography, genetics or language. The same can be said for its literary tradition. As such, the common narrative of Palestinian national identity continues to define and redefine itself, to flourish and thrive, and in so doing challenges as well our received notions regarding nationhood.

REPORT BY DIANE OATLEY



Diane Oatley.

In opening the first seminar day, Eli Borchgrevink from Transnational Arts Production (TrAP) expanded upon the concept of “a still small voice – a big echo” by emphasizing that the main focus of the Viewing Palestine project has been the intrinsic value of Palestinian art and culture. She clarified that while solidarity projects have their place and importance, the presentation of Palestinian arts and culture in Norway that was taking place during this particular week represented a long term dream in the making that had now come true. The ramifications and significance of this dream and the relation of Palestinian art to the Palestine identity and nation building would be readdressed and explored throughout both seminar days. The first seminar day would provide a sound basis for the understanding of this, first through a presentation and discussion of Palestinian literature in general, and its place in world literature, the writers of today and their influences and vision. Within this, the issue of freedom of expression in a situation of external and internal conflicts, and censorship would also be given due attention.

The first speaker of the day was Stein Torgersbråten, from the Norwegian Representative Office to the Palestinian Authorities, Al’Ram, the Norwegian Foreign Ministry’s diplomatic mission in Palestine. Al’Ram had contributed to making the Viewing Palestine project possible through funding. Torgersbråten spoke about Palestinian cultural identity and Norway’s contribution. He specified that the Norwegian policy in the Middle East is to assist the parties in the development of two states which can live peacefully side by side within internationally recognized borders. He emphasized that the establishment of an independent Palestinian - entails more than a parliament, a legal system, health and education services, electricity and water; he made it clear that all of these things are absolutely important but that there is also a very important connection between the arts and nation-building. He maintained that even though an artwork may not be explicitly addressing political issues, in such a context personal/public pleasure or gratification is not the primary objective. Palestinian art is also about the creation of a common narrative, a common history, a common national identity. In short, about building a nation.

This statement contained two themes that arose repeatedly throughout the day: the significance of a focus on commonality, and of narrative, respectively. Torgersbråten expanded on the importance of artistic expression for national identity, as a means of preserving and transmitting a common heritage, which is important in turn for the functioning of the basic infrastructure and parliament. He mentioned the example of the now deceased Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish who still inhabits a clearly defined space in the Palestinian consciousness, precisely because he put common feelings into words. In doing so, he contributes to a feeling of a common heritage, a common identity – he is contributing to a nation. Torgersbråten then went on to list some specific cultural initiatives in Palestine that are receiving support from Norway, such as the Palestine Cultural Fund, the Palestinian Art Academy, the Yabouse Cultural Center in East Jerusalem, as well as the Tamer Institute and the Sabreen Association, both of whom were main participants in the Viewing Palestine event.

Moderator Truls Lie followed up on this presentation, echoing Torgersbråten’s message by stating that this week would make clear the importance of Palestinian culture in the political struggle, in the building of a state, but also how important it is for artists to meet and exchange ideas. He presented then two questions from the seminar programme. First, what is Palestinian literature? Secondly, he proposed that there is an entire country of words to be found within the diaspora and homeland: what are then the frontiers of the imagination and the boundaries of censorship?

These two questions encompass a large number of issues: freedom of expression, censorship, self censorship, the complexities involved in the creation of an “imagined community” as part of the Palestinian national identity, and the perils of living under occupation. Lie proposed that during the day participants also keep in mind the question of aesthetics vs. ethics, politics vs. art, and the inherent tension found between these as a basis for dialogue during the seminar, as well as language-related issues in terms of the diaspora and homeland.

National identities under construction – Palestine and modernity

Lie then presented the next speaker, Palestinian writer and literary critic Hassan Khader, who is also the chief editor of the literary magazine Al-Karmel in Ramallah. Hassan’s presentation focused specifically on issues relating to Palestinian identity and how this has evolved and been redefined, remains under (re)definition by Palestinians themselves and the world. Hassan prefaced his talk by emphasizing the importance of this seminar also in terms of the opportunity it provided for the invited guests to meet other Palestinian artists, in that the most practical and safe way to do so is in a neutral place, such as Norway. He went on to state that the mere fact of “being” Palestinian, is for those who define themselves as Palestinians, an existence that is being contested almost daily. He spoke of the necessity to “prove themselves” as a people, a point that would also be raised repeatedly and from various perspectives throughout the day.

Hassan then gave a detailed summary of the evolution of Palestine literature as a tradition since 1948. He explained how the loss of major cities in 1948, such as Jaffa, implied a major loss to the culture, a loss of the centres of their national existence. Poetry was in 1948 the most dominant form of literary expression. After 1948 many forms of literary expression stopped functioning altogether. Post ‘48 Palestine was then reinvented as a lost paradise. He specified that this was an important metaphor, in fact the most dominant metaphor, for the understanding of Palestinian literature, even though Palestine was not completely lost. He spoke of the lost generation – from 1948 – for whom there are no autobiographies, as people were unable to tell their stories. In that dedicated literature requires a cultural centre, Beirut subsequently became this centre for Palestine.

After 1967 the Palestinian was redefined as a freedom fighter – being Palestinian was no longer a matter of genetics. The limits of Palestinian identity were then being expanded beyond national borders, and beyond romantic nationalism. An emphasis emerged on the universal dimension of the Palestinian identity. The PLO became the symbolic homeland in the collective imaginary. Gradually however, the voices of second and third generation Palestinians who were born in the diaspora began making themselves heard. From the mid 1990s, Palestinians were writing in other languages, being recognized in their adoptive countries and communities. A large community of authors has subsequently developed in the diaspora, and with a large representation of woman authors. All of these authors are now also recognized in their respective countries in their second literary language, but Hassan specified that they nonetheless remain Palestinian authors, even though Palestine is often a hidden metaphor. He maintained further that this was not something unique to Palestine, holding that some of the best works of English literature are now being produced by non-English people, such as Salman Rushdie. There are hundreds of names, among them Nobel Prize winners, who are not originally from the West, because most societies are now multi-cultural. Pluralism is a part of modern times. No city of the world is free of different and foreign elements that are integrated in one way or another and in this sense Palestine is not any different.

He went on to explain how, with time, a greater interest has evolved within Palestinian literature in the small details of daily life, from Gaza, from the diaspora, as opposed to an eternal focus on the “political struggle”, in the context of which the human dimension is frequently lost. He also pointed out that while the Palestinian state for some represents a dream come true, for others it entails a nightmare in the making. What was established in the beginning was a populist regime where literature served national identity and through which borders/limits were established. In Hassan’s opinion, the role of the author and intellectual is not that of a protector of a political regime. To the contrary, such a role calls for an awareness of the dangers involved in any regime, protecting the interests of the people, and defending values, freedom of expression, the rights of women, etc. With this in mind, he specified that the Palestinian identity is thus in the making at all times, constantly being invented, and reinvented. Hassan here emphasized that it was important to remember that this is not only the case for Palestinian identity; that in fact all national identities are under construction, continually being redefined.



Hassan Khader is born in Gaza 1953, is a Palestinian writer and literature critic, as well as chief editor of the literary magazine Al-Karmel in Ramallah; originally initiated and run by Mahmoud Darwish.

Telling the Palestinian story involves first reclaiming it

Moderator Truls Lie then asked Hassan whether there was then any limit, any point at which the Palestinian identity is no longer Palestinian. Or is everything Palestinian? Hassan replied that this depends on one's perception of what is Palestine. In most cases Palestinians are what they are because others define them. This is identity based on negation. The borders are now losing their importance and that Palestine should be a nation with open borders. Palestine is unique, it is historically Jewish, Christian and Moslem, and it has captivated the imagination of the world for 2000 years. As such, Palestine is not about genetics or geographic origin, and it has no right to deny any other person from another part of the world the possibility of living there.

US-based author Susan Abulhawa followed, providing further resonance and nuance to a number of the narrative threads from Hassan's presentation. Her presentation, entitled the Anatomy or Evolution of Telling the Palestinian Story addressed specifically the telling of this story both within and to the West. As an introductory example she spoke of an encounter she had had at a Palestine literature festival in Bethlehem with the Reverend Dr. Mitri Raheb, who had explained to her that of all the things that have been taken from the Palestinian people, what he found most painful was how they have stolen the Palestinian story. Susan expanded on this, by explaining that initially the Palestinian narrative was predominantly told by other people and that this narrative was either demeaning or at best Orientalist. She then traced the rewriting of that narrative, from David Ben Gurioun, to the people of the newly created state of Israel – people who were already part of European society, thus able to tell that story in languages and using an idiom familiar to Western culture in ways that Palestinians at the time for the most part could not. The Palestinians' own stories were in Arabic, and thus remained largely inaccessible to the West. Then there was the fairy tale sold to the West about the Jewish homeland, "a land without a people for a people without a land"; there were the words of Golda Meir, in 1969, who went so far as to state point blank that "Palestinians...did not exist". The subsequent organization on the part of Palestinians into militant resistance resulted in the rewriting once more of this story, in which Palestinians figured this time as "a depraved people, crazy and insane, irrational, inherently violent. (Their) voice was muted ... and that version can be summarized in one word: terrorists".

She then spoke about the new generation of Palestinians who are writing now, who have grown up in the West and have the means to tell their own story. As she put it, for her own part as well, this involves inherently "proving that we exist", because the past narratives remain so entrenched in people's minds. In addition to this one, she maintained, among the many things that Palestinians must now seek to overcome is one of the most alluring, fantastic stories of all, told by people who not only presumed to speak for Palestinians, but also for God. In this narrative, the utter destruction of Palestinian society, "the carving out of our hearts," as she formulated it, is nothing less than a divine mandate, an ordinance. And this is a narrative that a lot of people still ascribe to, in the West, particularly now with Islamaphobia.

She closed by commenting about her own experience from the reception of her novel "Mornings in Jenin", stating that there were those who enjoyed the book but nonetheless maintained that it was, somehow, biased, that she had failed to present "the other side". She stated clearly that she rejected this criticism, and her biggest objection in this context was the implication that the Palestinian people cannot exist, not even in a novel, as a people with own narrative and point of view. Having been robbed and denied at every turn, it is at the very least the Palestinians' right to claim their place in literature.

The floor was subsequently opened for questions, the first of which addressed the concept of the documentary or political novel. The point raised was that while this type of literary production is also a necessity, is there a limit at which fiction begins to serve something other than art? Susan responded that one reviewer had called her work polemic, which had bothered her, because there are many novels set in other political situations, about which nobody would dare say such a thing. As she put it, for Palestinian literature "all bets are off, whether you write a novel that includes politics or not." In other words, that merely by virtue of being Palestinian it becomes political. She maintained that this was because the Palestinian narrative has mostly been told by other people and that when Palestinian authors finally overcame the "we don't exist" part, they became in the eyes of West abstract political creatures. This image created a clear understanding of one of the many themes of this day: the importance of creating literature in which readers see Palestinians as human beings with real life stories. And as she concluded, although in literature these human elements may be set against the backdrop of a political reality, this does not necessarily make for a political novel.



Susan Abduhawa, writer, "Mornings in Jenin" has been translated to Norwegian and published in Norway through Aschehoug.

Fragments can also form a whole



Nathalie Handal is the author of numerous books including, Love and Strange Horses, winner of the 2011 Gold Medal Independent Publisher Book Award.

The following presentation was by author Nathalie Handal, who is also currently based in the USA. In her presentation entitled Fragments on Notes on Palestinian Identity and Literature the focus was shifted towards Palestinian identity as defined through experiences from a life in the diaspora and the multitude of influences that this inevitably entails. “Palestine remains the pulse within me” she stated, the pulse from which she has “navigated borders, lived in the difficult space of dislocation, seeking windows of sensual light within exile”. She maintained that people think that fragments cannot make a whole, but that being a Palestinian artist has for her involved the refusal to separate herself from all that is in her, a deep running connection to the world. Here she touched upon another recurring theme – the risk of marginalization that was inherent to the diasporic experience and to those living under occupation. She emphasized that though she writes in English, all of her (five) languages find influence in her work. Writing in English she is not a part of Arabic literature, but definitely a part of Palestinian literature.

This brought the focus back to the theme of the criteria for being Palestinian and the definition of Palestinian literature, respectively. Nathalie maintained that it is not a matter of linguistics. Palestinian literature can be in any language – it need not be part of Arabic language literature. Neither is it about thematics; Palestinian authors cannot be limited by politics of thematics. As she put it, “What we are here to do is tell a story. We are Palestinian but we don’t want to be marginalized. I am also a part of American literature.” She went on to speak of the presence of a vibrant Palestinian community and voice that is not only defined as being dispersed all over the world. She emphasized that Palestinians are also individuals, that each has a different story to tell, but these all combine to constitute the image of what Palestine is today. This echoed the points made by Hassan in his presentation: that Palestinian literature is very diverse – linguistically, culturally and aesthetically. She closed by stating “My poems recount what I can’t to myself—silence collapsing into non-silence. And Palestine is not what it used to be but it is still very much what it has always been.”

In response to this, Moderator Truls Lie commented that he was not altogether willing to give up on the definition or boundaries of that definition, that there must be things lost from the culture when one begins to write in another language. To this Natalie replied that of course things are lost, but that it is more important to look at what has been gained, because evolution is really key in terms of how Palestinians and Palestine will move forward. She mentioned that she doesn’t have a mother tongue and that she grew up with 5 languages in her household, with everyone speaking whatever they felt like speaking. That created a kind of fragmented identity, but that there is a whole to be found within that fragmentation.

She expanded upon this by stating that even when she is writing in English the Arabic language is in her head. But it is not a defining factor. Lie then made the point that all Latin American literature is exile literature; he suggested that one might even make the claim that all literature is exiled, that it comes from a kind of “outsideness”. Palestine literature is literature without a state, and this potentially constitutes a dynamic element. He asked then whether the writers present felt any kinship with the literature of other countries, such as Latin America?

Susan replied that of course, that “we can meet on human ground and rediscover each other’s humanity.” She emphasized that writers in general share a common bond, whether or not they are writing in exile, but that the themes and passions of writers in exile tend to intersect. Nathalie as well confirmed that she has been heavily influenced by Latin American literature. Despite this, however, for her it is always necessary to return to language, to the question of what the actual work is doing, independent of its national boundaries. Hassan spoke about the Polish poet, Czeslaw Milosz, who in his piece “Notes on Exile” wrote that first people were waiting for his words, but he was forbidden to speak. Then when in exile, he was free to speak but nobody was listening, and he also forgot what it was he wanted to say. Hassan stated that with this in mind, one understands that what will keep the writer alive is keeping Palestine as a metaphor for liberty, a universal dream – that Palestine itself will keep the writer alive.

All of these points incited further discussion between the authors themselves. Susan asked Nathalie how having access to other languages affects her writing. Nathalie responded that one of the things she has learned is that we tend to always focus on our differences when in fact there are also many commonalities, through which a huge world opens up. Being able to read in other languages exposes one to the aesthetics of these languages, and that that of course influences one’s voice. People tend to want you to define things rigidly, which is a problem if one’s world view is not rigid, a point that was pertinent especially in terms of defining Palestine and Palestinian identity, respectively.

Susan then spoke about the tendency for political discourse coming from Palestinians to be apologetic, about an expectation that Palestinian authors should be explicitly against violence. She stated that there is a difference between being apologetic and asserting one’s existence. There is nothing apologetic in the latter. Approaching discourse with anything but pride in being Palestinian is wrong. She emphasized that there should be no apology, even though there has been violence, atrocities that are regrettable. Israel often justifies its crimes by saying “they’re doing it”. The reverse is found on the Palestinian side. Palestinians needn’t be angels to allow themselves dignity.

Discussion on Palestinian identity, diaspora and cultural financing

Hassan Khader then introduced the musical interlude that followed with the Sabreen group, featuring musicians Wisam Murad and Mahran Mureb. Hassan explained how the lyrics of the song they would play were from the last part of a poem by the prolific Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, written in 1998 after heart surgery, and how Darwish had believed at the time that it would be the last poem he would ever write. The musical interlude was thereby explicitly connected to the literary heritage of Palestine. Participants then had the opportunity to sit back and reflect upon the many and complex issues that had been raised in the first half of the day, to the background of a musical interlude. Indeed, the music of this group served in all contexts to integrate and embody many of the themes of the seminar, through a musical expression implementing both ancient and modern influences, and much like the Palestinian identity itself, preserving the narrative of its heritage, but simultaneously evolving as a story to embrace the disparate voices of innovation, the homeland, and the diaspora.

Moderator Truls Lie then opened the second half of the day by asking a question about supporting the Palestinian identity in Gaza. He stated that it had become clear throughout the morning that the Palestinian identity is undergoing changes, but despite this, Norway continues to support the development of the culture by funding to Gaza/the West Bank. His question was whether this was in fact the appropriate way to promote Palestinian culture when so many Palestinians are spread throughout the world? Torgersbråten responded to this by explaining that their organization can support institutions on the West Bank and in Gaza and that when they do so they are very careful not to tell artists what to do. They are supporting the Tamer Institute, but not telling them what books to publish. They are supporting the Ministry of Culture because institutions like this can assist and offer possibilities to Palestinian artists. In general, what they are doing is creating the possibility for artists to do what they are good at. Having said this, he added that they do not have the possibility to enter the diaspora. Their focus is on giving Palestinians living in the West Bank the opportunity to feel that they can express themselves.

Broadcasting journalist and filmmaker Hayyan Jubeh then took the floor and suggested that that particular question should be put to the Palestinians themselves, rather than the Norwegians. He held that it was a question that pertained to sovereignty, relating to the process that emanated from the Oslo Accord. Hayyan stated that the Palestinians in the diaspora are communities but do not represent the real Palestinian identity, therefore the support should be through the Palestinian authority, and that the real problem that should be discussed, is that of Palestinian sovereignty.

This statement provoked some controversy among participants, where some held that Palestinians have no control over any types of resources, and that culture is one important means of giving this aspect back to the people. Susan stated that defining herself as a Palestinian writer is not just a choice – it's a matter of existence. She made direct reference to his statement: "the true Palestinian identity coming from those under occupation" and pointed out that none of those living in the diaspora are there by choice, and that his choice of words had the effect of separating Palestinians rather than uniting them. She held that there is far too much disenfranchisement of not only Palestinians living in the diaspora, but also those living in Israel, and in refugee camps. There is a very different kind of suffering in each population and that Palestinians must move away from language use that divides rather than unites.

George Ghattas from the Sabreen Association for Artistic Development then commented regarding "the true Palestinian identity" that the important thing about this seminar is bringing all of the many threads and experiences of this together, and that this was important also because there is a great deal of advocacy at work among the writers. A lot of Palestinians are not aware of the work that writers are doing. He then reemphasized another point raised earlier, stating that there is a kind of commonality that exists, in terms of the question of access. He referred here specifically to all the Palestinians who cannot necessarily enter one another's

worlds. And how this imposes the need for Palestinian artists to, in his words "be creative, find ways of defining ourselves around these conflicts". A general consensus then emerged regarding the importance of such a focus on commonality, on the things that join rather than divide, and the importance of being innovative in terms of finding adequate solutions.

Small worlds, giant echo



Renad Qubbaj –
director of Tamer
Institute

This created a solid platform for the contribution of the following speaker Renad Qubbaj the director of the Tamer Institute for Community Education on the West Bank. Renad gave a presentation entitled Small Worlds...Giant echo which brought further detail and clarity to the issue of the role of literature in the context of the preservation and evolution of Palestinian identity. She began by stating that young adult literature in Palestinian has been nourished by an ancient and deeply rooted culture of which young people are the recipients. This heritage has been enriched by the oral narrative treasures of parents and grandparents about the 'homeland'. Young adult literature in Palestine has evolved spontaneously, and predominantly as a uniting factor around what is meant by "Palestine". Literature thus serves as a bridge between the hopes envisioned for children, and the restrictions and limitations imposed by reality. This in itself is a concept forged on creativity and innovation as means of cultivating and preserving cultural identity.

Renad stated that 1974 was an important turning point in this evolution of a growing awareness about writing for children. At this time, the Palestinian Liberation Organization adapted a humanistic approach in its vision 'the future is for children'. This vision called for inventiveness and innovation and in so doing was a response to the sentimental as well as realistic needs of Palestinians to strengthen their cultural rights. It has subsequently defined the main road for the Palestinian production of literature, most chiefly through establishing the Dar Al Fata Al Arabi publishing house which gathered a group of Palestinian and Arab intellectuals and artists. The main idea of this publishing house was to enhance the educational level and preserve the identity of Palestinian children which had been disrupted by the displacement and violence in connection with the occupation after the Palestinian Nakba.

She related how this vision was subsequently renewed and revised in 1998 and 2007, respectively, but that its key contents have been preserved. Freedom, for example, has been an ongoing theme since 1974, and Renad gave an example of this: the book *My Code Name is a butterfly* (2008, Tamer Institute) by the Palestinian writer Ahlam Bsharat, which caused some controversy and raised many questions about the theme of freedom of expression. The writer herself proposes literature as a mean of self-expression in the face of not only the occupation, but also social constraints, and the book thus serves to highlight many types of censorship. Renad also made the point that books without readers implies the death of literature, thus underscoring the importance of corresponding literacy projects, such as a community libraries programme developed by the Tamer Institute. She concluded her talk with a comment on the power of literature in transcending oppression, stating that "the rich exchange of ideas, expressing the questions, rebellions and dreams that these initiatives involve are the activities that keep us alive and through them we know that with words, we will overcome walls and occupation."

Moderator Truls Lie then asked her a question about the access to Palestinian literature for the Israeli people, and whether any Israelis are reading Palestinian works. Renad replied that their books go to the Arabic community in Israel, but not to the Hebrew readership. They are not translated. Susan interjected, on the subject of the translation of Palestinian literature into Hebrew, that it is not the responsibility of Palestinians to convince the Israelis of their humanity. The Israelis must take the interest. Hayyan reaffirmed this by stating that the Israelis know nothing about Palestinians, about their culture and that the poem referred to earlier by Mahmoud Darwish is considered terrorist poem. The final comment in this brief discussion was from Nathalie who stated that she has nonetheless noticed a difference in New York City since 9/11. She explained that she now has a lot of students from Israel who are reading Palestinian literature. A change is taking place among the youth in Israel, as well as within the Jewish community outside of Israel.

Hassan then asked if Renad could name a specific case of censorship. Renad told of a particular book that it had been agreed was to be integrated into the school libraries, but there was censorship on the part of principals in the schools, as a result of which the book is in the libraries but they are not sure whether it is accessible to the children. In Gaza there are many books that are not allowed in the school libraries. She gave an example of a book that had been banned by the Hamas government because there was a picture in it of boys and girls sitting together beneath a tree. She stated that there has been a great deal of discussion about this but that there are no formal campaigns against censorship, and the point was made that unfortunately weak social groups such as women, children, are often sacrificed for "larger" national goals.

Truls Lie then asked Nathalie about her work with film and theatre, where the artistic idiom implements not only text, but also visual images and sounds. He asked whether she thought a documentary or film is better able to speak more to the emotions, to move people politically. Nathalie replied that she felt that every art form has its own particular "breath" to reach people at different levels, but that we live today in a visual world. She mentioned social media as an immediate example, saying that when she asks students what they do in their free time they say Facebook, and when she asks if they have ever written a poem, they say yes, on Facebook. As such she agreed that the minds of young people and the way they connect to things is much more visual, so that is something to take into consideration, but that the different mediums affect us all in different ways and complement one another.

Freedom of expression and the media



Mohammed Omer,
Palestinian journalist

In the final presentation of the day, Mohammed Omer, a journalist from Gaza, spoke of the challenges facing Palestinian journalists in the occupied territories. He began by explaining that for the past two decades freedom of movement, safety, political pressure and working conditions have been the biggest challenges. These phrases reflect the findings of a study done by the IFJ, which outlined clearly the harassment, violence and targeting of journalists, along with the systematic destruction of Palestinian media installations and materials, and an overall climate of fear.

Mohammed went on to focus on the situation since the coming to power of Hamas in 2007 and the ongoing political tensions and strife between the latter and the Fatah Palestinian Authority. His presentation spelled out in bold print how this particular conflict has further compounded the risks and difficulties involved for those working in the media, presenting challenges for those wishing to work ethically as professionals and without political interference. He specified how just since 2008, there have been a total of 330 documented violations and in the first six months of 2011, MADA has monitored 113 violations on press freedom in the occupied Palestinian territories. The Palestinian syndicate of journalists has little support due to among other factors, a lack of reform, and lack of transparency in the membership lists. However, the first congress since 1999 was held in February of 2011.

Omer's presentation on the whole was visually striking at both ends of the scale; on the one hand as a window to the incredible dangers faced by journalists and others working in the media in the occupied territories. He then concluded with a full three minutes of photo images from daily life, images that provided a powerful contrast to the otherwise dire and shocking contents of his presentation. Again, there was an emphasis on the vision of Palestinians not as terrorists, or militants or victims – but as human beings with a need and desire for normal lives, and all that this entails – whether it be a day on the beach, an ice cream cone, a walk through the countryside – in short the human dimension which was mentioned several times throughout the day and which has an unfortunate tendency to get lost in the shuffle of political debate.

When he was asked how, as a journalist working under these conditions, he found the motivation to take these kinds of risks, Omer stated that it comes from a strictly serious commitment to journalism, but also from the injustice one witnesses, the difficult life that one is obliged to live; all of these things combined make one stronger and incite a desire to reflect the images to the world.

The discussion then returned to the many challenges faced by the civil society in Palestine, and how the cases of censorship mentioned by Renad were good examples of exactly the difficult choices involved, not least in terms of standing up to Hamas. Should one campaign? Speak out? Or maintain a low profile? Omer at this point objected that it was important to recognize that the problem is not really with Hamas, but with the youth, the new generation and that there is a need for a greater awareness on the whole about the fact that the current alternative to Hamas is in reality much worse than Al Quaida. It is a matter of individuals who have been completely marginalized and he was emphatic about the need to wake up and understand that they need to be put on the right track. Susan further confirmed this by pointing out that 80% of the children in Gaza suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder – as such it is not strange that the youth in Palestine are taking such a radical turn. She also commented that there is a distinction to be made between journalistic endeavours and the attempts to build institutions, that given the extreme level of censorship in place in every way, the way to combat that is precisely through the programmes to empower youth through reading and venues of creative expression.

Hassan then offered another perspective on this issue: He repeated that he wanted to emphasize that the role of Palestinian writers, artists and intellectuals is not to protect the regime, and that those who try in the cultural field to protect or glorify the regime, are not

really taken seriously. He held that when it comes to Hamas this is a different story, and stated that he feels unable to talk about Hamas as a political regime, that it is worse than that, and the future will not bring really good news from Gaza as long as these people stay in power. When it comes to the regime, this is a regime that is accused of corruption, of a lack of transparency. Renad pointed out that having said this, there is a much more important objective at stake, and that is "what kind of Palestine do we want?" Formulated in this manner, Palestinians become active agents in terms of defining their own national and cultural identity, and this requires that they must be different in the defence of their liberty and in terms of the Palestine they want to build.

Omer followed up on the aspect of censorship here, stating that the news from the occupied territories is not news any longer, the Arab spring is what's interesting now. And this is the case even for Al Jazeera International. Not everything Palestinian journalists write or propose gets published. Now every day is about Libya. This has distracted everyone with respect to the occupied territories. Renad countered this by pointing out that the Palestinian cause has never been dependent upon the international media, but more on solidarity, and that now there are other options available, such as social media.

Susan said that in her experience the Arab spring has also been a source of inspiration, in particular what happened in Egypt. She spoke of witnessing the news coverage of what was happening from the USA and her comments related to the issue of telling of "the Palestinian story". As she put it, the images that met journalists during the Egyptian uprising were so contrary to what the Western media were used to, that the journalists didn't know how to report them, because of the non-violent nature of the protest. The perception that was garnered was that of Arabs as human beings, and as such the media did not know how to relate to it or report on it. They did not, in short, have a ready narrative on hand for the telling of this particular story.

In closing Truls Lie then asked each of the speakers to say something about the future and the state of mind of Palestine. Renad began by stating that the future is in the people of Palestine and thus it is very important to help people to continue. There are hundreds of resolutions that have been taken to the UN, without this having had any real consequences. Hassan followed up on this by saying that as Palestinians they are going through a very painful and long process in efforts to normalize their lives and existence like any other nation on earth. He stressed that they do not want to be victims or heroes, but just to be normal, to live like any other nation on earth.

Nathalie related that she is not optimistic about Palestinians getting a state and soon. In terms of the Arab spring, she too held that there is a far more positive consciousness than there used to be, basically everything returning to the notion that Palestinians are part of a dialogue that they have never had before. Europe has changed, the US has changed; the latter has been obliged to become aware of its Muslim, Palestinian, and Arab populations. Omer then stated that he finds the future in the spirit of the Palestinians everywhere. The Palestinians must now rely on themselves. What have the Palestinians achieved following the Oslo Accord? Nothing. To the contrary, it's getting worse. Self-reliance then, was the answer, with regard to how best support the Palestinians' existence.

The final response came from Susan who stated that she believes that the Palestinian future lies in the solidarity of civil society around the world. She held that there has been a huge growing awareness in the world and Israel has been losing the love because of this. Then the Palestinian authority comes with this bombshell, the UN resolution, without really consulting the rest of the Palestinians. Palestinians want to read the fine print of the resolution and she held that the fact that it has not been made publicly available, is worrying. This was a sentiment that she would reiterate and expand upon in her talk during the seminar on Friday.

Conclusion

It is not surprising that when one gathers a group of artists, activists and intellectuals with a common cause in one room that the energy is electric, full of enthusiasm, that the discussions become animated and dynamic. In this particular case however, the atmosphere was further charged by the fact that many of the participants had had knowledge of one another but had never before had the opportunity to meet, and as such the seminar provided a valuable forum for contact and creative exchange. This forum was further enhanced through the literary readings scheduled every afternoon of the week – on this particular day featuring three of the invited authors. The reading sessions served to illustrate a number of the points made throughout the day – whether through the understated sensuality of the work of author Huzama Habayeb, by virtue of its subtlety made all the more potent, in a voice expressive of both humour and humanity; Susan’s reading from her novel *Mornings in Jenin*, the very story we have already had presented through the media from a distance, now told with intimacy and brought into the everyday; or the poetic voice of Nathalie – present, resonant, immediate. All of these voices were put in context through the erudite analysis and commentary of Hassan Khader, whose weighted and penetrating reflections expanded upon the contributions, and thereby connecting them to the literary heritage of Palestine. Here was art activism incarnate; here was a concrete demonstration of the role of literature specifically in the Palestinian struggle, in terms of defining and building national identity both from within Palestine and the diaspora.

Many of the challenges and difficulties, the struggle as it were, that such a project entails were expressed and reiterated throughout this day: censorship, the eternal necessity to prove that one exists, finding commonality and meaning in fragmentation, the reclaiming of the Palestinian “story”, also as a means of self-definition. Beyond this, what also became clear was that Palestinian life is much, much more than war and conflict: Palestinian identity is a modern construct, and one which exceeds definitions of nationality by virtue of geography, genetics or language. The same can be said for its literary tradition. As such, the common narrative of Palestinian national identity continues to define and redefine itself, to flourish and thrive, and in so doing challenges as well our received notions regarding nationhood. The ramifications of this in terms of international cultural cooperation would be explored on the second seminar day, but already at this point it was clear that any arts cooperation with Palestine will be, by definition, mutually beneficial with regard to the rich heritage that culture has to offer and the many lessons hard won that its struggle has brought to bear.

PAPERS

The anatomy or evolution of telling the Palestinian story, *Susan Abdulhawa*

- I started thinking about this concept of the evolution of the Palestinian story after hearing something my friend the Reverend Dr Mitri Raheb said to me, almost a year ago. I was in Bethlehem with PalFest, the Palestine Literature Festival, and Mitri was taking us on a tour through what has become the little ghetto of Bethlehem – surrounded by the menacing wall that blocks the sun and separates families from each other and from their lands and orchards – and showed us the most recent confirsctions and bypass roads. After an hour or so of showing us what has become of Bethlehem after extensive land theft projects, he and I had a private conversation in which he said: “You know, the tangible things they’ve taken is one thing – our homes, farms, and properties; even the intangible, like rights and liberties and the simple dignity of being able to move from one town to another. They have even claimed our foods, our hummus and traditional clothing as their own. But what is even more painful to me is how they have stolen our story.” He added, “We are the people of the bible. The bible is our story.”

- So this makes more sense, Mitri is head of the Lutheran Church in Bethlehem and he comes from a long line of Palestinian Christian clergy. That’s how, through the church records, he has been able to trace his personal lineage all the way back to the first century in Palestine. 2000 years of recorded personal lineage in Palestine. In fact, his last name, Raheb, in Arabic means “monk”.

- I have always understood that Palestinians were the natural inhabitants of that land, many of us descended from the original Hebrew tribes that existed thousands of years ago who converted to Christianity and then Islam along the way; who intermarried with the various conquerors and immigrants who came through Palestine. There are even Palestinian families with the surname “Canaan” as in the Land of Canaan or Canan. But only a man of the church, a man who can trace his lineage literally to the first century in Palestine would have thought to express this truth in the way that he did. And as a storyteller, his comment resonated and stuck with me.

- And so, telling the Palestinian story actually involves first reclaiming it.

- More than 60 years ago, when the indigenous population of Palestine was being expelled or terrorized into leaving their homes, thinking they would return once hostilities subsided; well before Israel was formally established, David Ben Gurion, who would become Israel’s prime minister but who was at the time occupied with executing the expulsions, declared “We must do everything to ensure they [the Palestinians] never do return” He added his prediction that “The old will die and the young will forget.”. He said this in 1949. David Ben Gurion, by the way, was born David Grun, a Jewish man from Poland, who left Eastern Europe’s antiSemitism and progroms and found refuge in Muslim Ottoman rule in Palestine, an education in Istanbul, and security and safety he lacked in his native Poland, while he went about organizing the eventual taking Palestine and ridding it of its Palestinian sons and daughters.

- Those who came to Palestine to create Israel in its place came mostly from Europe and they told the West the story it wanted to hear. The people of the newly created state of Israel were already part of European societies and they could tell the story in their own languages and in the nuances of Western culture in ways that perhaps Palestinians at the time could not because they mostly spoke Arabic. That original story is encapsulated in Leon Uris’ novel “Exodus” and is summarized in the mendacious myth of “a land without a people for a people without a land”. It was the perfect fairy tale to for the West to consume after what it had done to the Jews of Europe. It was the story that the West needed to hear to ease its conscience.

- In the next stages of this narrative, where Palestinians were beginning to assert their presence and history, we were dismissed or described as miscellaneous ignorant Arabs. This

Fragments on notes on Palestinian identity and literature,
Nathalie Handal

version is summarized in the words of Golda Meir, who made the infamous declaration in 1969 that “There were no such thing as Palestinians. They did not exist” she said. Gold Meir was born as Golda Mabovich in the Russian Empire in what is now the Ukraine and lived in the United States before emigrating to Palestine in the early 1920s.

- And when Palestinians tired of trying to talk and plead their way to justice and organized themselves into militant resistance that hijacked airplanes, only then did the world notice the Palestinians. But even then, the story told was a tale of a depraved people, crazy and insane, irrational inherently violent. Our voice was muted and again, our story was told by others and that version can be summarized in one word: terrorists. We were [to many are] the terrorists in the same way that Native Americans were the savages – dehumanized, maligned, and blamed for our own fate while our society was/is being destroyed.

- But now there is a generation of Palestinians who have grown up in the West and who can tell our story in Western languages and in the nuances of Western cultures. For the first time, we are telling our own story in our own voice to the West. But because the past narratives are so entrenched in people’s minds, telling our story is an uphill battle that involves overcoming mountains of lies. Among these is one of the most alluring and fantastical story of all from this conflict. It’s the story from those who not only presumed to speak for us and about us, but who also presumed to speak for God. This narrative is one that turned God into a real estate agent and the Bible into a property deed and allowed a million Palestinian tragedies to go untold, unheard.

- Like Ben Gurion, Golda Meir came from Eastern Europe imagining to hold a divinely ordained title to Palestine with full rights and blessing by none other than God to expel the non-Jewish natives of that land. In fact, she once said that Israel “exists as the fulfillment of a promise made by God Himself. It would be ridiculous to ask it to account for its legitimacy.”

- We did, however, eventually succeed in exposing one undeniable fact – that we are the natives of that land. Historically, culturally, socially, ethnically, legally, and even genetically – we are the natives. And while the world cannot and no longer denies this nor denies our existence, we are nonetheless asked to negotiate for our own heritage with the same people who claim it as theirs. We are asked to negotiate for our freedom with the same people who have locked us up or kicked us out; asked to negotiate for human rights and basic human dignity of home and liberty – as if such things are even negotiable – with the same people who have taken these from us.

- maybe that’s because the first narratives are the ones that still persist.

- And that’s why so many readers, even ones who were very moved by Mornings in Jenin, will often qualify their praise by saying that the story I wrote is biased. That is does not fully examine the “other” side. I do not accept this criticism and I certainly do not respect it. In fact, I find it insulting. To say nothing of the simple fact that a novel, by definition is told from a particular point of view and therefore it is absurd to call a novel biased. But the bigger objection I have is the implication that we cannot exist, not even in a novel, as a people with our own narrative and point of view. Having been robbed and denied at every turn, it is at least our right to claim our place in literature.

- I don’t know what will happen. I do know that a better world lies in the realm where we do not put entire people into stereotypes – whether it’s a stereotype of terrorists, savages, backward, or even as eternal victims. Where narratives are honest and true to fact and history. That’s why literature is so important. It’s the one place where we can all meet to rediscover each others humanity. It’s a place where we find proof that we are all part of the same human family.

I have navigated borders most of my life. Dislocation has not been an easy place to exist in. It is a place where the dark is suspended around me all the time but I have also found in this exilic journey, windows of sensual light. Today, I feel deeply connected to the world. And maybe that makes me even more Palestinian. People think that fragments cannot be whole. I don’t view it that way. I cannot separate myself from all that is me. Just like I cannot separate myself from the world—being attentive to the life-beats around us is what is most divine in us.

Palestine remains the pulse inside of me. I come from Bethlehem and when I went back for the first time it was as if I had never left. I return each year. It is home even if Bethlehem cannot breathe with the wall. The wall is a dark cloud pressing us into the earth. Everywhere we go, we see it. Every time I return, I feel more devastated than the last. But hope has never ceased to grow in us.

I believe in the transcending and transformative force of art. Art forces us to become aware of ourselves, of the universe around us; it challenges our safe havens and demands us to think, to head towards what is evolutionary instead of what is destructive; it engages us consciously and subconsciously with what we want and don’t want to know.

My poems in one form or another (even the love poems) address Palestine yet I write in English with the influences of various other languages. I speak and dream in all these languages, and they seem to exist harmonious together. At least, I like to believe they do.

As a Palestinian from the Diaspora, writing in English, I am not part of Arabic literature but I am definitely part of Palestinian literature. Palestinian literature (and society) today is diverse linguistically, culturally, and aesthetically.

My poems recount what I can’t to myself—silence collapsing into non-silence. And Palestine is not what is used to be but it is still very much what it has always been.

Small worlds,,,, giant echo

Renad Qubbaj

The Palestinian young adult literature has grown with those youth and children, feeding themselves through the ancient and deeply rooted culture they are the recipient of. It has been enriched with the oral treasures of parents and grandparents about the 'homeland'. Spontaneously, young adult literature in Palestine evolved mostly, as a uniting factor around what is meant by 'Palestine'. A bridge between what is hoped for children and what reality compels them in.

Among the many short stories for young adults by Ghassan Kanafani is 'A paper from Ramleh' dated 1956. The story pictures Abu Othman within the crowd of Palestinians expelled from Ramleh and heading towards Jerusalem. His body in pain and tears was barely able to move to bury his little child Fatima who had been shot by an Israeli soldier. The narrator was 10 years old he also had to witness Abu Othman's wife who was also shot because she couldn't stop her tears when the soldier forced her to. How can a 10 year old narrator express those scenes? He was only able to think of Abu Ottoman's reaction when he entered the Israeli police center where an explosion has proved his death. A 10 years old child had no way to reflect on this incidence, it was only a characteristic of an identity that would form itself through suffering, an identity that cherishes the value of humanity within a homeland.

Between an imaginative prospect and reality lays the Palestinian young adults' literature. A growing awareness of writing for children dates in the 1974, when the Palestinian Liberation Organisation: PLO adopted a vision: 'the future is for Children', as stated in an official document on education in Palestine. This vision had its main approach:

'to publicize for a contemporary, based on scientific knowledge, Arab culture, while its products are inventive and innovative, and based on a human national commitment and scientific methods.'

This humanistic approach, calling for inventiveness and innovation responds to the sentimental as well as realistic needs of Palestinians to strengthen their cultural rights. It has defined the main road for the Palestinian product on literature, mainly through establishing the "Dar Al Fata Al Arabi" publishing house which gathered a group of Palestinian and Arab intellectuals, designers and artists. The main idea of this publishing house was to enhance the educational level and preserve the identity of Palestinian children which was disrupted by the displacement as well as violence caused by the occupation after the Palestinian Nakba. 190 titles were published among them, books originally written in Arabic, others translated from other languages to the Arabic like Andersen stories, La Fontaine fables, and Grimm's fairy tales. Many of its books were translated from Arabic to other languages like the "illustrators note book" for the Arab author and artist Allabad. The services of this publishing house came to an end in the early nineties; it has however succeeded in setting high standards for the young adult literature in Palestine and the Arab world.

This vision was thoroughly reviewed, on a national level, both in 1998, and in 2007, yet its primary content was maintained until this day. Taking into consideration that the changes on the social and political level left its influence on the updated vision, the new vision states:

"Towards a child reading is his main interest, and provided with a Palestinian, Arabic and international entertaining book, inclusive of the artistic elements agreed upon in form and content, obeys the child's interest, free of preaching and guidance and appropriate for the different age groups."

Freedom has been the primary theme of the books produced during the period from 1974 till this date. Let's compare between two books for young adults, one by Zakaria Tamer produced in 1975 'Regret of a Horse' by Dar Al Fata Al Arabi, and the book by Ahlam Bsharat produced in 2008 'My Code Name is a butterfly', by Tamer Institute.. The first book tells the story of a horse who accepts to become a slave and then realises the exploitation of his

master who forces him into the barn, then he regrets his sedition as he watches all his friends free in their homeland. The second book tells the story of a young girl who despises the fact that her father works in an Israeli settlement, yet she knows very well that the wall of expansion and annexation has left no place for employment, agriculture and any source of living for Palestinians. In her search for freedom and answers, she collects her questions objections and contradictions in her 'secret pocket'. Despite the 30 years span between both books, the main theme is still being in hand by writers as well as by readers. In Palestine, discussions of the book by Bsharat, has raised many questions about the theme of freedom of expression. The writer herself proposes literature as a mean to express herself against occupation, but also against social constraints.

Apart from its rebellion against occupation, this book by Bsharat is a good illustration of all sorts of censorships represented by society, religion or traditional educational system: but the entire controversy arose by the book, as well as the failed tentative to censor it has raised its success among all teenagers.

Freedom, persistence, memory.... Apparently, Palestinian young adults' literature is in perfect harmony with Anderson's imagined community prospects..... It sometimes seems as if Palestinian writers have reinvented it in order to preserve the Palestinian Identity. However, as literature without readers means the death of this literature, a deeper look into the status of reading in Palestine becomes necessary, and it is possible to say that reading percentages¹ among Palestinian young adults between 10- 18 years indicates that among the children 54% read books, other than school books.

In its constant efforts to raise this percentage and deepen the Palestinian identity through reading, Tamer Institute has developed a programme within community libraries, through this programme, between March 2010 and June 2011, more than 1800 books discussions were held inside community libraries. About 50000 children and adults were engaged in the process. A total of 25000 child participated in 110 book discussions in school libraries. Some parents got involved in the process and started to show impact. These numbers may not be very appealing, but they hopefully can illustrate all the rich exchange of ideas, expressing questions, rebellions and dreams that they do involve: these are the activities that keep us alive and through them we know that with words, we will overcome walls and occupation.

² Survey on 'Reading Habits among children aging 10-18 years old', Ramallah, 2011

Journalism Israeli Under Occupation

For the last two decades, safety, freedom of movement, political pressure and poor working conditions have been the biggest challenges for Palestinian journalists in the OPT.

Throughout this period, the IFJ organised successive fact-finding missions which produced several seminal reports and recommendations. In its report "*Danger and Deadlines: Journalists' Rights on the Palestine Peace Agenda*" the IFJ mission which visited Palestine lately and found:

- a) *Evidence of systematic destruction of Palestinian media installations and material*
- b) *Numerous incidents of harassment, targeting and violence against journalists*
- c) *An atmosphere of fear and uncertainty among journalists and media about their circumstances*

The case of Gaza war

The three-week Israeli military offensive on Gaza on December 2008-January 2009 proved, once again, to have deadly consequences for Palestinian journalists. IFJ led mission to Gaza in the wake of the conflict, shows that five media workers were killed and up to 15 were injured during the Israeli offense.



- In January 2009, the joint IFJ-Federation of Arab Journalists (FAJ) Solidarity Mission to Gaza concluded in its report "*Justice in the News: A response to Targeting of Media in Gaza*"
- *There is a lack of safety and basic protection for media workers in Gaza, many of them journalists and photographers working freelance. The dangers facing media staff are profoundly exacerbated by evidence of deliberate attacks on media by Israel in Gaza.*
- *The mission concluded that the ban on foreign journalist entering Gaza, imposed by the Israeli authorities on 27 December 2008, was evidence of concerted efforts by Israel to ban, control and manage media.*
- *The mission also found evidence of undue pressure on independent journalists and media workers from Hamas including reports of threats and assaults and seizure of humanitarian aid to media.*

Who is representing who? The Rise of Factional Media



The internal political divisions between the Fateh-Palestinian Authority (PA), and the Hamas movement, culminating in the violent seizing of power in the Gaza Strip by Hamas in June 2007, has further added to the suffering of the Palestinian journalists. It has presented great challenges to their ability to work ethically, professionally and free of political interference without fear for their freedom or safety.

The Palestinian Syndicate of Journalists has struggled during the last few years to maintain the support of the Palestinian journalists due to the lack of reform. The biggest problem was the membership list with no transparency either in the list of members or in the criteria to accept new members. There were several unsuccessful attempts to reform the union until they managed in February this year to hold a congress, the first since December 1999.

Attacks on journalists continue to hinder their work and endanger their lives. In the first 6 months of 2011 MADA has monitored 113 violations on press freedom in the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt), including 68 committed by the security services of the West Bank and Gaza and 45 committed by Israeli Occupation Forces (IOF).

What is Palestinian literature? *Hassan Khader*

What is Palestinian literature?

The most simple and direct answer is: it's written by Palestinians, the same way when we say what's Egyptian or Chinese literature. To this fact we must add that Palestinians are Arabs, their language is Arabic, it means they are part of Arabic literature and culture, they are influenced by both and contribute to both.

Then, if we move a little bit further and ask:

Who and what are the Palestinians?

Unfortunately, the answer will not be direct and simple as the first one.

There are people who define themselves as Palestinians, but the existence of these people is contested and in some cases denied in territorial and legal terms. It's a unique situation, no other people in the world need to prove their existence and basic rights more than the Palestinians. Having that in mind doesn't mean ignoring the Kurds and other ethnic and religious minorities in the Middle East.

This is the first dimension of the complicity of the definition, who is and what is the Palestinian.

This fact is reflected in what can be defined as Palestinian literature. To prove that we exist, that we have rights and a narrative of our own.

The starting point, if there is a need for one is the Nakba, the events of 1948 that led to the expulsion of the Palestinians from their homeland, dispossessing and transforming them into refugees.

Usually, the cities are the center of political and cultural life of peoples; one of the greatest losses of the Palestinians in 1948 was the loss of their major cities, the traditional centers of their political and cultural life. This can partially explain why poetry was dominant while other forms of expression such as fiction and autobiography were rare.

In fact Edward Said tried to understand why the Palestinians, who were dispossessed, exiled and transformed into refugees didn't write memoirs in the first two decades after the Nakba. The answer was: they were so traumatized to the extent that sheer survival was the most pressing factor in their life. Only in the Seventies we started to read individual accounts of what happened in 1948?

After their expulsion, Palestine had to be reinvented as a lost paradise, any person familiar with romantic nationalism can easily identify common elements shared with other nations found themselves in the same situation in different parts of the world.

After the rise of the Palestinian national movement in the mid Sixties, Palestine had to be reinvented again, this time as a metaphor for freedom.

We have to keep in mind that when people imagine a homeland they reconstruct and reimage themselves as well. One of the early pioneers of reimagining Palestine was the essayist and fiction writer Ghassan Kanafani. Kanafani was an activist as well, in his fictional world the Palestinian was re-imagined as a freedom fighter, and the identity was reinvented, the Palestinian (male or female) is not necessarily and only some one born to Palestinian parents, he is the one who fights for freedom.

In the early Seventies, Beirut, where Kanafani lived and worked became a temporary center for Palestinian cultural life, the presence of the P.L.O headquarters and institutions played a major role in producing what can be defined as "dedicated literature".

Another center of cultural life was created by the Palestinians who remained in their homeland and became a minority after 1948. In Cities such as Haifa, Nazareth a cultural center appeared in the late Sixties, the finest poets and fiction writers were born there, the contribution of that center was dealing with Palestine not as a lost paradise, but as a hard and disfigured reality where notions of being exiled in your own homeland, and defending what remained of the land, came into being.

Mahmoud Darwish, the Palestinian national poet was born, in the literary sense of the word, there as well as Tawfik Zayyad, Emil Habibi and Samih Alqassem. They are the ones who made an ever lasting influence on the making and shaping of the Palestinian identity.

At the same time another process was going on, the Palestinian Diaspora, or Diasporas (in the Middle East and North America) was in the making, the first generation of refugees was busy trying to earn a living and repair a damaged life, their children the first generation of Palestinians born in refugee camps and far a way from the land were starting to make their voice heard.

In the nineties, especially after the establishment of the Palestinian authority in Gaza and West bank many Palestinians living in the Diaspora came to the conclusion that the Diaspora is not temporary, it's becoming more and more permanent with the second and third generations being born in other places and trying to establish themselves, in their adopted countries. In the last ten years or so we witness the appearance of different centers.

Here, it must be mentioned that after the establishment of the Palestinian Authority a new center was created in Gaza and the West Bank. This time the center was to a large extent controlled from above, by the P.A bureaucracy; this led to the creation of what can be defined as populist literature and culture, less significant than the other centers, it led as well a new generation of Palestinian men and women to disengage from the grand narrative of their elders.

A new generation of Palestinian men and women are writing now in other languages as well, their main interest is not the grand narrative but the small details of life in the Diaspora and under occupation; Palestine is being reinvented again not as a lost paradise but as a human tragedy. To literature we must add cinema, plastic arts, theatre and music. All these modes of expression and creativity are witnessing a real revival and making an impact.

This is connected in different ways to the political changes in the mid nineties, to the populist Palestinian regime in Gaza and the West Bank, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, the failure of the peace process and the decline of the national movement which is manifested in factional conflict.

Nowadays, politically speaking, it's the lowest point in many decades; the occupation is still there, the peace process crumpled, the founders of the Palestinian national movement and the most creative thinkers, poets and novelists, who dominated the literary and cultural scene in the last four decades, passed a way.

At the same time new voices are being heard, young men and women in their Twenties and Thirties are declaring there presence in different centers, in Palestine band the Diaspora as well.

There is no dominant center any more and no grand narrative. Questions are being asked, and I see this as a positive development.



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