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## PALESTINIAN LITERATURE BETWEEN THE HAMMER AND THE ANVIL

This paper is an attempt to present a critical evaluation on an existing literature of the two segments of Palestinians — those in Israel and those in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Although the 1967 is the actual date on which the isolated Palestinians inside Israel physically met their fellow Palestinians, who until then had been under Hashimite Jordanian or Egyptian rule, the process of discovery and recognition remained rather slow and tentative until the West Bank uprising of 1973 - 76.

Such a discussion achieves even greater significance in the context of Intifada, which has already put into effect new ideas, views, and tactics on the type of development that is needed in order to achieve Palestinian rights towards independence and self-determination. Moreover, strategies which implement various forms of self-reliant development raise the central issue of the nature of the relationship between the Palestinians and the occupying authorities, and also raise questions about the role of the various funding organizations which impose types of development that may have negative implications for the future development of Palestinian society.

Characteristics such as self-reliance, group identity, and solidarity have already been developed within Palestinian society through the activities of the mass movement during the Intifada. Indeed, it could be argued that it is their expression through projects and cultural activities that has assisted the continuity of the Intifada and given it its strength. Of course, this has dramatically transformed the nature of the relationship between the individual and society and thus has made it virtually impossible for a return to the previous status quo.

In short, economic transformation and implementation of new tactics and options of development, such as the co-operative, do not take place without a change in the literary arena. On the contrary, they are meant to support the political struggle and its continuity. Thus, the stone is as important as the enthusiastic poem. Ya'qoub Hijazi when addressing the masses adds that his poetry will guide and improve their state:

Because I write Poems for the human beings,  
Peasants, oppressed, workers,  
My letters I shall always make known,  
Cross the bridge of my tragedy to the more beautiful  
Write its story ...  
So my people may rise to the better  
To the better.<sup>1</sup>



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Prior to presenting the detailed discussion, it is necessary to present a brief historical account of the nature of occupation experienced in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in order to permit a better grasp of the significance of the title of this essay.

## THE BACKGROUND

The Hashimite rule over the West Bank, as well as the Israeli, was and still is, overtly and directly involved in suppressing the publication of worthwhile literature, specially that of political or social significance. Direct censorship, combined with control over educational and social institutions, clubs, and all cultural activities, along with relentless political repression, succeeded in maintaining a standard of ignorance and superficiality of alarming dimensions. Censorship and lack of freedom of speech were - and still are - familiar in Israeli occupied territories.

I speak to the world ... I tell it  
About a house whose lantern they broke  
About an axe that killed a lily  
And a fire which destroyed the world<sup>2</sup>

Israeli attempts to suppress this literature did not succeed entirely, and were gradually enfeebled by the preservice of the politically committed poets and writers of the areas.<sup>3</sup>

Censorship in the occupied areas, and until recently on the Palestinians in Israel, followed the British Mandate emergency regulations of the 1940's were part of Israeli democracy when used against Arabs. These laws are neither explicitly formulated nor openly published, but in practice they are arbitrarily enforced along the following lined as gathered from Arab news papers and magazines printed in Jerusalem:

1. The material has to be sent in two copies ( already printed) to the censor at 10 AM., 8 AM. and /or 11 PM.
2. The censor keeps one copy and sends back the other with the following stamps:  
(A) Publication permitted  
(B) Revise the encircled  
(C) Delete
3. No blank spaces may be left in any publication and the term "censored" may not be used.
4. A newspaper, or magazine is allowed three warnings, after which it is closed down.
5. On the Sabath news, items are read on the phone while articles and longer materiales are sent before and after the Sabath.<sup>4</sup>

Conditions of publication were equally discouraging on both sides until progressive publishing houses were opened in Israel. The Communist Party's newspaper al-Ittihad and the monthly al-Jadid provided windows of expression for budding writers and poets hence the predominance of the Communist Literary figures as pioneers in

the modern Palestinian Literary tradition.

#### NATURE OF PALESTINIAN LITERARY MOVEMENT

Palestinian literature is not limited to printed page or to legally published books. Because of the conditions mentioned above, various channels of expression were devised to supplement the gaps and circumvent obstacles of freedom of thought and expression. Poetry reading sessions, and seminars or study sessions have become familiar phenomena on a very wide scale in the West Bank.

Newspapers, recognizing the need for creating further channels of literary expression, have come out with literary section which have gained immense popularity. The quality of the published works is gradually improving, specially due to the efforts of al Fajr primarily, followed by al Shaab and al Quds, all in Jerusalem. Al Bayader has already established itself as a landmark in the intellectual and literary life of the occupied territories, and is currently recognized as the only mouthpiece of the politically aware and innovative writer of the area. In it, one can read the works of the major as well as the most promising literary figures and at the same time followed the development of contemporary trends in Palestine.

The Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip are suffering from a geographical and cultural isolation, though of a lesser severity than that of the Palestinians in Israel from 1948 -1967. Living under the occupation of a regime which is socially, culturally, and politically alien and hostile to the native population has created a defence mechanism reaction among the Palestinians who insist on preserving their identity at all costs. This adds strength to the national folklore revival<sup>5</sup> and that at the same time gives the Palestinian literature a somewhat defensive and extreme colouring and weighs it heavily with the task of aggressively expressing and affirming this identity. This has become a double-edged sword in that initially it gave momentum to the literary movement, but then became a rigid pattern depriving the literature of much of its originality and vitality. The language itself, at first enriched by the use of folkloric and colloquial terms and expressions, is now suffering the loss of meaning and force which comes as a result of endless repetition and formalic constructions.

More dangerous, however, than the plight of the literature is the plight of the people who write this literature. Although aware of the literary problems facing them and working for a new breakthrough in their fields, writers and educated people in the occupied areas are feeling most keenly on the economic and psychological pressures of living under occupation. Lack of freedom can be confronted or evaded,<sup>6</sup> but when writers and intellectuals are unable to survive physically, then the sacrifices demanded of them become unbearable. The brain drain from occupied Palestine has reached alarming proportions, with the educated young seeking a living elsewhere. Such danger is enhanced by the symbolic role that these people play in the eyes of the society as a whole: they are the national figures, symbols of resistance and political as well as aesthetic consciousness, who are wielding their

mighty pens in the face of the enemy. Such a tremendous responsibility is placed on their shoulders, burdened with aspiration of a whole nation. In this stage the song replaces the fighter:

It is my fate to sing  
To hunger  
And remain singing,  
For my wounds to bleed  
And remain singing,  
If I die in battle  
The songs,  
Among the comrades, will take my place  
And fight for me.?

It has become almost imperative for any study of this nature to offer a literary "apology" or "defence" in an attempt to justify any shortcomings or literary defects in the subject at hand. After all, the literature is "Palestinian", and unfortunately this national definition has become the rationalization for the lack of any objective study or criticism of the literature which is in itself a source of national pride, a symbol as well as a means of resistance.

This study, however, while not pretending to be the final word on our literature, is perhaps the beginning of a ruthless scrutiny of a field that has long been denied its rights to responsible criticism; the right to demand of its critics responsible analysis and evaluation combined with the essential intellectual integrity that other literatures of the world have "enjoyed".

This is not to say that objectivity means a disregard to the conditions -- social, political and cultural-- within which this literature was born and is still growing. Nor does it mean a patronizing condescension to literature of a developing nation on the basis of the logical fallacy that this underdeveloped nation has a literary output which is in itself parallels this underdevelopment. Rather, through a study of a objective conditions one can come to a better understanding of - and not an apology for - the literary works of the people who are living these conditions. The Palestinians have been able to meet many challenges in their struggle for existence and the challenge of an honest and constructive criticism is a mere footnote in their long and arduous struggle.

#### REFERENCES

1. Ya'coup Hijazi, a Palestinian poet, "The Other Face", Drops of my blood, p. 47.
2. Sameh Al-Qassem, "I speak to the world", The Smoke of Volcanoes, p.38
3. see for example, Tawfeeq Zayyad's introduction to his anthology of previously collection of poems Prisoners of freedom, in which he explains how the "overly-sensitive" Israeli democracy was unable to tolerate even singing. "The charges of endangering the security of the state remains a constant threat against any outspoken writer".
4. Hanan Mikhael Ashrawi, The Contemporary Palestinian Poetry of Occupation, Journal of Palestine Studies, No.38 (winter 1979) p.81.
5. See Tawfeeq Zayyad, The State of the World, a collection of folklore short stories; cf., also Muhammad Ghanyemeh, The Cry of the Conscience, special verse from Palestinian folkloric tradition. See also the colloquial poems and various 1970 issues of al-Jadid newspaper such as al-Fajr are also starting special folklore section with continuous contributions from readers. Other visible signs of the folklore revival are in the frequent visits of the intellectuals to village feasts and weddings, armed with their portable cassette recorders.
6. West Bank writers publishing in al-Jadid often use pseudonyms to hide their identity for security reasons.
7. Salem Jubran, Comrades of the Sun, pp. 25- 26.