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The Story of a People




AN ANTHOLOGY OF PALESTINIAN
POETS WITHIN THE GREEN-LINES

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Introduction

he Palestinian poet is the son or daughter of the people, the pulse of its feelings, the mirror of its life and the carrier of its worries and concerns. Through the pen, the Palestinian poet expresses thoughts, pleasures and grief, hopes and pains, successes, expectations and failures. The poet is engaged in his or her people's daily affairs, registers its process of struggle and escorts it throughout its history, its presence and future. After the *Nakbah* in 1948, the Palestinian poet has undergone a tough experience: the loss of his or her homeland and the dispersal of his or her people. Worse, he has been made to live under terrible circumstances where he has to fight for survival. This new reality, however, does not commit the poet to hopelessness and frustration. On the contrary, like a sphinx, Palestinian poets are resurrected from the ashes and come to life with new perspectives characterized by a boost of energy, hopes, expectations and ambitions on the part of their people who remained rooted in their land, for others who were sent into Diaspora, for the Arab world and for people everywhere. These perspectives are reflected in their poetry which includes all spheres of life. Yet, it is only natural that the center of their focus is the situations created by the occupation or expulsion.

Almost all poets confirm their roles as notable leaders of struggle against all practices of occupation and oppression. Tawfīq Zayyād, one of the major pil-

lars of this stream, has designed an innovative route for fighters of freedom. In his fascinating poem called "The Singer," Zayyād points out that he has chosen to sing for life to which he devotes his own life, songs and possessions rather than sing for violence bred by violence. In another poem, he says

I sanctify nothing
 If I had lived as a rascal
 I would have died as a happy man
 If my words had been able to please some people
 If it were possible that a child
 In the future
 Would read them
 In a notebook.

In his "To a Poet," George Najīb Khalīl reaffirms Zayyād's meaning when he maintains that the non-stop tragedies which circumscribe the Palestinians' lives have the power to turn light into utter darkness. Still, the poet asks his people not to blame the time for their disasters. Instead, the poet, as the mouth of the people, should keep his optimistic smile despite all odds. In Khalīl's opinion, poetry is most beautiful when it carries between its lines the pulse of the revolution and simultaneously preaches love and peace. This function of poetry becomes clearer when peace is settled and the oppressed party gets its fair and just rights. Then poetry will have yielded fruits capable of pleasing the hearts of people. He says,

Oh, ye poet who does not find joy
 Until peace settles the whole universe
 In the record of struggle you have recorded glory
 Through a poem with fiery letters
 So sing what you please and smile for hope
 Because hope is an eternal song
 And recite for all people the fine verses
 From the files of the Arabs' glowing history

Shafīq Ḥabīb presents the face of a poet who is stormy and sad owing to the circle of illusions residing in the heads of the cowardly sector of his or her people. Worse, Ḥabīb is surrounded by blind people who live in such a desperate situation that he almost forgets the call of the land. The love of his homeland crushes his bones. He is simply engaged with trouble which is frequently confronted by the honest people the like of him.

Ibrāhīm Mālik wants his homeland now under occupation to find sleep and comfort, but of course it cannot because it is still occupied. It is here that the role of the poet becomes significant. He is obliged to remain alert because his

alertness will motivate others to follow his example and eventually his homeland now in captivity will enjoy freedom.

Similarly, Sāmīr Khair asserts the centrality of the poet's role in the struggle of people for freedom. Addressing the poet, Khair says,

Live your life
Oh, poet
Live your life without mirrors
Shattered in the paper
And cross the time like the wind
No puzzling or worry
And before drowning forget
What the sea hides...

In his long poem, "The Hoopoe," Maḥmūd Darwīsh, perhaps the most cherished poet in all over the Arab world, talks about the journey of a flock of birds which starts from the eye of a needle towards the God of birds, the Simurgh. The whole journey is coupled with difficulties, problems, questionings and moments of hopelessness and tiredness. At the outset of the journey the birds recognize the need for a guide. After serious arguments, they agree on the hoopoe known for his wisdom and expertise as their guide and protector. The hoopoe provides his group with hope and optimism. He asks his group to continue flying and to give no mind to obstacles until they reach their goal. Doubtlessly, the central purpose of the poem is the achievement of the Palestinian dream: to return home from the Diaspora and establish an independent state. This dream which is too thorny to be accomplished in reality can be achieved by means of poetry. This is the only available way for the speaker's group (the flock of birds) to enjoy peace and freedom following the example of peoples the world over. In the present time, their life is an exile or a forced expulsion outside of Palestine and, in consequence, until they manage to accomplish their desire, they will be considered as captives.

So what keeps the speaker and his group hopeful is the presence of a guide (the hoopoe) among them. Writing from his place in exile about the birth of the new and free home, this guide (the hoopoe) will lead them to their inevitable redemption. So after having lost faith in people who can fight for their cause, the group have great expectations from this poet/guide who is going to let the voice of this dispersed people be heard all over the world. This is why the group described in this poem ask the poet/guide to speak loudly so that everybody can hear him and realize their just cause. Yet, the birds have their own doubts and questions. They wonder whether they are doomed to fly in the sky of their exile awaiting salvation, whether they are fated to walk along a road filled with one mirage followed by another.

Rushdī Al-Mādī regards the struggling spirit of the poet as an integral part of his life. It is rooted so deep inside him that it cannot be daunted at all by intimidation or coercion. The repeated losses do not reduce his strong will and fail to lead him into frustration and hopelessness. On the contrary, his pen submits to his optimistic spirit and makes him soar with pride.

2

Another major topic discussed by the Palestinian poets is their choice of the route of dignity which they consider to be more important than their daily bread. The Struggle of the people to obtain their daily bread may force some to adopt neutrality and in consequence prevents them from playing their natural role in reflecting the people's pains. In his "I Without My Dignity Shall Not Feel Gratified," Samīḥ Sabbāgh foregrounds the conflict between maintaining the daily bread, i. e. the route of neutrality and writing rebellious poetry. As a poet, Sabbāgh has always been aware of the sad history of his people. In response, his feelings are moved and, as a result, the words rush in him and flow in the shape of poetry. Unfortunately, his poems are, in a sense, imprisoned. He is torn between silence for fear of losing his job and the call of poetry to occupy his natural position. But he chooses the road of dignity and allies himself with the workers.

The same idea is reiterated by Jiryes Khūrī, who, in "An Elegy for People Who Have not Died Yet," gives a faithful picture of his people living under oppression as though buried while alive. His father has sold his eyes, his most precious possession to keep his honor in a world which has thwarted dignity. Instead of begging the grave-digger's mercy, the poet challenges him to build up the walls of the grave because he does not care. "Our bodies perish," he tells the digger, "But our soul/ Remains with us."

3

The Palestinian poet's intense commitment to his role of leading the struggle of his people does not depart from him even when he is engaged in contexts of inflammable compassion. The beloved and the homeland merge and become an inseparable entity. In his "Whispers in the Shades of Olive Trees," Samīḥ Sabbāgh, for instance, wishes that the future could unite him with his beloved to live as two rebels on one land. Then they could compose a beautiful song strewn with love which would help them confront torture. If pain and torture were to storm him, he would resort to his beloved because she is his port. And in "You Come at the End of the Night," Sabbāgh again associates the home-

land with a girl who visits him in his dreams reminding him of a village in the Galilee known for its beautiful orchards.

A similar meaning is given by Su 'ud Assadi in his "Like Two Ripe Figs." Assadi's grief is mixed with his nostalgia for the past, his first homeland, a cave in a rock. In the process he describes the trees and plants of his area and his childhood memories when he survived death thanks to Dr. Nāyef Ḥamzah, who predicted the child is not going to die. Then, Assadi seizes the opportunity to express his sorrow for his own bereaved people who passed away both at home and in the Diaspora. Afterwards, the poet recalls his passion for the beautiful poetess whose love pushed him to be more committed to poetry and to the writing of it. In conclusion, he wishes his body could transform into a plant in soil and be a daffodil bulb which flowers every year fulfilling Ḥamzah's prophecy. He says,

How much I wished that my soul would become a plant in soil
Like a daffodil bulb blooming and flowering every year
Fulfilling the prophecy of my first famous doctor
That death will not come close to me!

Fahd Abū Khadrah's talk about love is submerged with the passion for the homeland. His beloved is a princess loved by a multitude of eyes and hearts and desired by countless others. Yet, she lives in a Diaspora where she dreams of dawn and believes that the night of separation will impend. Then, pains will end. Once the prince is about to meet the princess, he realizes he is a dreamer. Although he knows their meeting is a difficult task, he nonetheless continues to be dedicated to her love.

4

Living in Diaspora under tough conditions and feelings of estrangement, hopelessness, frustration and homelessness is another topic which preoccupies Palestinian poets living within the Green Lines. It goes without saying that *An-Nakbah* has caused a deep crack in the body of the Palestinian people. In fact, the Palestinian people was shattered into numerous fragments. It was only natural that those who remained in their homeland could not only express their strong ties with their homeland but also share the concerns and pains of those who were compelled to live in exile. George Najīb Khalīl draws a faithful image of this experience. In his "I am Homeless," he points out that he is deprived of his freedom to move inside his village and as a result he suffers the concerns and sorrows of expulsion. He, therefore, longs for the trees and the orchards of his village which were given to others but taken away from him. The way out of this situation is possible through confronting oppression with