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The Contemporary Palestinian Poetry of Occupation

HANAN MIKHAIL ASHRAWI*

The term “contemporary” is used here to refer to the poetry of the 1970’s, a period selected arbitrarily, but significant in that it marks the age of optimism and rebellion in the occupied areas. It is marked by the political and literary reconciliation of the two segments of Palestinians — those in Israel and those in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Although 1967 is the actual date on which the isolated Palestinians inside Israel physically met their fellow Palestinians, who until then had been under Hashemite Jordanian or Egyptian rule, the process of discovery and recognition remained rather slow and tentative until the West Bank uprisings of 1973-76.

The 1970’s, thus, for the first time provide us with an opportunity to talk about Palestinian literature as a whole, rather than the two literatures of exile and of occupation. The main focus of this study will be the poetry of occupation, i.e., post-1967, in the West Bank and Gaza, at the same time drawing on the poetry of the Palestinians in Israel. Many studies of the latter have been made, primarily in other Arab countries, but the literature of the occupied areas remains difficult to obtain and approach in a systematic study. Both trends are getting closer, however, and in their development after 1967 have become mutually dependent.

1. THE BACKGROUND

The Hashemite rule over the West Bank was overtly and directly involved in suppressing the publication of worthwhile literature, especially that of

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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. Only the regime's mouthpieces or writers of trashy third-rate literature succeeded in getting their works published, while underground literature remained scarce and did not reach a significant audience.

Censorship and lack of freedom of speech were also familiar in Israeli-occupied Palestine. With the 1960's, however, after the experience of the "Al-Ard" movement in 1958, and mainly after the Communist Party (Rakah) gained popularity and recognition among the Arab masses, the Palestinian voice of protest began to be heard not only in Palestine but also throughout the Arab world. Israeli attempts to suppress this literature did not succeed entirely, and were gradually enfeebled by the perseverance of the politically committed poets and writers of the area.¹ Other ways of evading censorship, of course, included the heavy use of symbolism which gradually became a burden on Palestinian literature, degenerating into clichés and frozen metaphors — as we shall discuss later in specific detail.

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

1. The material has to be sent in two copies (already printed or typeset) to the censor at 10 a.m., 8 p.m. and/or 11 p.m.
2. The censor keeps one copy and sends back the other with the following stamps:
 - (A) Publication permitted.
 - (B) Revise the encircled.

¹ See, for example, Tawfiq Zayyad's introduction to his anthology of previously censored poems *Prisoners of Freedom*, in which he explains how the "overly-sensitive" Israeli democracy was unable to tolerate even singing. The fact that he was able to publish these poems by the end of 1973, he says, is proof that life itself has the capacity to solve all problems — including those of greater freedom. This does not mean, however, that censorship and suppression of freedom of thought and expression have been eliminated as official policy in Israel. The charge of endangering the "security of the state" remains a constant threat against any outspoken writer. See, for example, the case of Samih al-Qassem in "A Poem in Confrontation with a Tank," by Muhammad Hamzeh Ghanayem, *al-Jadid*, July 1976, pp. 13-16.

(C) Delete.

3. No blank spaces may be left in any publication and the term “censored” may not be used.

4. The censor sends a written notice on any violation.

5. A newspaper or magazine is allowed three warnings, after which it is closed down (which generally involves the closing down of the printers).

6. On the Sabbath (Friday noon-Saturday 5:00 p.m.), news items are read on the phone while articles and longer materials are sent before or after the Sabbath.

It is almost impossible to predict what might be censored, in as much as it is difficult to predict the whims of the censor. Anything which might threaten “the security of the state” is forbidden, but that is quite fluid since, according to the emergency laws, thinking thoughts harmful to the state is a legally punishable offence. Until recently, for example, the word “Palestine” was considered threatening enough to be censored — even in West Bank children’s textbooks.

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* (established 1951) provided avenues of expression for budding writers and poets — hence the predominance of Communist literary figures as pioneers in the modern Palestinian literary tradition. Along with Dar al-Ittihad² publishing house in Haifa several other progressive publishers have contributed to the increasing output of Palestinian literary figures — including Arabesque, also in Haifa, al-Maktaba al-Sha’biyya, in Nazareth, and the most recent, Salah ad-Din in Jerusalem.³ More neutral publishing houses include Dar al-Jalil in Acre and Dar al-Hurriyya in Nazareth. Progressive political, literary and cultural trends in the Arab world also reach the Palestinians through pirated editions put out by private groups and the leftist press.

The Israeli authorities predictably attempted to counter the emergence of nationalist and progressive publishing houses by creating and sponsoring others which would serve its own interests by publishing only those works which serve Israeli policy or at least those which do not come out openly

² As the official newspaper of the Communist Party in Israel, *al-Ittihad* cannot be sold legally in the West Bank, which still follows the Jordanian laws; according to these, the Communist Party is outlawed and possession of any communist material is illegal. Israel has used these laws to arrest many “undesirables” in the West Bank against whom there is no tangible evidence.

³ Established in 1974, Salah ad-Din has become the major publisher of West Bank intellectual, literary, and political circles, thus filling an important gap in the occupied areas.

against it. The most prominent of these are the Histadrut-sponsored Dar al-Nashr al-‘Arabi and Dar al-Sharq al-Taawuniyya, both of which are directly connected with the official Israeli Arabic newspaper *al-Anba’* and the journal *al-Sharq*. Such a polarity naturally reflected itself in the literature and readership of both groups of publishers — each having its own writers and audience; hence the choice of publisher has become, in itself, an overt political position. Fortunately, the nationalist group won the upper hand without much effort, while the Israeli-affiliated faction has become a mere footnote in the history of Palestinian literature. Michel Haddad, Jamal Qa‘war, Anton Shammās, and Fahd Abu Khadra, along with non-progressive Jewish writers and critics of Arabic literature such as Sassoon Sumaikh, Shmuel Moreh and Salim (Shlomo-Samuel) Sha‘shou, neither influence the main thrust of Palestinian literature, nor are they influenced by the conditions and the aspirations of the Palestinian masses. Their direct models are Western poets and their concerns verge on the existentialist/absurd subjective tradition.

Palestinian literature is not limited to the 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 to freedom of thought and expression. Poetry reading sessions, panel discussions, and seminars or study sessions have become familiar phenomena on a very wide scale in the West Bank. Literary events, such as the traditional “Souq ‘Okath” in Bir Zeit University, are gaining increasing audiences, and along with Bethlehem University, Bir Zeit University and the student council have expanded their public activities to satisfy such pressing demands — as in the extremely popular “Palestine Week” which Bir Zeit University student council held during the first week of June 1976. Lectures and panel discussions underwent a hard struggle to establish themselves as distinct means of communication, especially as the censor demanded the complete written text of any lecture or discussion. Lecturers and speakers persistently refused to comply and the law was dropped in practice if not in theory.

Another factor was the establishing of clubs or the revival of licensed but defunct organizations which carry out “internal” activities which, if limited to members only, do not need the direct permission of the authorities. These, along with established “charitable organizations” such as the “In‘ash al-Usra” organization, sponsor research groups, cultural committees, and many types of socially-directed activities.

The most noticeable literary-cultural phenomenon, mainly in the Jerusalem-Ramallah area, is the emergence of theatre groups. In 1971, the

“Balaleen” (balloons) theatre group emerged and performed *A Slice of Life* on January 22, 1972. It was met with great success, and the group attracted an audience from all over the West Bank — an audience which still attends all the group’s performances. Other theatre groups were formed, culminating in the founding of the Association for Work and the Development of the Arts in August 1974, the first working committee being that of theatre. Almost all plays presented were written by the theatre groups themselves. Most groups have preserved their independence, and consequently remained in financial trouble. Again, financial difficulties, censorship, lack of qualified volunteers, and political persecution have plagued the Palestinian theatre in the same way they did other types of cultural activities.

Newspapers, recognizing the need for creating further channels of literary expression, have come out with literary sections which have gained immense popularity. The quality of the published works is gradually improving, especially due to the efforts of *al-Fajr* primarily, followed by *al-Shaab* and *al-Quds*, all in Jerusalem. *Al-Jadid*, the magazine published by Dar al-Ittihad, remained unique for quite a few years until the publication of *al-Bayader* in March 1976. Having come out only six times till now, *al-Bayader* has already established itself as a landmark in the intellectual and literary life of the occupied areas, and is currently recognized as the only mouthpiece of the politically aware and innovative writers 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 follow the developments of contemporary literary trends in Palestine.⁴

The only journal in the area is the quarterly *Journal of Society and Heritage* put out first in 1973 by the Folklore Committee of the “In‘ash al-Usra” organization of al-Bireh-Ramallah. This followed the tremendously successful folkloric study of *Turmus‘ayya — A Palestinian Village*. The publication of this journal is of special significance in that it is a concrete expression of a phenomenon which exists as a recurring and dominant theme in Palestinian literature — folklore, not only as a subject of historical and literary study, but also as a vital and dynamic force in Palestinian society and as a symbol of the determination of the Palestinian people to survive and gain

⁴ The reason for the scarcity of journals and magazines is the difficulty in obtaining licences and financial support. It took the *al-Bayader* editors five years to get a licence — even resorting to the mediation of people considered politically “safe” by the Israeli authorities. The magazine was able to survive financially through the support, initially, of interested individuals who donated and subscribed to it before the first issue saw the light. Lack of sufficient funds, however, remains a major threat to the survival of the magazine.

their right to self-determination as a nation with a distinct culture and history, a past and a future.

The Palestinians in the West Bank and Israel are suffering from a geographical and cultural isolation, though of a lesser severity than that of the Palestinians in Israel from 1948 to 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 fuel to the national folklore revival⁵ and that at the same time gives Palestinian literature a somewhat defensive and extreme colouring and weighs it heavily with the task of aggressively expressing and affirming this identity. We shall see later how 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 formulaic 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 the economic and psychological pressures of living under occupation. Lack of freedom can be confronted or evaded,⁶ 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 a danger is enhanced by the symbolic role that these people play in the eyes of society as a whole: they are the national figures, symbols of resistance and political as well

⁵ See Tawfiq Zayyad, *The State of the World*, a collection of folklore short stories; cf., also Muhammad Ghanyemeh, *The Cry of the Conscience*, special verses from the Palestinian oral folk tradition. See also the colloquial poems in various 1970 issues of *al-Jadid*. Newspapers such as *al-Fajr* are also starting special folklore sections with continuous contributions from readers. Other visible signs of the folklore revival are in the frequent visits of intellectuals to village feasts and weddings, armed with their portable cassette recorders. Several music groups — most notably Mustafa al-Kurd and the Bara'em — are experimenting with the local musical tradition, setting to music both the lyrics of contemporary poets and old folklore songs in new musical arrangements.

⁶ West Bank writers publishing in *al-Jadid* often use pseudonyms to hide their identity for security reasons.

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 the aspirations of a whole nation, that they are no longer free agents or individuals. The repercussions of their actions are quite serious and widespread, and in the words of the budding poet Walid al-Hallees, "A poet who leaves destroys a nationalist phenomenon," and lets down a whole generation who looks up to him.

Less important than actual economic need, but just as destructive as a motive for emigration are the romantic yearnings of isolated Palestinian intellectuals to visit or live in "free" Arab lands — Beirut (until recently), Cairo, Damascus. The Palestinians in Israel have always regarded these places as a dreamland, impossible to visit unless without return. Those in the West Bank have mixed feelings; the pre-1967 generation has no illusions about, although some nostalgia for, other Arab lands. However, most contemporary writers belong to the 1967 generation, which was either not yet born or too young to remember life before occupation. The "open bridges policy" of Israel mainly increases the frustration, for travel permits are not easy to obtain and travel conditions remain extremely harsh. Most recently, the Lebanese crisis, ironically, has served the Palestinians in the occupied areas by removing the vestiges of curiosity or respect that they had for Arab countries. No Arab regime is considered trustworthy, and especially with the memory of the September massacres still fresh in their minds, the Palestinians have nowhere else to go except their own homeland — even under occupation. Feelings of disappointment, disgust and outrage have now destroyed the romantic yearnings of the Palestinians for their Arab "brothers."

2. THE POETRY OF PALESTINE

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 national literature, is perhaps the beginning of a ruthless scrutiny of a field that has long been denied its rights to responsible criticism, like a child or a mentally disturbed person who is not held responsible for his actions. Our literature has 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 of the conditions — social, political, and cultural — within which this literature was born and is still growing. Nor does it mean a patronizing condescension to a literature of a developing nation on the basis of the logical fallacy that an underdeveloped nation has a literary output which in itself parallels this underdevelopment. Rather, through a study of the 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.

* * *

Poetry is the most popular and dominant genre in Palestinian literature, and the one closest to the people as a whole. This can be attributed, in part, to the strong oral tradition in Palestinian culture and the ease with which catchy expressions and verses are retained and repeated. Also, like the rest of the Arab nation, Palestinians are a verbal people, easily captured and moved by language, often swayed more by the external beauty of rhythm, music, and sound of the oral expression than by the internal meaning and coherence. The number of poets is expanding rapidly, each poet assured some amount of recognition and at the same time not checked by a solid critical current.

Consequently, and because poetry is viewed as an expression and a tool of national solidarity and political consciousness, two poles of poets are discernible: the nationalist, committed, and politically aware poets, who view poetry primarily as a vehicle and a means of moving the masses; and the individualistic, personal poets who are totally detached from their people and setting, having reached a point of abstraction and intellectualization that becomes entirely incomprehensible. In both groups, the cathartic element is visible; in the former on the collective, patriotic scale and in the latter on the personal psycho-therapeutic level. In between are the poets who write committed poetry with a “message,” but who have Westernized (and consequently foreignized) their style and allusions to the point of obscurity.

The individualistic group is the easiest to deal with in that its impact on the local literary scene is minimal. It includes the “Sharq” poets, who write to themselves and to each other, looking to the West for inspiration. Foremost

among these is Michel Haddad who has made several attempts at forming Arab literary associations in Israel supported by Jewish-Israeli writers and critics of Arabic literature such as Salim Sha'shou, Shmuel Moreh, and Sassoon Sumeikh. Other poets of the group include Jamal Qa'war, Fahd Abu Khadra, George Najib Khalil, and Anton Shammas.⁷ The poetic progress of these Arab "establishment" poets in Israel is best expressed in Michel Haddad's poem "The Shadows of the Walk":

As much as I can
I humour the shadows
But when they narrow
They are no longer mine
And when they widen
They're wrapped in the impossible.
Yet, not to get lost
I dip my feet in water
Wet the path
And slide.⁸

The opposite pole comprises the majority of Palestinian poets, especially those in the West Bank who followed in the footsteps of their counterparts in Israel, namely Salem Jubran, Tawfiq Zayyad, Mahmoud Darwish, and to a certain extent Samih al-Qassem. The popularity of these "poets of resistance," and the enthusiasm with which the Palestinian masses and the Arab world embraced their works, have established a pattern of imitation and repetition in Palestinian poetry. The current crisis in poetry, with its formulaic nature, exhausted images, and standard devices can be traced directly to this need to imitate, to have a model and a set standard.

The mimetic urge is most visible in Samih al-Qassem who has established the trend of "foreignization" in poetry, and who has followed the techniques of the Lebanese poet "Adonis," placing them in a Palestinian context instead. His poetry has progressively displayed a predominance of allusions from Ulysses and Penelope to Johnny Guitar, Bach, Beethoven, and Tom Jones, to the now all-pervasive Biblical-Hebraic events, names, and quotations.⁹ Many

⁷ See Jamal Qa'war, "A Glance at Local Arabic Poetry," *al-Sharq*, III, 2 (June-July 1972), pp. 21-30.

⁸ *The Drawing Closer of the Hours and the Miles*, p. 7.

⁹ See *Father, Father, Why Hast Thou Slain Me?* especially pp. 11, 14-15, 21, 32, 40. His actual use of English and Hebrew in his poetry is the most obvious element of "foreignization." See also *They Neither Killed nor Crucified Him, but so it Seemed to Them*, "Confessions of a Smuggler," pp. 36-47, and "Birds of the Black Forest," pp. 124-27.

West Bank poets have slavishly imitated this style by needlessly imposing on their poems obscure allusions and references. Khalil Touma, in "Ulysses on his Last Journey," goes back to the tradition of comparing the plight of Palestinians in exile to the travels of Ulysses on his way back to Ithaca. Samira al-Khatib also uses the parallel of sailors for homelessness and alienation: Ulysses, Penelope, Isis, Osiris, etc.¹⁰ Samih al-Qassem, like them, remains a nationalist poet and his attempts at giving his poems an international dimension invariably revert to the specifically Palestinian situation; it is this situation that either generated the poem or that is reflected in and paralleled by the universal or archetypal conditions of the "foreignized" poems. Many of these obscure allusions remain a flexing of intellectual muscles rather than integral and indispensable sources of meaning. Such poems are addressed to and appreciated by the educated elite who themselves sometimes find this intellectual exercise a bit taxing. The other extreme of al-Qassem is the one that makes him popular; it includes the more direct statements of nationalism and defiance as well as bitterness and self-pity which have become the standard form for most Palestinian poetry:

O world
 My lilies have become —
 My lilies — trumpets sounding
 About my burning in refugee camps,
 And I had raised them, for centuries and centuries.¹¹

Upright
 I walk
 Head held high
 I walk
 In my palm
 An olive twig and a dove
 On my shoulders
 My coffin.¹²

Such is the voice of the "poets of resistance," the voice of poet-rebel, poet-martyr, poet-politician. Theirs is the poetry of commitment, and they are the spokesmen of a nation. Most of their poetry is written in the first person singular, the subjective "I," used to include the masses who are suffering but

¹⁰ *Al-Bayader*, I, 1 (March 1976), pp. 57-59 and 46 respectively.

¹¹ "The First Person 'I' merging with the Incomplete Verb in the Past Tense," *And it Happens that the Bird of Thunder Will Come*, p. 29.

¹² "I walk," *The Smoke of Volcanoes*, p. 32. See also "Documentary on a Passing June," *The Great Death*, pp. 86-102.

whose pain the poet feels intensely and conveys to the world. They are the poets who raise generations and signal resistance, for “ink has the smell of blood,” in the words of Samih al-Qassem.¹³ Mahmoud Darwish, recalling the poems of romance, drink, and fate, now calls for a necessary turn to committed poetry, addressing the “simple” people and becoming an effective instrument of resistance analogous to the plough, grenade, and chisel:

Comrade poets!
 We're in a new world
 What's past is dead, who writes a poem
 In the age of wind and the atom
 Creates prophets!

Our verses
 Have no colour
 No taste
 No sound
 If they do not carry the lantern
 From house to house!
 And if the “simple” cannot understand our poems
 Better for us to shed them
 And resort to silence

If only these words were
 A plough in the hands of a peasant
 A shirt, a door, a key
 If only these words were!

A poet says
 If my poems please my friends
 And anger my enemies
 Then I'm a poet.
 And I shall speak!¹⁴

This call has been taken up, and Palestinian poetry has been busy reducing itself to the lowest common denominator in order to be understood by the “simple” people and to appeal directly to their patriotic sentiments. Poets like Ahmad Abed Ahmad, a follower of Nizar Qabbani in style, define the

¹³ “The Password,” *And it Happens that the Bird of Thunder will Come*, p. 57.

¹⁴ “Concerning Poetry,” *Olive Leaves*, pp. 77-78.

function of poetry by comparing it to a “washbasin/Removing the dirt of things.”¹⁵ Ahmad extends the hygienic analogy by stating that the task of the poet “Is to hang the wash on the roofs of Arabism.”¹⁶ Ya‘qoub Hijazi, also addressing the masses, adds that his poetry will guide the people and improve their state:

Because I write poems for the human being,
Peasant, oppressed, worker
My letters I shall always make known,
Cross the bridge of my tragedy to the more beautiful
Write its story...
So that my people may rise to the better
To the better.¹⁷

Mahmoud Awad Abbas, another minor West Bank poet, expresses the need for a truthful song to be sung to the “olive,” to the “peasants” and (in pain) to the “beloved land.”¹⁸ As‘ad al-As‘ad, in whose poetry one can hear echoes of all the known poets in an ineffective attempt at imitation, announces that his only crime is his love for the “worker and peasant... and those who go hungry in the village.”¹⁹ In As‘ad’s works, the jargon and the obvious attempts at capitalizing on the familiar themes of progressive and nationalistic poetry are examples of Palestinian poetry at its worst. The bombastic tone of the poet-martyr-rebel is quite unrealistic in that it replaces the “we” with the “I,” and burdens the already self-conscious self with all the tasks of a nation. This has been called the narcissism of Palestinian poetry, perhaps unjustly, for the “I” remains symbolic in most cases, however pretentious in its effect. Salem Jubran, a Palestinian poet from Israel whose influence is quite marked on the poets of the West Bank, gives the poet and his poetry impossible tasks:

The Singer of the Revolution

It is my fate to sing
To hunger
And remain singing,
For my wounds to bleed

¹⁵ Ahmad Abed Ahmad, “The Poem in Constant Motion,” *Posters on the Walls of Defeat*, pp. 10-11.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* “Rubaiyat on Standing Still and Marching,” pp. 21-22.

¹⁷ Ya‘qoub Hijazi, “The Other Face,” *Drops of my Blood*, p. 47.

¹⁸ Mahmoud Awad Abbas, *Melodies with a Sharp Rhythm*, p. 6.

¹⁹ As‘ad al-As‘ad, “Lost... on the Threshold of the City,” *Birth in a Foreign Land*, pp. 60-61. See also “The Paths of the Sun,” pp. 32-37.

And remain singing.
 If I die in battle
 The songs,
 Among the comrades, will take my place
 And fight for me.²⁰

The song here has replaced the fighter, while in another poem Jubran makes the poem compensate, in its immortality, for the destruction and loss of mortal things:

Announcer for the Wind and Rain
 You can uproot the trees
 From a mountain embracing the moon
 In my village,
 You can plough all the houses of my village
 Without a trace,
 You can take my rebec
 And burn it, having cut its string,
 You can...
 But you cannot strangle my tune
 For I am the lover of the land
 Singer for the wind and rain.²¹

The role of the poet, also in the symbolic first person singular, and the impossible tasks expected from poetry are similarly expressed in Samih al-Qassem's "Application to Join the Party," especially in the last stanza:

O fighting eagle
 O storm
 Ravisher of tons of chains
 Often twice-bitten from the same snake pit
 Give me your chisel, moulded from the heart of bitterness,
 Give me a hammer, a landmine, a spark
 So that I may make an axe — from a poem!²²

When poetry becomes impossible, the poet finds an alternative to record his story and his defiance, as in Tawfiq Zayyad's "On a Bark of an Olive Tree," where he declares his intention of engraving his "story, chapters of [his]

²⁰ Salem Jubran, *Comrades of the Sun*, pp. 25-26.

²¹ Salem Jubran, *Poems not under Restricted Residence*, pp. 9-10.

²² Samih al-Qassem, *Smoke of Volcanoes*, pp. 75-77.

tragedy, and [his] sighs” as well as a wide range of experiences in national oppression on the bark of an olive tree in the courtyard.²³ This need for poets to record and immortalize the Palestinian case and to speak on behalf of the people’s refusal to be defeated or broken is both the strength and weakness of Palestinian poetry. It can be the compelling force, the dominant spirit of the people and the poetry, and it can degenerate into mere rhetoric and jargon. The need to speak out, however, remains, but the difference is in the way the message is conveyed:

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

I speak about a goat not milked
A morning coffee... not drunk
A mother’s dough not baked
A mud roof that flowered.

I speak to the world... I tell it.²⁴

Using such simple yet eloquent images taken from daily life, Samih al-Qassem, at his best, projects a sense of loss and a pathos that is keenly felt, as opposed to the tone and style of poets like Ya‘qoub Hijazi, As‘ad al-As‘ad, Samira al-Khatib, and others. Khalil Touma, though more advanced in technique than these poets, still uses a similar bombastic, imperative tone commanding the earth to listen and the blue sky to bow down; “For I speak,” he adds, so “Let my words be heard by the cities of the world/Let my words be understood by the cities of the world.”²⁵

The prevalent use of free verse in Palestinian poetry has given freedom to the good poets and licence to the weak ones. Many poets end up writing prose arranged on a page like poetry, while others string together the familiar series of images and symbols to come up with a nationalistic poem. These poems remain fragmentary without any internal unity and development, relying mostly on the emotional appeal of the topic itself:

O strange heart
Is mine the right to have a child,

²³ Tawfiq Zayyad, *Bury your Dead and Rise*, pp. 69-73.

²⁴ Samih al-Qassem, “I Speak to the World,” *The Smoke of Volcanoes*, p. 38.

²⁵ Khalil Touma, “Return to the Summit,” *Songs of the last Nights*, pp. 108-113.

The remnants of a tent in the shades of a palm tree,
 A lover?
 Do I have the right, my heart?
 Why don't you answer?
 Do I have my right to a smile
 To pride in dignity
 Or a short history
 Whose love the night knows?
 I don't know.²⁶

Among the frozen symbols that form much of the Palestinian poetry is the olive tree, which automatically means Palestine, the land, and the will of the people to remain:

The sun reproaches us
 It came, as usual,
 Asking us to be patient
 To remain like olive branches —
 Deep in the soil
 Are the roots of the olive tree —
 To remain
 Like the roots of the olive tree.²⁷
 Lightning, thunder, prayer
 Hurricanes, storms,
 And floods break the branches
 Of trees.
 Ropes of earthworm
 Trim the leaves of youthful olive trees
 But the roots of the olive
 Return and stretch in the depth
 Of the soil....
 Roots of olive, you have become the model
 And man is competing, imitating your root,
 Olive of the land.²⁸

²⁶ Samira al-Khatib, "I Shall Come so We Can Paint together a Rainbow," *The Adulterous Village*, pp. 60-61.

²⁷ As'ad al-As'ad, "Strangers," *Birth in a Foreign Land*, p. 54.

²⁸ Mahmoud Awad Abbas, "Pieces Played on the Psalms of Winter," *Melodies with a Sharp Rhythm*, pp. 88-89; see also pp. 5-6. On the same theme, cf. Samira al-Khatib, "The Salesman of Heroes," *The Adulterous Village*, pp. 24-26, and Khalil Touma, "The Martyrs," *Songs of the Last Nights*, p. 97.

The land and the organic relationship between human beings and the soil are also expressed in the symbols of the palm tree, almond, fig, jasmine, lily, ear of corn, orchard, garden, and orange. The sun, rainbow, sky, sea, rock, eagle, and horse stand for freedom, rebellion and rejuvenation, while wolf, chains, jailer, tartar, mogul are the enemy. The poet, and sometimes the Palestinian people, are Christ, with all the consequent imagery of the side wound, the crucifixion, and resurrection. The poet is also the sword-carrying knight/saviour, especially in his role as rebel. Palestine is Jerusalem, the lover (especially female) and the mother, with abundant sexual imagery. Storms, thunder, and lightning are used in the dual sense for the forces of evil and destruction as well as for defiance and revolution. The diction and imagery, generally, are extracted from the past rather than the present or the future. Add to this the use of the subjective first person point of view, the individualistic tone, and the preoccupation with the catchy rhythm and the appealing sound and the dominant shortcomings of much Palestinian poetry will be revealed. All these weigh the poetry very heavily toward the lyric, a genre whose founding fathers are Tawfiq Zayyad and Salem Jubran.²⁹

Arising from this poetic background, three Palestinian poets are building on this tradition but going beyond it in innovative and meaningful ways. Differing in standard, approach and fame the three nevertheless in their own ways signal a change in the development of poetry, and hence are worth individual attention. Walid al-Hallees is a relatively unknown young poet from Gaza, who has just come out of jail and is currently a student at Bir Zeit University; Abdul-Latif Aqel, from Nablus, is a more experienced and mature poet who only recently began to change his theme and approach; Leila Alloush is a Jerusalem resident, whose style is original and promising though far inferior to the works of Hallees and Aqel.

Walid al-Hallees has published, so far, only three full-length poems in *al-Bayader* although he has written many more that deserve to be published in an

²⁹ See, e.g., Mahmoud Awad Abbas, "Who Will Save Salma in the Age of Drought and the Hunger of Rain?" *Melodies With a Sharp Rhythm*, pp. 23, 38; Fadel Ali, "Songs to the Holy City," *Al-Bayader*, 13 (May 1976), p. 54; Samih al-Qassem, "The White Horse Neighs on the Hill," *The Great Death*, pp. 64-65; Khalil Touma, "From the Book of Pain and Victory," *Song of the Last Nights*, pp. 17-18; Muhammad Hamzeh Ghanayem, "A Reading in a Blood Pamphlet," *Documents from a Blood Pamphlet*, p. 73; Tawfiq Zayyad, "In Everything I Live," *Prisoners of Freedom*, p. 18; Khalil Touma, "From a Daily Journal," *op. cit.*, pp. 6-7; Na'im 'Aryadi, "The Continuing Silence," *Breasts and Graves*, pp. 14-15; As'ad al-As'ad, "The Return of the Knight," *op. cit.*, pp. 27-28; Fadwa Touqan, *To the Face Lost in Wandering*, pp. 10-13.

individual collection. "A Poem on a Closed Summer"³⁰ opens with a deceptive, quiet statement of fact which establishes in an undertone the dream-like quality of the poem: "Tonight I was visited by Khanyounes." The quiet tone is quickly shattered and the poem develops along the tension between reality and the dream, love and hate, intense sexual desire and the frustration of knowing the impossibility of fulfilment, the desire to lose the self and the fear of not finding it. The pace of the poem is swift and overwhelming, sweeping the reader along with it until, almost breathlessly, the resolution comes with the holistic vision of the homeland and sleep. This is not a poem of obvious political and nationalistic fervour, nor is it a simple equation between lover and homeland; rather it is the fusion of an intense personal love and desire with the intensity of the attachment to the land which is also painful. The integrity of both loves is preserved, neither one sacrificed for the other, but at the same time inseparable and rightfully so. Here are the desire and the yearning of a Palestinian, which are intense because of their Palestinian nature and because the personal, national, and universal have merged into one sweeping need.

Khanyounes and Gaza are the women he loves and desires, but whose presence, in their condition (presumably under occupation and in defeat) is painful:

Tonight I was visited by Khanyounes,
 She struck me with stone kisses, sweets, and waves
 Thrust in my breast a tired flower of love, empty bullets,
 And eagle's wings of burnt feather.
 I scratched at her breasts, a hungry child.
 Hissed a few words
 And conjugated I love you —
 Painful were my words.
 All I remember of Khanyounes
 Is an eagle with burnt feathers.
 (I allow you to come to me tonight
 I mean I ache for you to come
 You do not know the need
 You do not know the need, you do not know)
 Khanyounes.

³⁰ *Al-Bayader*, I, 1 (March 1976), p. 53.

All the basic tensions are introduced here, especially in the paradoxical descriptions of the kisses of stone, the tired flower of love, the empty bullets and the eagle with burnt feathers. The possibility exists in the positive image of kisses, flower of love, bullets and eagle; however, the antithetical qualifiers belie the initial promise, for the kisses are petrified, unfeeling, and the flower of love is exhausted, while sexual force and energy are destroyed, for the bullets are empty and the eagle's wings are burned. Even the words of love are painful, and the memory remains incomplete — one of defeat. This part ends with the reiteration of the need, a repetition of “delirium”³¹ reinforcing the dream-like quality and the unreality of one side of the tension in the poem.

In the robes of a hungry woman, Gaza came to me
 Rested her tired head on my arm
 And we cried.
 The black trees in our eyes became wet
 And the sea encircled me
 So I washed in it my clothes and veins.
 Who would believe I'm bearing Gaza with me?
 All I remember of Gaza is an eagle
 Who has devoured its wings
 And a woman-child
 I carry and walk on the edge of the sword
 (It was said that the bridge was wide open
 This summer,
 So where is the child?)
 Gaza

 You come to me
 I feed the bread of desolation
 And watch the entrance of Gaza
 (Gaza's entrance is a graveyard
 Your grave is my rib
 And I know no grave for me
 All things deny me now)
 I should ask:
 Where have you gone and how?

³¹ Abu Nidal (a pseudonym), “A Return to the ‘Halook,’” *al-Bayader*, I, 44 (June 1976), p. 59.

I should stab you tonight
 In love or death or fear,
 But you have not come to me
 While the summer visitors have come....

Gaza, too, is a woman unable to offer him fulfilment, herself being in need of consolation and rest. An eagle also, she has devoured her wings, and her sexual potency is impaired. Neither woman nor child, she is both, and he carries her with him and in him — a precarious balance on the edge of a sword. A sudden parenthetical shift jerks the reader back to reality — the reality of the open bridge on the Jordan river. The sexual dimension is clear here, yet there is no birth (“where is the child?”), for the total union has not been achieved; it has failed on the personal level and on the national level, for the open bridges cannot unite the Palestinian people, who, too, are exhausted under occupation. In a dream again Gaza comes, but her entrance is a graveyard — a literal fact which is expertly exploited here. The parallel is between consuming desire and death (“Gaza’s entrance is a graveyard,”) and the urge to return to the womb is also the yearning for the grave. The archetypal reminder of male-female sexuality (“your grave is my rib”) is then denied in frustration, for neither womb nor tomb acknowledge him — the alienation of a Palestinian in an occupied Palestine, compelled to love and need, but unable to satisfy either. Her vision fades (“I should ask you/where have you gone and how?”) but the birth-death tension remains. The urge to “stab” her, “In love or death or fear,” completes the tomb-womb motif and sex-death parallel. She has not come to him in this final male-female union; instead the sterile and inadequate “summer visitors” have come, the artificial and temporary visits of the Palestinians outside Palestine.

Tonight my homeland slept with me
 We drank a toast to the birds of thirst
 Whose beaks are thrust in our hearts
 We cried.
 All I remember of my homeland
 Is an eagle with burnt feathers.

The moment of final reconciliation and rest arrives. The whole homeland is sleeping with the poet, but this resolution too is inadequate. “The birds of thirst” are painfully embedded in their hearts, enhancing the undercurrent of the pain that comes with love and unfulfilled desire throughout the poem, and the lovers can only cry; the rest is one of exhaustion and sorrow. The last two

lines, like a refrain, unite the whole poem and take us back full circle to the beginning: The whole homeland “Is an eagle with burnt feathers,” and the theme of sterility and impotence sums up the poet’s and the Palestinian’s futile attempts to come to terms with the pain of life under occupation.

Walid al-Hallees’s other poems, especially “A Talk to a Quiet Woman”³² also easily fuse the personal, national, and universal levels with an ease and smoothness unequalled in Palestinian poetry. The organic unity and control in the whole poem, with the progressive energy and rhythm leading to a disturbing climactic situation, surpass most Palestinian poetry which leans heavily on the set image and the artificial stringing together of exhausted symbols. His ability to suggest meaning and his subtle urging of the reader to probe and explore further are unique in a world of poetry that has gotten used to slapping the reader in the face with outright cries and protests of a one-dimensional nature.

In “Days from the Life of a Palestinian Boy,”³³ the poet resolves a tension expressed in his two previous poems. In order to live one has to rape life and deny the tameness of parental and social possession. Neither the warmth of the womb nor the ice-cold reality of a sterile life (and “dead fish”) can solve the conflict. The resolution comes with the recognition that he is the child of life and that he has to grasp forcefully the vitality he needs:

In the hope of life, my father cast me — a seed
 In my mother’s depths,
 Shivered in ecstasy over her
 Like a neighing horse
 And slept.
 In a dream he said: I shall beget a male.
 In the hope of life he said:
 I shall beget a male.
 And I departed from my mother
 In the hope of life I departed from my mother.
 I parted with a warm womb
 To drown in the roads of ice
 Brimming with people
 With dead fish
 In the roads of ice filled with death
 To live in the roads of ice.

³² *Al-Bayader*, I, 3 (May 1976), pp. 26-27.

³³ *Ibid.*, I, 5 (July 1976), p. 9.

And where is my father so that I may tell him that his seed
 Is not sufficed with life.
 In a feeble hope of life
 And that from all indications
 A warm womb
 Is comparable to all types of life.
 And where is my father?
 Where is my father so that we may strike hand against hand
 And laugh, spit, rape life
 There is no life in life unless raped.
 I swear I had lied to God
 A little while ago
 For life is rape
 Comparable to the warm wombs of all women.
 Forgive me, mother
 I am the child of this life.
 I am bewildered at the meanings.

“Death, love, and poetry are like rain — acts only, not disfigured by precise analysis nor conforming to the mould of thought and logic. And so I make poetry the way I make death, the way I make love.... Analyse me if you wish, but you will not discover your talent in bad intentions; read me, but you will admire the colour of your eyes...”³⁴ With this defence, Abdul-Latif Aqel introduces his fourth volume of poetry, *Poems on a Love that Knows no Mercy*. The defensiveness might not be entirely needless, for his poetry until then (1974) remained the subjective personal statements of a craftsman whose own egotistical pleasure in the aesthetics of his crafts and confessions took precedence over the meaning to be conveyed. His three earlier volumes (*The Shores of the Moon*, 1964; *Songs of the Summit and the Abyss*, 1972; *She, or Death*, 1972) showed a progressive development in the craft of poetry but minimal growth in theme and intellect. They represent an experimental stage in two channels: the individualistic love poetry, and the simplistic mimetic nationalist formulae; compare the following selections from two volumes:

Whenever winds rage and storm
 In yearning, my eyelids tremble to the wind
 As if, with the sorrow in my heart,
 All gates of the world are closed before me

³⁴ Abdul-Latif Aqel, Introduction to *Poems on a Love that Knows no Mercy*, pp. 8-9.

I amuse myself with the statues that
Consumed my soul, inspiration, and enchantments.

Whenever a green thought roams within
I cover it with a cloak of madness.³⁵

In the age of hunger
Olive trees in Jerusalem grow no leaves,
Nor do the wheat grains grow.
Fig leaves fall
And the wound does not cease bleeding.³⁶

Both exhibit a strong sense of sound and rhythm in Arabic, but rely on the weakest string of images and all too familiar thoughts. In *Poems on a Love that Knows no Mercy*, Aqel begins to work out the union between the aesthetic and the didactic, at the same time formulating his own, unique sense of language structure and vocabulary. He is still not entirely free of the traditional poetic diction in which the land is the female about to be wed while the olive trees and lilies react and the scattered Palestinians return as knights.³⁷

Not until his latest volume, *Children Pursue the Locust* (August 1976), does Aqel emerge as a mature and original poet. Having freed itself from the rigid confines of a too-regular beat, the rhythm of his free verse flows more easily in tune with the developing theme and image. The poetry is also free from the redundancy and self consciousness of his previous works, the poet having gained a wider vision of poetry and its place in Palestinian society. In this volume, one of Aqel's most outstanding poetic techniques comes to light — the use of a dramatic, informal tone which gives the poem thematic flexibility and framing devices of a wide variety. Although the point of view is still the first person singular, the situations within which the "I" can move and react dramatically are vivid and appealing. The dedication, "To the schoolchildren with the sun in their bags," expresses not just the unifying theme of the volume, but also the actual situation which gave rise to these poems: the recent uprisings in the West Bank and the heroism and defiance of the young students who challenged the tanks and machine guns of the Israeli army with stones and burning tires. The poems are a commentary on the Palestinians under occupation as well as on contemporary events in the Arab and the Third

³⁵ From "Between your Eyes and my Art," *The Shores of the Moon*, p. 131.

³⁶ From "Psalms in the Age of Hunger," *She, or Death*, p. 102.

³⁷ See "Concerning the City and other Things — The Wedding," *Poems on a Love that Knows no Mercy*, pp. 87-88.

World. They are the summary and the projection of the experiences and hopes of a Palestinian poet who has finally captured the mood and the sentiments of the people, but who still has a way to go in ridding himself of the exhibitionism that marked and weakened his earlier poetry.

Here almond trees give fruit to all hopes
 The cares of streets haunted by the presence of students
 These flower girls
 Fight with the (tender) green, the locust armed
 With protective helmets.
 The eyes of these guns plant rejection;
 These clubs are stripped from
 The roots of confiscated soil
 After the tears and before the songs.
 I wonder, did "Balfour" realize
 The agony of birds before their birth?
 Have mercy on Christ, take this scalp
 And these braids, the notebooks
 And rulers,
 But these faces filled with the sun
 Are not shattered by guns,
 Are not shattered by clubs,
 How can I teach the love of Christ
 When armed locusts crowd the place?³⁸

Familiar symbols (almond trees, the sun, Christ) merge with the new (locusts) in a description of a battle between young schoolchildren and armed Israeli soldiers. The progression in time throughout the poem moves from Christ whose homeland is Palestine, to Balfour who promised it away, to the poet who is now a teacher facing the dilemma of teaching about Christ and Balfour while the reality of guns and helmets renders meaningless all theoretical instruction.

The influence of Muthaffar al-Nawwab, a bitter and daring Iraqi poet striking out blindly against the injustices and sorrows of his own homelessness,³⁹ has served to loosen up both the diction and structure of Aqel's poems. This is seen in the psalm-like poem, "The Sorrows of a Lover

³⁸ From "Children Pursue the Locust," pp. 9-10.

³⁹ Muthaffar al-Nawwab is from Arabestan, which no longer exists, having been incorporated by Iran.

who Died Young,”⁴⁰ especially in the tone of complaint and bitterness; addressing the “age of deceit,” he calls out:

Save me from the nationalist sharks,
Age of imported goods, find me a place
In the ranks of oppressed workers, for I arrive
Before dawn and I await the train of hunger, baptize me
Saint of the revolution, in the river of the poor.

The same tone and style dominate the last poems of the volume, which makes one fear that the poet might fall into a new trap of redundancy, having not yet completely escaped the previous one.

The woman in Aqel's poems is a constant element; having now escaped her individual role as mistress or love/sex object, she is now the traditional symbol of the land and an object of yearning. The “Salma” of his former poems is now less individualized, but she still stands for the Palestinians who have left (having herself gone) on a “cheap trip to the Gulf of oil.”⁴¹ She is also the symbol of alienation and the escapism of some Palestinians who have traded the “warmth of oil and companies” for the “lanterns in the eyes of heroes/Which light up time/Burn the darkness of the path/And inject their Arab warmth into... the breast and nerves.”⁴² Traces of sexism still appear, especially in his poem “To the Large Eyes”⁴³ in which he wonders why he still suffers the desertion of a woman like a “... fire/Burning in the cells” while he had never “cared for women, buried thirty females/The oil of the Gulf and the heat of Kuwait bear witness/... and never trembled at departure.” Trying to give his sexism a Marxist flavour, he merely exposes his reactionary attitude, for the women remain symbols of possession: “The women of the wealthy seek me, behind their backs I steal/From the women of workers a smile of warmth...”⁴⁴ In “A Poem on Love and Alienation”⁴⁵ the cities are depicted as females, given qualities of sexual attraction and moral values; hence Beirut is the traditional whore and Jerusalem the virgin.

The third poet, Leila Alloush, is not as well-known, nor as accomplished as the former two. Her three volumes, *Spice on an Open Wound* (1971), *Years of Drought, My Heart* (1972) and *The Beginning of the Muwwal — Ah!* (1975) are

⁴⁰ Aqel, *op. cit.*, pp. 112-120.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* p. 97.

⁴² *Ibid.* pp. 30 and 29 respectively.

⁴³ *Ibid.* pp. 132-136.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p. 131.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 92-102.

also a progressive development in poetry. Like Aqel, she lacks the depth of the collective statement and is encircled in an intensely personal vision. Unlike him, she has not made the essential effort to surpass the solipsism of the individual statement, although the total setting and external stimuli of her poetry are typically Palestinian. Hence her experiences remain singular, unavailable to many readers, although the general mood of defiance and sorrow — the Palestinian complaint — is quite accessible and moving. This brief study is an acknowledgement of her attempts at achieving an originality of visual imagery and a unifying theme which gives coherence to her poems. She rarely reaches the skill and artistry of Walid al-Hallees or the linguistic virtuosity of Abdul-Latif Aqel.

In "A New Mona Lisa"⁴⁶ she draws a parallel between the Mona Lisa and Palestine, interpreting the mysterious smile as Palestine's strength and ability to overcome all the assaults of history. Leila Alloush at her best is seen in "Return to Jerusalem,"⁴⁷ in which a compelling love-hate relationship takes her back to Jerusalem which is a city of paradoxes, "a cursed paradise"; she attempts to draw back but fails because she herself had become part of the city. The dual voice is also heard in "The Path of Affection."⁴⁸ On her way to Haifa, she sees and vividly describes all the shocking changes that had taken place after 1948. Yet with all the "foreignization," effectively conveyed through the use of common Hebrew words, there is another voice — the voice of the land repeating a solemn refrain of defiance and affection — in Arabic.

As a final apology, it should be pointed out that a study of such dimensions cannot hope to cover the whole realm of Palestinian poetry; there is a large number of poets, some of whom are not mentioned in this paper, and many poems worthy of individual attention. This analysis is by no means comprehensive; it is essentially an introduction which, I hope, will encourage readers to explore on their own. If Palestinian poetry at one stage had fallen into the trap of self-emulation and redundancy, it is now showing signs of a new birth. This emerging vitality and momentum will bring poetry to its maturity, and make of Palestinian national poetry one that can be appreciated on the international level.

⁴⁶ *The Beginning of the 'Muwwal'*, pp. 14-16.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 48-58.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 17-21.