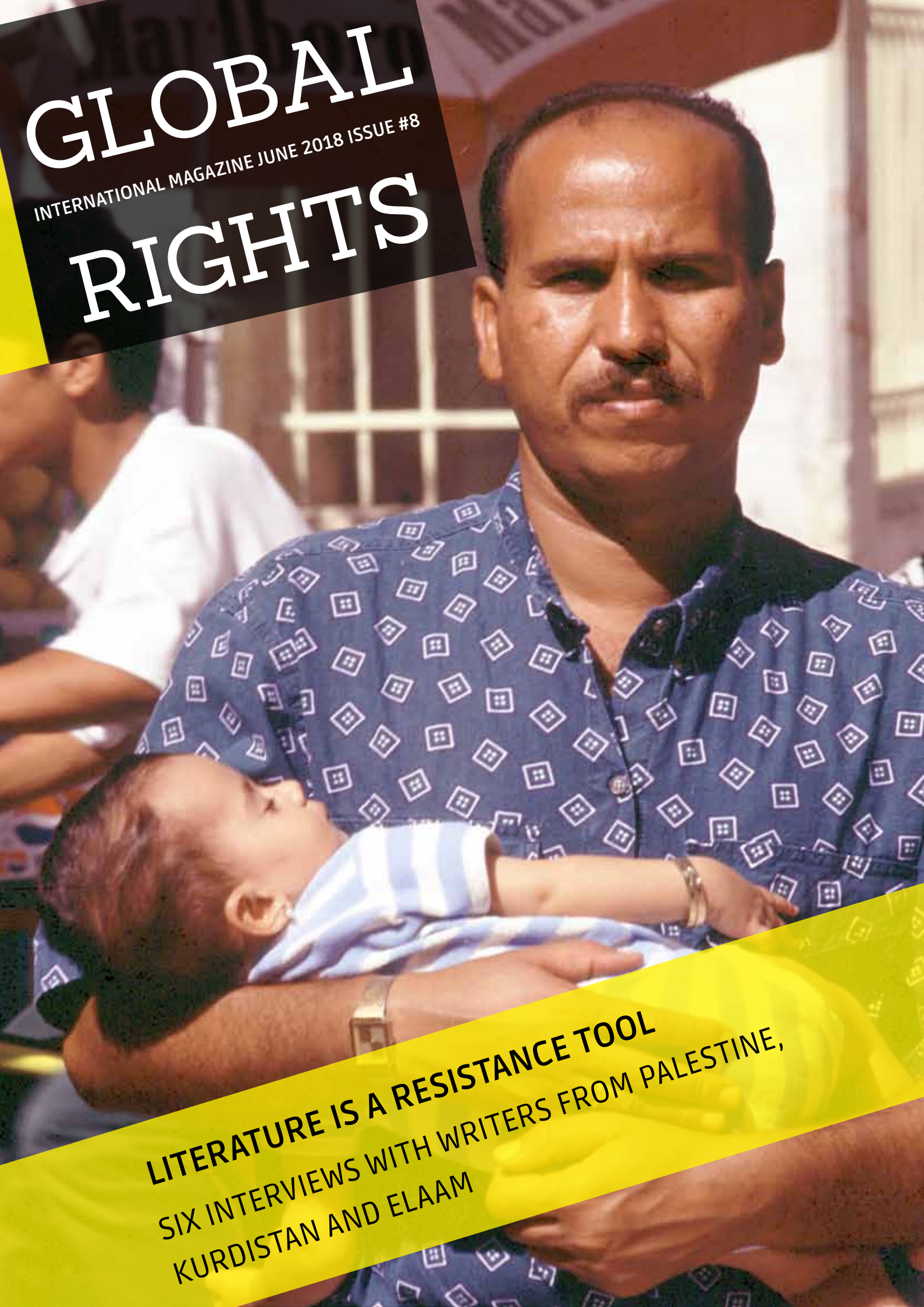


# GLOBAL RIGHTS

INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE JUNE 2018 ISSUE #8



**LITERATURE IS A RESISTANCE TOOL**  
SIX INTERVIEWS WITH WRITERS FROM PALESTINE,  
KURDISTAN AND ELAAM

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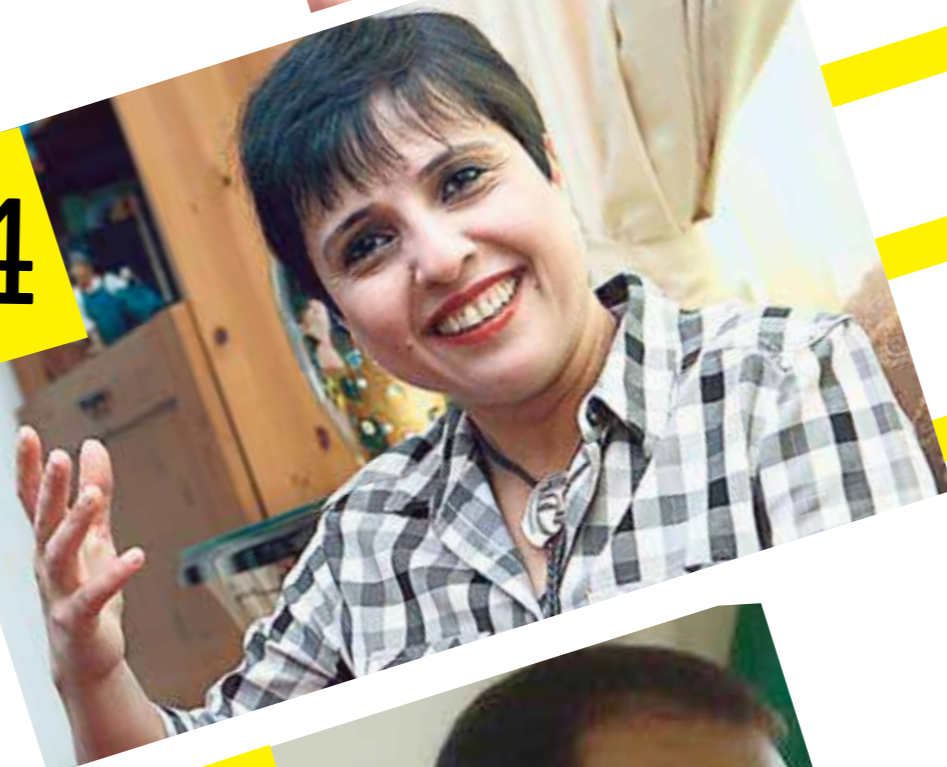
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# The poetry that frees

# men and peoples

**SERGIO SEGIO**

«Playing with the world by tearing it to pieces / children that the sun has already reduced old» sang in the early Seventies Demetrio Stratos, with his Italian band Area, in the song July, August, September (black) dedicated to the drama of the Palestinian people. Also thanks to music and poetry, international indignation and solidarity in those times grew due to the slow strangling of a people, whose organized forces tried, even in the divisions, to struggle for long-term liberation.

Seventy years after the Nakba, the Palestinians still live - or, rather, painstakingly survive - in an unbroken and bloody tragedy, apparently increasingly devoid of solutions, while the participation and condolences of the world have been lost in the last century. The music is turned off. And, as always happens, the tyrants draw more strength from the silence to stifle their victims in the blood.

From September 2000 to the end of 2017, Israel's rulers killed 10,463 men, women, the elderly and youth of Palestine. In the first four months

of 2018 2378 of them were arrested, including 459 minors. In one day, on May 14, 2018, Tsahal's snipers murdered 59 Palestinians in Gaza, eight were under sixteen, an eight-month-old girl was killed by tear gas. Drones against kites, an unequal and infamous war. Another 49 were killed on March 30, the day the protests began and the "Return March".

The world, therefore, is increasingly broken and children can no longer become old. The cynical power of Herod now seems unchallenged, there are no weapons or revolts, pressures or appeals capable of restraining him.

When a man is completely stripped of all rights, when a people is deprived of any minimal freedom and is forced to live in a concentration camp like in Gaza, when the lives of millions of people weigh less than a feather, when the world turns its head from another place, when the only significant diplomatic reaction to the massacres of Gaza comes from another massacre-perpetrator and oppressor of peoples like the Turkish Recep Tayyip Erdogan, then,

truth and justice seem deceived and disappeared everything seems useless and lost.

Instead, even in these terrible and desperate moments, it is still possible to fight and resist, with the most powerful weapons of all: the word, literature, poetry. Several Palestinian writers and narrators remind us of this issue of "Global Rights": Talal Abu Shawish, who was born in a refugee camp in Gaza; Refaat Alareer and Nayrouz Qarmout, who still live in Gaza; Huzama Habayeb, born in Kuwait, a Jordanian citizen of Palestinian nationality. And as they are witnessed here by other writers who knew the violence of oppression in Syrian Kurdistan as Haitham Hussein, or in Sri Lanka as V.I.S Jayapalan.

Narrators who have sometimes grown with a stone in one hand, during an Intifada, and a book in the other. The tear gas of repression did not cloud their sight, the violence of the occupation did not silence them. They have made their gaze somewhat sharper, more sharpened their feathers, increased their

ability to recount the ordeal, the exodus and the search for freedom and above all have made deep and fruitful their ability to delve into consciences, to remove alibi, to use the power of literature to the full.

Poetry has always lived on the barricades and accompanies the revolutions. When they are then betrayed, it fades and goes out, but it never dies. Reborn forever as a phoenix.

Surprise in another prison cell, in every other part where humanity is oppressed and tortured, in every place and time in which men and women claim life and dignity.

## THIS ISSUE

The photos of this issue are part of a reportage by Italian photographer Mauro Guglielminotti. [www.guglielminotti.it](http://www.guglielminotti.it)

A special thanks to the translators from Arabic.



# Palestine, Eelam, Kurdistan:

## the relativity of distance



J.M. ARRUGAETA - O. CASAGRANDE

In this third issue of Global Rights Magazine dedicated to interviews with women and men writers we offer six conversations that focus on literary creation.

However, due to the origins and experiences of the writers, the answers are intertwined with reflections on the political context and the exercise of human rights, which emerge naturally, thus providing us with new knowledge about the world we live in.

One could say that the main nucleus in this issue is dedicated to Palestine, a territory that has been living for too many decades in permanent conflict, and that at this time is again bleeding. Palestine, and the Gaza Strip are again headlines because of the ruthless and indiscriminate Israeli state repression of all its Arab population.

Four Palestinian authors, two women and two men, speak to us about literature, their creative processes, their cultural tastes and their works, but at the same time they can not and do not want avoid talking about the harsh environment that surrounds them and the aspirations to freedom of their national community, marginalized and alienated in, and from, their own land.

We just need to point out, but you can tell from their answers, that contemporary Palestinian literature, despite so many difficulties is living a moment of special vitality and quality, with an added background of reflection full of human feelings towards the "others".

To the four Palestinian voices we have added that of an exiled Syrian-Kurdish writer, who

uses Arabic as a vehicular language without any prejudice, and who in a certain way offers us a master class on the natural coexistence of languages and cultures. To complete this issue is the voice of one of the great Tamil poets.

A literary territory, the Tamil one, surely unknown to most of us, not only for reasons of alleged physical or cultural “distance” but also as a result of editorial policies dominated by western centralities and promotion of certain authors and literatures.

We, at Global Rights Magazine, are convinced that distance depends on the point of view, as Albert Einstein’s theory of relativity showed us. Therefore we will continue to venture into literatures we know little about, crossing linguistic, geographical and editorial barriers.

We would like to thank all the people who have collaborated to make this new monographic number of literary interviews possible, and es-

pecially those who have helped us with translations from Arabic.

The word is back to Literature, that is to say to these passionate people who build and forge new bridges with their works, allowing us to continue, avidly, enjoying the pleasure of reading of real and imaginary worlds.





# V.I.S JAYAPALAN

## My poetry reflects the peasants and liberation struggle

INTERVIEW BY JAYAPALAN

V.I.S JAYAPALAN WAS BORN IN 1944, IN THE TOWN OF UDUVILLE IN THE NORTHERN PROVINCE OF SRI LANKA, WHICH IS THE TAMIL HOMELAND, KNOWN AS EELAM. DURING THE 1960S HE WAS ASSOCIATED WITH RADICAL ANTI-CASTE MOVEMENTS AND WITH THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF CEYLON. HE WAS ALSO A PROLIFIC POET, AND HIS POEMS AND SHORT STORIES HAVE EARNED HIM TO BE CONSIDERED AMONGST THE FINEST EELAM TAMIL POETS OF THE MODERN ERA. HE WAS THE FIRST STUDENT UNION PRESIDENT OF JAFFNA UNIVERSITY IN THE LATE 1970S, DURING THE EARLY PHASES OF THE RISING MILITANCY AMONG THE EELAM TAMIL YOUTH AGAINST THE NATIONAL OPPRESSION AND STRUCTURAL GENOCIDE LEVIED BY THE UNITARY STATE.

*V.I.S. Jayapalan is an Eelam Tamil writer, poet and artist. He is also associated with Eelam Tamil militancy, and his literary work reflected some of the dynamics wrought upon the Tamil people and homeland by the decades of oppression and war. This interview has been carried out by his son.*

**Could you tell us about the environment of your early life, and what influenced you into writing and social activism?**

My mother was a teacher and was interested in academic pursuits. She was quite attached to Tamil and English poetry, as well as a reader of biblical and religious literature.

My father was a business man, who wanted accumulate land and wealth, and he eventually become a notable land owner.

He started out by humble means as a salesman on bicycle in the Sinhala south during the 1930s, where he was involved in the distribution of cigars. He also became an ardent supporter of the Federal Party (The Tamil political party which advocated federalism as a solution to the national question of Eelam

Tamils) during the 1950s.

My father surprisingly was very fond of Tamil classical poetry, as well as modern poets such as Bharatiyar, as well as Sinhala poetry. When I was young I saw many poems cut out from magazine and newspapers, my mother had the habit of copying such poems and collating them in a big exercise book.

Despite my parents' different orientations, literature is what united them. This created an encouraging climate despite all the fights between my mother and father, and the love and hate relationship I had, troublesome as it was, with my father. The poetry made my turbulent home more sober and provide a space for me.

When I was five years old, our father compelled us to move from Uduville to the islet of Nedunthivu (Delft), which was the island of our ancestors. There I came to mingle with the peasants and ordinary working people, who sang folksongs and whose speech was rich in poetical proverbs. When people spoke, they





“

**Our classical poetry speaks about the particular landscape, or the social landscape of the Tamil speaking world and the connection between nature and man**

spoke in picturesque language and also with many allegories filled with images. This astonished me, and it can be said that my poetry begins with influences from both my home and my environment around the people. I began my early poetry with words of the village folk of my father's island. By the age of twenty I had written a lot of poetry and epical literature.

**Which is when you begin reading classical Tamil poetry...**

By my mid-20s I started to dislike my writings, due to the fact that all my writings had obvious influences from early modern Tamil writers such as Bharatiyar (a revolutionary Tamil writer associated with the Indian independence struggle in colonial India), other modern Tamil poets, as well as Omar Khayyam and some English poems my mother used to read.

So at this point I abandoned all my previous work, and started to read and study Tamil classical poetry and the ancient literatures of Sangam (a body of literary works in Tamil written between 300 BCE to 200 A.D.).

Bharatiyar is a powerful modern Tamil poet, but he has his limitations as his acquaintance of the language begins from medieval Tamil literature and poetry- not the ancient classical Sangam tradition. He starts from the medieval siddhas as well as Kamban, Sanskrit classical literature, and English poetry.

The vesture of Tamil classical knowledge

and poetry is Sangam, and I was very much influenced by reading it. Bharatiyar imagined India as a united entity and Tamil Nadu (The Tamil state within the Indian union and located in the southern reaches of Indian subcontinent) as being part of it, and describe generalized aspects of the Pan-Indian idea and land filled with contradictions. Hence he displayed a structural limitation in immersing himself with the sentiments of the popular masses of the Tamils and the particular images and symbols they sport.

Our classical poetry speaks about the particular landscape, or the social landscape of the Tamil speaking world and the connection between nature and man. They make images and allegories from nature – human relationships. They also classified the Tamil speaking world as constituted by five socio-geographic entities, called tinais. That is the invention of the Sangam poetry, and one is shocked to see the depth of the social understanding of human and nature extolled by these ancient poets.

Neytal is the sea and coastal land, and the people who live and interact with that landscape (fishermen, salt producers, traders in the region). Mullai is jungle and pasture lands adjoined to the jungle and the people who live in these lands (cow and goat herders).

Kurunji, is the mountainous territory, where hill tribes are associated. Marutam, are the agricultural lands and the associated irrigated landscape, associated with farmers.

The poets say the Marutam is created by man,



while Mullai and Neytal land is manipulated and engineered by humans.

Palai, is the dry zone covered with dry forest and bushes, open plains and arid land, the poets narrated that the people living here are hunters, bandits, as well as fierce warriors. The communities are presented as seasonal settlers who migrate to other tinais for work during the dry seasons.

Many of the poems set in Palai, are themes on young men migrating for work outside, and the longing between his lover and he.

**You were associated with peasant based struggles and the anti-caste militant struggle**

**of the 1960s and early 1970s, then you were the first student union leader of Jaffna university. You were also associated with the revolutionary armed phase of the Tamil liberation struggle. Could please tell us about the relationship between your engagements and your literary output?**

So the second phase of my literary activity was influenced by Sangam literature, and at this time I also became a well-known militant in the Vanni areas. My first poem during this period, is 'Palai aru naraguthu' (The Pali river moves) which touches upon the legacy of the Tamil chieftain Vanni Pandara Vanniyan. In the early 1800s the Vanni area was ruled by Pandara Vanniyan who fought the British imperialists. It de-

scribes the contemporary sequences involving the river and the local Tamil communities.

I describe women bathing in the river as it flows and scenes from the history of the river revolving around Pandara Vaanniyan during his resistance against British colonial rule. It also touches upon the socio-economic setting in the villages dependent on the river with scenes of ploughing taking place in the paddy fields. I end the poem like this: 'I believe the footprint of Pandara Vanniyan still exists in the sands of the riverbed of Paali. This is a land where he dwelt, and where he has drunk water with his hands from these very rivers, these are carried on today as practices which still are in existence.'

I was here saying indirectly that the Tamil peoples national spirit of resistance still exist in the Vanni, I wrote this in 1969, before the national liberation struggle commenced in Eelam (in the 1970s).

Many business elements within the Tamil community supported the federal Party. I was influenced by their federal ideas when I was young.

**But later, during the anti-caste struggle (1968), you were influenced by the Communist Party...**

The Communist Party had a deep contradiction, as they did not stand for the national rights of the Tamils. At that time China and USSR were close to the Sri Lankan government, headed by Srimavo Bandaranaike and the Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP), hence they instructed the Communist Parties not to oppose the Sri Lankan Government. Due to the geo-political considerations of the Chinese and USSR, the Communist Party was forced to accommodate and accept the Sinhala Chauvinist parties and policies as progressive forces.

Even though they (the Communist Party of Sri

Lanka, both Peking and Moscow wing) were fighting for the workers in the South (Sinhala areas) and the oppressed caste people in Tamil areas, they failed to recognize the national oppression and the democratic aspirations of the Eelam Tamil people for self-determination.

Moreover, they started ridiculing the Federalist Party and their Federal solution. They raised the issue that there was lack of involvement in the struggle against caste oppression in the Tamil homeland. This was partly polemics to cover up their failures in regards to the Tamil national question.

Despite the Federal Party's official line lacking a consistent programme against the caste question, there were many progressives also within the Federal Party. The Federal Party for instance, organized the 'equal dining movement', in which the party facilitated collective meals where all members of Tamil society were to dine together in equal seating in an effort to break the inhuman practices of caste of discrimination (discrimination in the practice of seating and in the utensils delivered to individuals for food based on the so-called caste system).

I supported the Communist party in respect of the rights of the labourers, peasants and the oppressed castes, but I insisted upon the federal solution within the communist party and I supported the federal parties.

The Vanni was a remote region then, and neither the communist parties nor the Federal Party had any significant social base in the Vanni. Hence all the parties, despite their rivalry, worked along with me in this region.

As I advocated federalism then, I also worked with the progressive elements within the Federal Party. In this sense I worked with rivalling factions to achieve a common goal.

**You desired for the Tamil federal party to further incorporate the caste question and the**

### Communist Party to recognize the Tamil national question.

This began when I was 16, and I became very active in the struggle for farmers rights and those of the oppressed castes. Compared to other communists, I differed as I stood with the Tamil national question, advocating a federal and progressive solution for Tamils.

When I was writing my first poem, 'The Pali river moves', I was identified as a leftist militant who was employing violence in the anti-caste and peasant struggles. I was identified as a peasant rebel working in the Vanni. I also fought against caste discrimination in employment and the civil service in the Vanni. Many police departments, in particular the superintendents of Mannar, Vauvuniya, and Killinochi were looking for opportunities to silence me, and made several failed attempts. There were many police reports against me based on that me inciting the peasantry to fight against the system and the fact that I was behind violent attacks on caste oppressive civil servants in the Vanni.

### On April 3rd 1971 the Sinhala youth insurrection commenced...

During the state counter-insurgency against the JVP in 1971, the state massacred the poor rural Sinhala youth in their thousands. As a reaching out to the rebellious youth of the South, I penned an poem dedicated to them in this period.

A year before it began in 1970 I met with the JVP leader Rohana Wijeweera as he was hospitalized in Colombo at that time. I told him that I could mobilize Tamils for the struggle of the JVP, on the condition that the JVP accepted federalism regarding the Tamil national question. He disappointedly did not want to answer, and told me to meet with another JVP leader, S.U. Bandara. Rohan Wijeweera said if communism was achieved we will create communes and that will be the solution for Tamils, refusing to accept the Tamil national question. Because of their refusal to accept federalism, and to not recognize the

oppression faced by Tamils at the hands of the state, I refused to work with the JVP.

From here starts also my work with the Tamil militancy which was at this time in its incipient phase.

Also during my work with the Tamil liberation movements, I always took an stand with the grievances of the oppressed castes and advocated the need to address the Muslim Tamil question.

I entered Jaffna University in 1976. Before that many civil servants and the magistrate influential in Jaffna conspired to send me to prison for five years, because I had assaulted a doctor who had committed violence against Dalit labourers on casteist grounds. So the authorities tried to frame a case in the court against me, and the doctor used his influence through his caste association to pressure the verdict against me. S.P. Subramaniam, one of the Communist Party leaders, a leader of the anti-caste struggle, and a dear friend of mine intervened on my behalf.

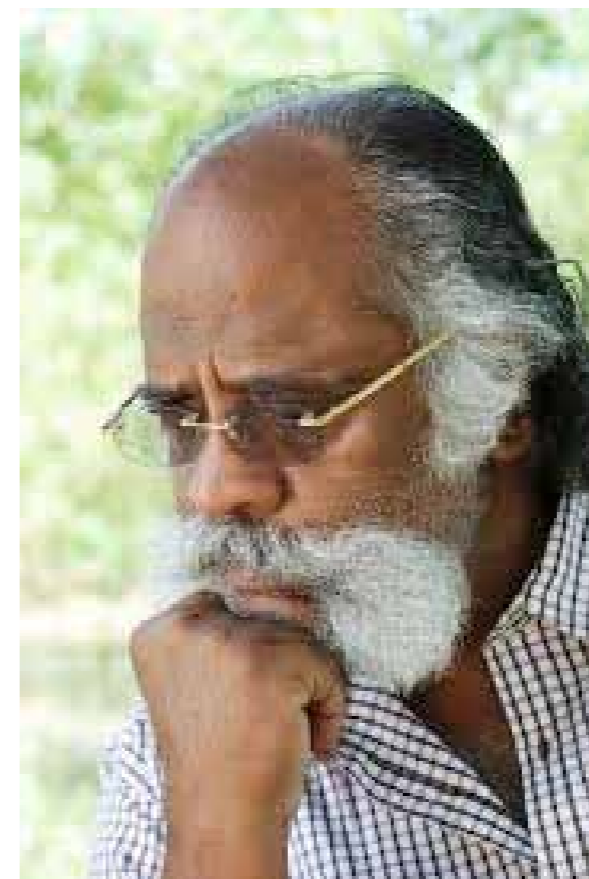
### What happened?

His support for me in the case as well as help from the Federal Party, and the fact that none of the people would witness against me, resulted in them being unable to arrest me. However, during one of the court trials, a judge sympathising with my radical views but who disagreed with my militant methods, encouraged me to enter university.

So I entered university as a mature student, I was 26.

It was the period when Tamil militant movements emerged.

During this period, due to an environment of national oppression by the Sinhala state and national resistance by the Eelam Tamils, enmities emerged in Jaffna University which then had a number of Sinhala students. I was working amongst both the Tamil and Sinhala students, in the foreground to the upcoming election to the first student council of the Jaffna University.



### What did you advocate for?

I advocated that as much as I support Eelam Tamil independence, I want our struggle to be waged on a humanitarian and a non-communal manner, our fight is against the state, not the Sinhalese students. I encouraged the students on both sides to confer a common candidate.

The Tamils did not concede. I then asked the Sinhalese to give up a separate candidate list, if I organized the Tamil list which, also included some Sinhalese students for the student council.

I worked for the inclusion of students from the oppressed Tamil castes, the Eastern Province and the Tamil speaking Muslims and a reasonable seat number for the minority Sinhalese student. In the end, I was asked to stand for the student union president candidate, and subsequently was elected as the first president of the student council at the Jaffna University in 1978.

I strongly stood for the self-determination

of the Eelam Tamils, and in opposing the national oppression and the massacres levied out to the Tamils by the state.

My writings also reflected my efforts of linking the caste struggle and the peasant struggle with the Tamil national freedom struggle. I also worked to get the support of the progressive elements in the Sinhala south. I have also been a voice who advocated within the Tamil national liberation struggle the plights of the Tamil speaking Muslim people and encouraged venues for them to work together politically.

Hence my literary work reflected some of these desires and motives.



# HUZAMA HABAYEB

## Writing is an urge taking hold of my heart

INTERVIEW BY MARCIA LYNX QUALEY

HUZAMA HABAYEB WON THE 2017 NAGUIB MAHFOUZ MEDAL FOR ARABIC LITERATURE. SHE WAS BORN IN 1965, IN KUWAIT, WHERE SHE ALSO GREW UP AND STUDIED. SHE HOLDS A B.A. IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE. BECAUSE OF THE GULF WAR SHE MOVED TO JORDAN AND SETTLED THERE FOR YEARS BEFORE SHE RELOCATED TO THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES, WHERE SHE CURRENTLY LIVES.

*Tell us about the night of the Naguib Mahfouz award...*

It was a very special moment for me. As much as it was emotionally personal, the audience interacted with my speech so passionately. I couldn't help it when I came to the part where I talked about what it means to grow up in exile—filled with the feeling of homelessness in all its connotations for the most part of my life.

I choked in particular when I mentioned the full name of my father. I nearly sobbed. "What's in a name?" they would say. Well everything! It is my history, my love and my loss. And yet, it is my victory, as I hold on to it so tight.

People cried. It was a very warm moment, where they all connected with me. I can't even know how to describe it. The whole thing was overwhelming.

*You said, in your talk, that for you "writing is no longer a choice." Do you remember when*

*you first set out on this path? Did it feel like a choice back then? Or did you always feel compelled to create stories, to make a home and homeland from stories?*

After all these years, I feel that writing has always accompanied me. I may not be able to define the exact moment where I first set out on this path.

I think it blossomed somewhat unconsciously, manifesting itself very early in a form of segmented writings and poetic pieces that echoed my feelings, before I found—in the short story—a proper expressive medium, or a space that embraced those feelings that materialized into something more sophisticated.

I believe writing, any kind of writing, was initially an urge or a need that took hold of my heart (sometimes even haunting my soul) ever since my consciousness developed in an environment engulfed in deep sense of loss.



Writing has always echoed my feelings of deprivation, uneasiness, entrenched pain, shakiness of the land beneath my feet where I stand, the vulnerability of the self, my self indeed. And the persistent sense of defeat—especially since I grew up fully aware that I belonged to a homeland that was bequeathed to me in the form of an open wound, bleeding everlastingly.

After all these years, writing has become a dedication and sometimes a salvation. It gives me the reason to live, to cling to love, to endure all the pains and hardships of life, and to stand less shaken, and less doubtful, and more importantly, to be true to myself and everything I believe in.

**What books and stories did you read as a child? Were your parents interested in literature? In storytelling? In telling you about Palestine?**

I was raised in a home where I was always reminded of my identity as a Palestinian, not by explicit wording or lecturing, but through highly

expressive cultural elements, or highly charged innuendoes, i.e. the food, the daily news, the fine traditional embroidery of the “thoob,” or the Palestinian woman’s dress, the songs, the stories and news of our extended family, the colorful Palestinian dialect and subdialects of the friends and acquaintances, whom we would meet and engage with.

Actually, my father was the first one to encourage me to read stories, because I suffered sort of speech “stumbling” when I was around seven years old. He told me: Read loud! Listen to the words!

At first, I was fascinated with children stories that were loosely translated into Arabic from Hans Christian Andersen’s stories.

It did not take me long before I discovered Agatha Christie and Maurice Leblanc’s Arsène Lupin as well as much needed “quick” reads. Yet something was missing in these rather unrefined, kitschy works: passion; something that I discovered in my teens in the works of Naguib

Mahfouz, Youssef Idris, Tawfiq al-Hakim, among others.

**If Naguib Mahfouz, as you say, dedicated himself to producing novels as big as life, as you say, what sort of novels are you dedicated to producing? How do you see and describe your writing project?**

For me, writing is living in itself. To produce a novel is an immense project, through which I re-live a life or create one—a life that seems so personal, so individual, so unique, so specific, so confined to an emotionally and psychologically tailored environment. And yet it has the power to transcend the scope of the life it contains or the social context it embodies, or even the political and historical sphere it implies to a more wider and bigger environment.

What matters for me is to create a narrative that survives the test of time, outlives transient reality and specific geography, and to cement itself in the wider human literary repertoire.

As a Palestinian novelist, writing for me is one way to preserve memory, to safeguard the daily “legacy” of living, and to establish true love and integrity in the profound multi-layered human emotions. I do not write politics.

The Palestinian question for me is more of the people, those forgotten, whose untold stories, pains and sufferings need to be unraveled. We have long presented the Palestinian persona in elongated heroism that produced sort of legendaria, diminishing the true men and women within, making them more of a troubled shadow than a concrete flesh and

blood. I make sure to celebrate their passion, fragility and weaknesses as humans, first and foremost.

**Are there books that you read and re-read? Where do you go to discover new literature?**

I am open to the new Arabic novel, written by young Arab writers, from different parts of the Arab world, who have new eye towards things. It is always interesting and refreshing for me to trace new trends in writing as well as to pinpoint social and political changes that manifest themselves inwardly.

Sure, there are quite a few books that I go back to every once in a while. The first and most important of which is One Thousand and One Nights. I reread some of the Arabian Nights stories to remind myself of the true purpose of storytelling; what is it about.

**What is it about?**

It’s about joy. Writing is a painful and emotionally draining process that is meant in the end to produce joy of reading.

Are there authors you particularly admire, and consider yourself in conversation with? Do you consider your work building on the history of Palestinian literature?

In my early twenties, I came across highly resonant Palestinian authors like Ghassan Kana-fani, Emile Habibi, the pioneering short-story writer Samira Azzam, Mahmoud Shukair, who is renowned for his very short stories, and of course Mahmoud Darwish, whose poetry provided me, as a young passionate reader, with an appreciation to refined, personalized and sensitively coined lexicon.

I am always biased to the works of Kanafani. I remember the first time I read his novel (or novella) *Men in the Sun*. That was the first time I came across what it means to be a Palestinian. And that was also the first time I cried because of this discovery.

***In being translated into English, a new part of the Palestinian diaspora will have access to your work. What does it mean - for you as a writer - to be translated?***

Some of my stories have been translated into English. In them, so many aspects of the Palestinian life in diaspora are manifested in one way or another.

Definitely, translation can offer readers from other cultures a glimpse to a life that is so intriguingly different, and at the same time so identifiable. We are much more able to connect through appreciating each other's differences and dissimilarities as much as we appreciate our similarities.

What matters for me the most is that the other would come across the Palestinian element or constituent without stumbling upon heavily loaded political mottos or big questions.

My people are made of flesh and blood. They do not scream, they do not shout out loud their "Palestinianism".

They live, or they struggle to live, and their feelings, vulnerabilities, naked hearts, souls, and bodies, are exposed; not only because they are Palestinians in diaspora, but also because they are humans with torn hearts and defeated souls. Their stories are there for everyone to share, and I do look forward

to share them with as many readers as possible.

***You said, in an interview, that *A Form of Absence* was a turning point in your work. What about this book changed your work? Was some that happened during the writing, the revision, or how you saw the book later? How have you changed as a writer since then?***

*A Form of Absence* is a collection of short stories that was published in 1997. I remember that the stories were all written in a very close time sphere, unlike most of my other short story collections. I would finish a story and start another one the next day. It was sort of a relentless attempt to capture something that might be fleeing away.

I did not want to lose it. The book consists of 12 stories, each one about a woman. In the end, I came to discover that I was writing actually about what might be one woman in different phases of life, age, and emotional setup. The collection received critical acclaim by some critics, asserting the fact that I established a new writing approach about woman, unlocking her from her voluntary confinement in an ivory tower to walk boldly in the streets of life.

***I read that you made the "transition" from short stories to the novel. Does that mean you no longer write short stories? Why did you change to the novel? What does the novel allow you to do that short stories do not?***

I love writing short stories and reading them.



Short story writing is an intricate genre, that entails inimitable simplicity, challenging ease, subtleness and accessibility at one and the same time. I have produced four short stories in a span of 10 years that have established me as a short story writer reputed for building intricate storytelling structure. I do not believe that I actually have decided to drop the short story for the sake of novel. I guess it was a matter of necessity more than any other thing.

I needed a bigger frame or structure that can accommodate my vision, horizontally and vertically. In a short story, one tends to manage strict control over ideas, people and emotions.

A great deal of "economy" is on stake here. In a novel however, one tends to expand more on ideas and feelings inside an elaborate world of expression in comparison to the tighter highly controllable world produced in the short story. If one day I feel the urge to write a short story, surely I will.

***You said that "Velvet is the novel of wom-***

***en[...]" Are you more engaged by writing women characters? Why focus on women's lives?***

*Velvet* is a love story, love that is lived and its consequences suffered or paid for by women; women who are so passionate, who yearn to the unattainable, and who know how to walk through the muddy allies of life to preserve their love. Hawa, the protagonist in the novel, (her name actually refers to the ultimate meaning of life, which is 'Eve' in English), endures all kind of suffering, abuse, harshness and violation of her body and integrity as a woman.

Despite everything, she maintains her soul unbroken and unshaken. Not only that, but she develops an astute ability to imagine and recall and forge pleasant feelings even under severe pain and torture.

Hawa is appreciated for the love she exhibits in the darkest moments of her life. This is the true essence of *Velvet*, where sincere love, passion, lust, yearning, and deep and soft layers of the intact soul are exhibited at their best.



**A novel has a life of its own, a logic of its own. My role as a writer is to follow this life or logic with more passion maybe than wisdom**

*Do your novels always surprise you, in the directions they take? What does it mean for an author to be surprised by their own writing?* Well, I am always surprised!

However, I know that the moment I start walking through the road of the novel, I have to surrender to unpredictability, embracing the outcomes of the road. I believe that a novel offers you a mold to experiment with imagination more widely than any other mold, to play that game of trying to control the uncontrollable, without necessarily controlling it or bending it to meet your wishes.

A novel has a life of its own, a logic of its own. My role as a writer is to follow this life or logic with more passion maybe than wisdom, with more acceptance than resistance, and with more willingness to allow the characters grow and lead their path in life than trying to twist their fates or harnessing their wills and emotions.

It is always fascinating to watch your characters who you created or planted the seeds of their existence choose a very different path than the one you planned for them to choose

or you thought they would take. Yet, you feel strongly and passionately involved in this twist of fate or partly responsible for the divergent path your characters have taken.

How? Well first, they are still YOUR characters; and YOU are still the creator. Giving them independence does not make them any less an extension of your vision, your imagination, your beliefs, and your philosophy.

In the end, the fact that I am surprised makes the whole experience of writing a novel an adventure that is worth living, regardless of the final outcome, which is sometime, I admit, so painful, so heart breaking and so crushing to me.





# NAYROUZ QARMOUT

## Writing about this human being I love so passionately

INTERVIEW BY ORSOLA CASAGRANDE

NAYROUZ QARMOUT WAS BORN IN THE SYRIAN CAPITAL, DAMASCUS, ON 14 APRIL 1984. A PALESTINIAN REFUGEE FROM HER VILLAGE, DEIR SNEID (TERRITORIES OF 1948), SHE LIVED IN THE REFUGEE CAMP OF YARMOUK TILL SHE WAS 10, FINISHING THERE HER PRIMARY SCHOOL. SHE FINISHED HER STUDIES IN GAZA, WHERE SHE IS CURRENTLY LIVING, AS SHE RETURNED TO PALESTINE AT THE END OF 1994, AFTER THE OSLO PEACE AGREEMENT. SHE DID HER SECONDARY SCHOOL GOING FROM SCHOOL TO SCHOOL IN THE GAZA STRIP, ESPECIALLY THOSE IN THE REFUGEE CAMP OF JABALIA AND FINALLY IN THE CITY OF GAZA.

### *Where did you go to university?*

I was longing to travel abroad for my university, but I could not realise my dream because I was not able to obtain my identity card nor passport until the end of 2009. So, I studied at the University Al-Azhar in Gaza. I did three and a half years Farmacy but didn't end it. I then grew apart from my dad's wish and went on studying economy. I got a degree in Economy and Management Sciences, with a specialization in Business Administration.

### *When did you begin writing? Tell us the first memory you have of you writing?*

I always wrote things. I remember writing a poetry book when I was a child, but I lost it, as we were moving from house to house, after returning to Gaza. I remember well that despite my favouring maths and science subjects, I always got good marks in written text and literature. I very much enjoyed creating images, elaborating plots using a perfect and meaningful lexicon. When I was

studying pharmacy many times I took refuge in writing poems of a perfect and rhymed style, or a prose text, or phrases with a well structured and thought philosophical content. In my work I have written much about social issues and I have monitored complaints related to gender violence, in the Ministry of Women Issues. I contributed to the elaboration of a work vision for this ministry after Israel unilateral withdrawal from Gaza in 2005. I created this vision and implemented its ideas despite being a very young woman at that time.

My minister, Ms Zuheira Kamal, was also the General Secretary of the Palestinian Democratic Union (FIDA), one of the PLO sections. Her struggle left marks on me as well as her struggle in the right cause of women, for their rights and equality. On several occasions I have been asked to work in the field of information, on radio and television. I tried to avoid that. Nevertheless, I was always tempted by new experiences and got

back inside the news room to take on a new and unknown task. The experience of writing.

***The political situation in the Gaza Strip was complex...***

Indeed, and there was a 'military coup' against the Palestinian National Authority. Politically some call it coup, other consider it the solving of the situation. But I call it in my later writings neither solution of the situation nor coup, but division in the full sense of the word. However, in the end, in practical terms it was a coup against an existing authority with all its bodies and institutions.

True, there were legislative elections at that time, in 2006. The Islamist Movement Hamas triumphed. However, this does not justify the use of force by Hamas and even less the way it used it. A way I will never accept no matter the pretexts and justifications, and despite the wrong doing of the PNA, the theories of conspiracy and corruption.

Reform cannot be done this way, no matter what. I won't get into what happened from a political point of view. I will address what happened from the thoughts and feelings that shook me back then. I felt a breach in memory. I felt my motherland and my land crying before my eyes. I felt my history falling apart. I couldn't stand it. I couldn't bare it. I observed and witnessed everything that happened. I thought of the diaspora. My anxiety for an ID card that would allow me to identify myself to the world.

I felt that the Palestinian dream for freedom and independence was being tore apart by us, by the very Palestinians. I cried. I felt shaken by a pow-

erful strength. But I managed to put myself together. At the same time I was living different personal experiences. My uncle was struck by an Israeli missiles after he had joined a Palestinian Jihadist organization. My uncle had went from the far left to the far right for a single idea, free Palestine, all Palestine. We always had our differences, but I loved him very much and his loss left a indelible mark. I have lost many friends. Some older ones dies. Others emigrated after the Second Intifada, the "Al-Aqsa's Intifada". They were the living memory of motherland.

The talks I had with them gave me much energy and hope. At that time the plan was that I would move to Cisgiordania to live, marry and continue my studies. However this didn't happened, as the political and geographical breach/rupture increased. I wasn't able to travel. I remember I turned to sport then, and when I got back home there were cars convoys with huge speakers insulting the previous slogans and fabricating new ones. I didn't like them. I had to go back home. I them begun writing articles and essays of a more political, analytical, philosophical, literary and social character.

I was writing what was going on all around me. So I begun rejecting dogmatism, intellectual and religious extremism and the groups representing them. I was rejecting them from A to Z.

***That was in 2009.***

Yes. I begun sending my articles to national websites. I sent them to Dunia Al Watan (World of the Motherland) and they published them at once. It is possible that they publish everything they receive. On one occasion, the chief editor of the AMAD website, Mr Hassan Asfour (negotiator and former minister) read my articles in my Facebook page and told me: "Why don't you



send us your articles? You are a good pen. Good language. It doesn't happen often that a young Palestinian write such a good analysis. You have all freedom to express your opinion. I'll publish everything you sent. It seems you lean on the left".

I replied to him that I wasn't part of any organization. But yes, I had grown up in a leftish environment. He encouraged me to continue writing political stuff. And I have to say I continued to do so for years. I remembered he once said to me: "Young woman, you have talent to write novels, and you have the most important thing: ideas and feelings. I am sure one day you will write novels".

I don't know, maybe because I had to move, at an early age, from an oriental but more open Arab society to a similar one but more conserva-

tory, I had this eye which enables me to compare and check whatever is in front of me. All that was happening in front of me changed dramatically from the first day I entered school.

***Were you a reader in your youth? What was your relation with books when you were a child? Were books available?***

Yes. Very true, since I was a child I had a great love for reading. I remember we had a very large library in our house in Syria. There were brown and beige sofas with BORDADO that could be lifted and revealed drawers-like spaces full of books and music cassettes, both of western and eastern music. It was like stepping into a world very different from mine. How much I loved open the sofa! Like Alice in Wonderland.

I would pick up any book and start reading it with-



out stopping, even though it was not for my age. I wouldn't end reading the book, instead I would draw images of the phrases I read. I drew paintings in my childish imagination, no matter how difficult the meaning was of what I was reading, I tried hard to recreate that image drawing on what little I knew. I tried to simplify those difficult terms and converted them into simple and easy expressions. I didn't stop listening to music trying and dancing whenever I had the chance. When we got back to our motherland we couldn't bring our library with us. Our journey was no easy. Here in Gaza I have suffered the lack of books. My family worked hard to remake their life in Gaza. From scratch.

My parents had large families here. However, we decided to live alone, as we were used to do in Syria, where my maternal grandmother, aunts and uncles were living. I kind of lived to achieved stability in everything. I came from one diaspora to fall into a new one. The only thing that didn't changed was the heat coming from my small fam-

ily. I directed all my energy towards my studies.

I had one certainty: every sheet of paper, even a broken one, thrown on the ground, can contain something written of great utility. I never stopped reading papers and listening to the news with great curiosity and assiduity. I had good marks at school. I have spent hours in the company of my school books. I participated to radio programs in school. I assigned myself the task to observe the new society surrounding me, but in silence. I made friends with people like me who had come back to Palestine from all parts of the land, looking for a lost identity. They belonged to villages and cities their grandparents and great-grandparents had been forced to leave in the Nakba of 1948 and the military REVES of 1967.

Some were from Gaza itself, but were coming from cities whose life customs were different from those of their parents and grandparents. Their parents were of different political and social tendencies, of different mentality. I could



**I had one certainty: every sheet of paper, even a broken one, thrown on the ground, can contain something written**

feel these differences when I seat with they parents and grandparents to listen to their tales of history from memory, imagination, inventive, their eyes and lips, the movements of their hands.

I liked very much listening to the intellectuals and cultured people, as well as to my parents and their friends. From my friends, sons of the motherland, I liked to listen about the First Intifada, as I only lived it through the tv screen. I like to listen how they lived with the occupier, their memories. How is it to live with a direct occupation of land and human being. They felt fear. They enjoyed their childhood, played, they talked. Since I have returned I only saw children unable to play nor they even know what to play means, they know no joy, and this caused deep sadness in me.

I observed the look the camp's son gave to the city's son and how the peasant son looked at both. At the same time I observed the look of the urban child towards those coming from the camps and countryside. How the Gazian looks at the citizen of Cisjordan. How all looked at a Palestinian coming from very far away. How those who come back look at their families and society. How all of them look at the Palestinians of the 1948 territories, those who live in the Israeli State.

Many anachronism, different and various. This,

possibly, is what the former Israeli Prime Minister, Tseibi Levni, was referring to. She said something like: "Talking about return of the refuges is talking about something unreal". I think she knew well what she meant. She was not referring to quantities or proprieties; she was talking about something much deeper. It is one of the biggest truth that followed the Oslo Agreement and that prevented the implementation of all its clauses. This is a point that hit the whole Palestinian national THREAD/tessuto. It is the Palestinian political differences that have led to a further AGUDIZACION of bigger social raptures (FISURAS), even though later they would have been overcome thanks to the PLO, the moral entity of the Palestinians even before being its sole and legitimate representative. My maternal grandfather was from Gaza, an emigrated from the city.

My paternal grandfather is a villager who lost his land and fortune and had to emigrate to the refugee camp. My grandmother in the Motherland was analphabetic but left wing and despised religious extremism; she was very disciplined and well organized even in the toughest times of poverty and chaos. She was a Muslim of Christian origins, a villager of urban origins. And me, I was a person who had returned, and the Palestinian always returns to memory. My maternal grandmother is still alive, in the diaspora. She lives in Jueiber, in the countryside of Damascus, of Syrian origin, from the village



"Al Qariateyn", a village belonging to the city of Homs, and she is of Palestinian origins, from the village "Samj", in the province of Tiberiades, that suffered from the Nakba in 1948. She too has talked to me about her memories and lands.

**Tell us a bit about your literary influences...**

I have always admired and loved the work of Mahmoud Darwish. I don't know, I feel it very close to me. Before continuing, I have to say something. Often I don't remember the names of writers nor the titles of books. I don't remember the names of the actors and titles of their movies. But I never stop recording in my mind the melody of the stories they tell or characters they represent, the melody characteristic of their characters. I haven't studied literature, so my writing came out of an older creativity. I don't consider my childhood reading as deep reading. I follow and observe very carefully all that surrounds me. All that occur at local, regional and international level.

History appealed to me with great strength. I live the famous characters, I feel them, get into them, live the event, enter in its details, I reproduce it, with my mind, language and feelings. But after I begun writing my own stories, not yet published, I preferred buying hundreds of books and novels. I read a lot. Let me tell you something before I forget it: In the famous sofa of my childhood I had discovered a poetry book by our Palestinian poet, Sameeh Elkasseem. It had a red cover. I was very attracted to it. A Thick book. I remember his words, "Ahead, ahead". My hands then were very small to hold it. I was kneeling down to read it. Back to 2014 and what I read after. I read a lot, as I said. Ntezche, who I had read when I was a child. So Spoke Zarathustra. I read Garcia Marquez, Milan Kundera, Maximo Gorki, Paolo Coelho, Charles Baudelaire, Jean Paul Sartre.

**What about music?**

I love music very much. When I am writing I listen to music, generally. I feel like I am singing my

text as you would sing a song by a musician. I like oriental music, but also latin and western music. All music. I like the whispering of the tree's leaf. The singing of a bird. The sound of the waves. And I like the sound of silence. The noise of the wind. Indeed, I also ended up enjoying the roar of the planes before bombing, killing and destroying. Among musical tones I like the sad and deep ones, they take me far in my texts. I like the sound of the Nay (arabic flute), the Ud, the guitar, the violin, the piano. I like to sing but I barely remember lyrics.

**And cinema?**

Talking about cinema in an environment so small such as Gaza, films helped me only to keep in touch with the outside world. The world surrounding us. I like sitting on the sand on the coast, and look at the sky. Sure is looking over many more people like me, despite borders and distances. The hell with the vanity of man. When man does things the way he likes, he minimises everything. I was scared that my mind would reduce to the size of the prison where two millions Palestinians are held in Gaza. I have watched hundreds of american, european, indian, korean, arab films, but don't ask me to remember their titles. What I am sure of, though, is that they dealt with the essence of existence and the factibility of things surrounding us. I always look for the human being, in everything.

**How do you write? Does a story come to you, or a character comes first? What are the themes, issues, concerns you address in your books?**

How do I write. I listen to the voice of life. Its tone. The melody of the story is what comes first. Then it goes around the characters until they melt together. And I row, I row with such a strength in order to get out of there. Our of my worry. What worries me and what I write about?

I write about the human being. This human being I love passionately. About the human being unknown to me. The person I cannot identify by name, entity and place. But who is there I write about freedom. About the beauty of nature.



**My language is apologising for itself. I love the Arabic language. No, it's more than that: I respect it.**

About the land, the mountain and the sea. I write about injustice. The injustice we are carrying out against ourselves and the others. How do we live? What for? Despite all contradictions inherent to the human being and what is surrounding us. I write about the tragedy of existence.

**How important is language for you?**

I feel that my language develops and gets better together with the very development of meaning and sense of the text. My language is apologising for itself. I love the Arabic language. No, it's more than that: I respect it. I have dominated much its grammar, lexicon, terms, and vocabulary. I have learned it since I studied pre-Islamic poetry. And the poetry which came after that, from the Omeyyas to the Abbasides civilisations. I love to talk about the Arabs and their history. I can speak volumes of civilisations, literature, sound, insinuation.

The Noble Coran, icons of the Arabic language, influenced me very much. It helps very much to improve your language and gives you a great space for contemplation. Many other things. In my childhood I watched cartoons translated in other languages and dubbed in Arabic. I spoke classical Arabic, the cult one. A friend once made me laugh: she had come back to Gaza, Palestine, like me. She phoned me and told me that she was speaking about me with her family.

Remember, she said, when my older sister slapped you and you went running to your mum to tell her what happened in classical Arabic, and we all burst out laughing. We would not use such words in colloquial Arabic. I mean in the language or dialect we use in our everyday life. But now, after nine years writing, I feel that my expressions, sentences have become easier. My vocabulary is softer. I am not looking for linguistic showing off.

I turned the sequence of the text into music. Language is like music. The tone of the phoneme is what makes you feel joy or sadness. Language is not just an amount of words.

Language is meaning. Rhetorical constructions are something precious of perfect beauty. But we can't fall prisoner of the rhetoric. I speak English, but I don't dominate it well, and a little French. I wish I had more time to learn more languages. I would like to write in other languages too. My aim is to spread my ideas, my images, my narratives.

All this, though, does not change my love for my Arabic language. It's not a mistake to develop the Arabic language, as long as it doesn't lose its spirit and essence. Sure we don't speak the way our ancestors did. Time shapes the forms of language, cut the words and put them back into shape. Language is but a way to search for new formulas of communication.

**Do you feel you are part of a generation?**

When I write I feel I belong to all generations. I live generations which are not contemporary. But yes, I am part of this generation that grew up between war and peace. I lived the diaspora, the peace agreement, two intifada and three wars. Would this generation write my story! This generation of the '80s and '90s.

**How would you consider the Palestinian literary scene at the moment?**

Many Palestinian writers and poets have been able to offer their human and literary experience, so this added and clarified many new things. It shows what every Palestinian feel inside him/her.

Literature was varying, from that previous to the Nakba, of resistance, refuge, exile, prison. The influence of political and social conditions surrounding the Palestinian writer prevailed over his literary tendencies.

It is difficult to get rid of these influences because they interfere directly in the everyday life. What changed with the years is the writer's view towards the surrounding environment. It means taking it from another point of view, focusing on the literary side.

We must move away from the "bravado" of the complex wording, the ability to free ourselves from the guilt trip, especially in the wake of the Nakba (Palestinian National Disaster) and the setback of 1967, and the loss, by the Palestinian being, of an independent entity that represents it. Here I am not referring to this majority that goes in this direction and in this tendency. But I refer to the emergence of this trend in the Palestinian media. And here we have to mention a social literature that is being written by the Palestinians.

This literature exists and there are many examples of it, especially after the Oslo Agreements. The challenges of this era are bigger and more defined. The Palestinian society is accumulat-

ing its daily and social experience under the occupation.

In this context I search a balance in the focus.

**Do you feel there is a policy of supporting culture? I mean, for example, at local level, in Gaza, is there any institutional support for culture, literature, libraries...**

There are very timid contexts to support culture in Palestinian society, in Gaza, non-profit institutions, or governmental contexts of limited extension and activity. Speaking of myself, I never belonged to a cultural context. No context or institution had anything to do with polishing my talent. No one came to look for me except very few, who are neither founders nor officials of a policy or strategy to support creators, writers and intellectuals. I do not like politicized frames, or let me say "intellectually limited" ... Before talking about intellect and knowledge!

There are not enough cultural promotion institutions. There are no publishers. The bookstores are few and you do not find in them the works you are interested in or looking for. If one wants to publish personally assuming the costs, which are quite high, the publication will only cover local spaces. In this way, your literary project, your product does not reach the Arab countries and the countries of the world. We need bigger and deeper incubation institutions that are dedicated to sculpt and raise the nascent generation and open their minds to the experiences of the world, to the experiences of knowledge, of science, and of literature. We must create a more educated and better prepared Palestinian society.

**What does literature mean to you?**

Literature is an immortal life. It's You and I posthumously. Death is the only reality in life. It is immortality. It is the source of humanism. It is when humanity falls into drought. It is the melody of communication, even when they disappear languages.



**Sadness seizes me when I speak about the time when the struggle stopped being between Palestinians and Israelis and became among Palestinians themselves**



*It is often said that solving the Palestinian question would give the whole Middle East a new perspective ...*

The Arab-Israeli conflict or the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation carries with it national, cultural, religious and geopolitical dimensions. Let me synthesize everything in other words: indeed the Palestinian-Israeli struggle is the essence of the conflict in the Middle East.

Sadness seizes me, fills me inside, when I speak about the time when the struggle stopped being between Palestinians and Israelis, and became between Palestinians and Palestinians, for power. Both sides gave themselves to the task of defending the Palestinian cause, but one in the name of patriotism, and the other in the name of religious belief.

The essence of the conflict was distorted after moving from one side to the other of the Arab region in general (in particular, the countries

close to Israel) .. and there routes, directions and objectives were changing, until the religious parties were cloning themselves, giving more and more space to new and more extremist forces that threaten the stability of Arab societies and the whole world.

The world is a small village, and the generalization of an intellectual model for youth, through material and non-material things, becomes possible for many, especially after this technological and computer revolution.

For this reason, I always harbour suspicions about the true investor in this intellectual terrorism, and about being a force alien to our societies. When the role of Egypt in the Arab region was weakened, Iraq was destroyed, the role of Syria, Libya and Yemen receded, and the role of the Gulf countries (the oil countries) in the Arab region became strong; we had the reflections and the influences of the Gulf culture in all its components.

Figures like Ben Laden, going through Al-Zahawi and arriving to DAESH maybe are genuine children of the culture of those countries. I cannot take this for granted. Or is it that the appearance of a more influential role of other countries in the region such as Iran and Turkey has had more impact and effect in the region?

***In which sense?***

Perhaps this more influential role of Iran and Turkey has something to do with the victory of the Islamist movement Hamas in Gaza or the triumph of the Muslim Brotherhood in the elections of Egypt.

The Salafi movement in the Gulf countries spread to our countries in Cham (Greater Syria) through Jihadist Islam, just as it has happened in Iran and Afghanistan before and in Turkey more recently where religious parties are in power and they actually sup-

port of all that has or reflects an Islamist character in our area. Just think of Turkey and its support for jihadists. Let me clarify my idea. The main winner of everything that happens in the Arab region, beginning from the confessional conflicts, is Israel. The State of Israel claims recognition of the Jewish character of the state, and applies the civic codes in its legislature and in its system of government. It does not matter to the State of Israel if the region is divided into small states built on religious confessional bases, as long as they don't affect the idea of the Jewish character of the State of Israel.

***Are you optimistic?***

I'm not optimistic, no. I do not see a Palestinian entity in the short term. We are dissolving into the principalities of the patriotic and Islamic illusion. Everyone believes in the importance of the economic solution



**I am woman and I love being one. Fear kills women in our society, even when they presume to have full energy and strength. Family marginalizes women**

that improves living conditions of people, as the prelude to accept future solutions. In other words, re-form minds. We are talking about ideas. Meanwhile the land is reduced day after day by the geophagy of the colonization projects and the building of endless walls of isolation.

***What is the situation of women in Gaza?***

I am a woman, and I love being one. Fear kills women in our society, even when they presume to be in their full energy and strength. The family marginalizes women. Traditions and idiosyncrasies immobilize her with their bonds. The erroneous conception of religion inhibits her development. The occupation destroys her freedom. But despite all this pain and pressure, women's creativity is a reason for survival. Creativity is revolution and to solve the Palestinian question we need a creativity revolution that is

a women revolution. Only the awakening of women will allow stability in Arab societies and also in the Palestinian society.





# REFAAT ALAREER

## Literature liberates us from our prejudices

INTERVIEW BY J.M. ARRUGAETA - O. CASAGRANDE

REFAAT ALAREER WAS BORN IN 1979 IN THE GAZA STRIP, SHUJAYA. HE WAS BORN AND RAISED UNDER OCCUPATION, WHICH MEANS "EVERY MOVE I TOOK AND EVERY DECISION I MADE WERE INFLUENCED (USUALLY NEGATIVELY) BY THE ISRAELI OCCUPATION". HE FINISHED A BA IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE FROM THE ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY-GAZA IN 2001, AND A MA IN COMPARATIVE LITERATURE FROM UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LONDON (UCL) IN 2007. HE IS CURRENTLY ABOUT TO FINISH A PHD IN ENGLISH LITERATURE AT UNIVERSITY PUTRA MALAYSIA (UPM). REFAAT LIVES IN GAZA WITH HIS WIFE AND 6 KIDS. HE TEACHES WORLD LITERATURE AND CREATIVE WRITING AT THE ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY-GAZA. AS A KID, HE SAYS, "I GREW UP THROWING STONES AT ISRAELI MILITARY JEEPS, FLYING KITES, AND READING".

*When did you begin writing? Tell us the first memory you have of you writing?*

I started writing in English during Israel's 2008 offensive on Gaza that left about 1400 Palestinians dead. I still remember how I felt obliged to write back in English to reach out to the world to educate people about Palestine and save them from the dominant Israeli multi-million dollar campaigns of misinformation.

The first real piece was a short sarcastic piece imitating Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" in which I suggested instead of murdering Palestinian kids, Israelis should eat them up for their nutritious values and at the same time rid themselves of the so-called Palestinian demographic threat. But later, my writing was ignited while I was teaching comparative literature and creative writing to my students. Social media such as blogging and twitter made writing a daily practice, albeit in the form of very laconic posts and tweets.

*Were you a reader in your youth? What was your relation with books when you were a child? Were books available?*

As a kid growing up in the first Intifada, books were a luxury we could not afford. We grew up

attending wedding parties and listening to Palestinian folk songs and resistance songs. That was the major source of education on Palestine. Other sources of reading were Palestinian factions press releases and graffiti. When at night young masked Palestinians sprayed the walls with graffiti, we could not wait for the day to break so we go around and read again and again every single word of that. Reading these was an act of resistance. It was the least, we kids, could do, besides throwing stones at the military Jeeps.

Having books on Palestine and resistance was a crime punishable by the Israeli occupation. I remember my elder brother and I had an Intifada poetry book. I used to read it with the doors and the windows shut. I never told anyone we had that book at home. It was like I was hiding a bomb. If we had been caught with such materials or with a Palestinian flag or a poster of Yassir Arafat, we might have ended up spending 6 months in Israeli prisons, or, worse, our father's work permit would have been suspended.

School books were ok, but they did not help us understand what was going on. In Gaza, we had to use Egypt's school books. And all references



to Palestine were censored and erased by the Israeli occupation authorities. Whole pages and paragraphs were blank. That was where Palestine existed.

**Let's talk about your own work. What have you published so far?**

I edited and contributed to "Gaza Writes Back", a collection of short fiction written in English by 15 Young Palestinians living in Gaza. I also co-edited "Gaza Unsilenced", which is a book of articles on Israel's 2014 offensive on Gaza that killed about 2400 Palestinians. I also published a journal article entitled "Gaza Writes Back: Narrating Palestine". I have a bunch of unpublished poems and other stories I am hoping to bring to the light soon.

**Is there a distribution for your work both inside and outside of Palestine?**

"Gaza Writes Back" is now in 7 languages. The book was published by Just World Books, a small, but influential, publisher in the United States. They do all the distribution to the English edition. When I am done with my PhD, I am hoping I will invest more time and efforts into writing fiction and poetry. I have few unfinished texts that I am hoping to bring out to the world.

**Which of your books/stories have been published in other languages?**

"Gaza Writes Back" is in English, Italian, Turkish, Malay, Bengali, Persian, and (partly) Japanese. I had one of my poems translated (online) into Spanish.

**What is your feeling on translation?**

Translation is the best thing that happened to humanity. Translation breaks barriers and builds bridges and creates understanding. But "bad" translations could also create misunderstandings. And as much as I believe, and love, translation, I also believe that we need to train ourselves to express our concerns in the target language, here English. As Palestinians, there is good material that is translated into English and other languages, and there are people who speak for Palestinians in other languages. This is a two-fold weapon because we have always seen how mainstream media especially in the West misrepresents Palestine by adopting the Israeli military discourse, terminology, and ideology. Translation here is dangerous and misleading.

Therefore, as an academic in an occupied land, major concern is to train as many people as possible to write effectively in English so that they

express themselves in the way, discourse, and method they see fit, and hence overcome the dilemmas of translation.

In a word, we, Palestinians, need to translate Palestine. And Palestinians who are able to speak for themselves in other languages should do that directly.

Personally, I'd love to be part of a project to translate Palestinian folklore into English. This popular literature closer to the reality of Palestine and better represents the depth and richness of Palestinian culture and heritage.

**Tell us a bit about your literary, musical, cinema influences...**

In general, I love English poetry (my PhD is on John Donne's poetry). I read Shakespeare. But I also love to read Russian, Italian, South American, and African Literature. I love reading literature by native peoples in America, Canada, Australia, etc. I have been influenced by Shakespeare, John Donne, Laurence Stern, Aphra Behn, George Eliot, T. S. Eliot, and Aphra Behn. I have some interest in Israeli and Hebrew literature and hope to develop this interest soon. Currently, my interest is mainly in emerging young artists and how they react to mainstream trends that try to silence them or render them irrelevant or immature.

I listen to classical Arabic music and resistance folklore especially Palestinian nasheed. I listen to some American country music.

I usually love a movie that was originally a book. I love movies with plot twists, or sub-plots. I also use them in my teaching. My Top movies include "Apocalypto", "Death Sentence", "First Blood", "Room", "No Country for Old Men", "There Will Be Blood", "The Magnificent Eight", "Pulp Fiction", "The Pianist", "The Book Thief", "The Slumdog Millionaire", "Freedom Writers", "Great Debaters", "In the Valley of Elah", and "The Reader".

**How do you write? Does a story come to you, or a character comes first? What are the themes, issues, concern you address in your books?**

Whether it is fiction, poetry, or articles, I always seek a spark. In literary writing, once I have the

"revelation" or the spark of a certain story or a poem, it either pours itself onto the page or takes me ages to finish. I have written texts in a couple of hours. And at the same time, I still have a poem that I have been working on for more than 4 years. In fiction, I always feel that once I think of an event or an encounter or a bit of dialogue, the characters evolve accordingly and take the lead and free themselves from me as the writer.

If I am writing an article, the timing is important or else the topic loses its thunder. During Israel's 2014 massacres, one of my articles had thousands of shares. It came soon after Israel bombed the Islamic University where I work and obliterated the offices of the Faculty of Arts. The article was entitled "There are no Poems of mass Destruction". The article was timely, I brought my experience of teaching Jewish characters to Palestinian students in the piece. But I think the fact that the piece was cooking in my mind and heart for about 2 years helped it mature and reach out to greater audiences.

I classify what I write as resistance writing, as writing back, not that all I do is reacting to the political situations. In Palestine, everything has become political. Poetry is political. Fiction is political. Photography is political. Teaching is political. Living is political. But when I do write or when I teach my students to write, I urge them to transcend the particularities into the universal. I believe one reason "Gaza Writes Back" is a success is that it turned very personal Palestinian stories and voices into timeless and universal fiction that appeals to all regardless of age, race, ideology, ethnicity, or religion.

**How important is language for you in your work?**

Words. Words. Words. As Hamlet says. Language is all we have to voice our struggle and to fight back.

The words are our most valuable treasure that we ought to utilise in order to educate ourselves and educate others. And these words ought to be conveyed in as many languages as possible. And no matter what, I believe in a language that touches the hearts and minds of as many people as possible.

**Do you feel you are part of a generation?**

I do. And I am hoping that I am leaving something worthy behind. In the coming years, I will work very hard to provoke as many stories and poems from Young Palestinians as possible. The problem is that for many Palestinians living under Israeli occupation, with the political division, add to the brutal Israeli siege on Gaza where people cannot travel and sometimes get no more than 3 hours of electricity per day, writing is a luxury that most do not and cannot afford.

The contributors to "Gaza Writes Back" have been described as future Ghassan Kanafanis. This could be an overstatement, but this is where great writers, thinkers, intellectuals, freedom fighters, and human rights defenders come from. And my job as an academic and activist is to make sure to equip these young people with the skills they require.

We are the generation that took the brunt of Israel's aggressiveness and managed to fight back with all the means available. Online, this generation managed to beat Israel's error-riddled narrative.

This generation managed to reach out, using social media, to every corner of the world and expose Israel's crimes and human rights violations. Palestinians' call for BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions), for example, is gaining momentum as a creative non-violence means of resisting Israel's occupation, and obliging Israel to give Palestinians their rights.

I do my best to contribute positively to this generation and its steadfastness in the face of man-made crises that seem to never end because Israel wants to punish us Palestinians for not having the Jewish genes.

**How would you consider the Palestinian literary scene at the moment?**

The Palestinian literary scene is, in my honest opinion, in disarray. The literary scene in Palestine has two major flaws: the chasm between the old and the young and the domination of non-Palestinian voices. Usually established writers who have done a great job for the Palestinian cause tend to look down upon emerging writers. Rarely do I see an event or a project where old and young people work together or where the established writers work with the young ones who really need the support and guidance of experienced writers. This gap has existed everywhere and it negatively influences the young writers. However, a silver lining here is that the young writers develop their own independent usually revolutionary identity that is more daring more unconventional.

Secondly, if you look at major pro-Palestine events, sometime they are dominated by pro-Palestinians voices. While they are significant and needed, these voices usually occupy the space that should be dedicated to Palestinian voices. In other words, while all sorts of support are welcome, it is Palestinians who have suffered 7 decades of occupation, terror, humiliation, dispossession, and injustices.



**Literature has the ability to educate us, to heal us, to bring us all together and open up new possibilities for a better future**

Palestinians are more capable of conveying their message and concerns to the world. When Palestinian voices are muted or sidelined, we jeopardise the whole cause and doom Palestinian voices to oblivion. That is Palestinians should represent themselves; they should not be represented.

Therefore, more should be done to nurture emerging Palestinian voices, translate and showcase them, and present them to the world. The least to be done here is to constantly hold events for young Palestinians only, to publish their works, to fund their reading clubs and events, and to sponsor and encourage literary contests. These events can bring together Palestinians from Gaza, the West Bank, Jerusalem, areas occupied by Israel in 1948, and the Diaspora in one platform, where books and other forms of literary productions can be nurtured. This is how we can unify Palestine and create a Palestine that Israel and its allies are working very hard to prevent from existing.

**Do you feel there is a policy of supporting culture? I mean, for example, at local level, in Gaza, is there any institutional support for culture, literature, libraries etc**

I do not think there is an official strategy with strategic plans to support Palestinian culture. However, there are some individual initiatives or ones organised by activists. And these are not enough. Due to the lack of the needed support, many talents die out and give up on

pursuing their hobbies in producing good literature. Maybe the general situation is partly to blame, but there is no excuse whatsoever that can prevent us from taking care of our own culture and heritage because this is what we will be living behind for the generations to come.

**What does literature mean to you?**

Literature especially fiction is timeless and universal, and that is a fact. In my classes, we read fiction from all over the world across time and place and we still identify with the characters and feel sorry for their pains and happy for their gains regardless of their race, skin colour, ideology, or ethnicity.

Reading literature and stories like the ones in Gaza Writes Back takes us to the homes, minds, and hearts of people from all over the world. Reading these stories helps people transcend the barriers of language, ideology and geography and brings us closer. A book like Gaza Writes Back is a reminder to people of all faiths that we are all human and that these little children exposed to the brutality of Israeli occupation could be us, could be our own children or nephews and nieces.

Still, literature has the ability to educate us, to heal us, to bring us all together, and to open up new possibilities of a better future. Literature has the ability to create bridges and reach out to all.



## Silence is betrayal. Silence of intellectuals and writers is complicity.

That is why people who read and appreciate literature tend to be more thoughtful. And that is why totalitarian regimes hate literature. In the oppressed societies, literature is usually connected with their struggle and fight for human rights and justice. Literature becomes and is resistance.

It is not strange then that Israel targets Palestinian intellectuals, novelists, and poets. Nowadays, Israel, for example is persecuting Palestinian poet Nadeen Tatour, whose only crime was to express herself in poetry. And it is reported that Israeli general Moshe Dayan likened reading Fadwa Tuqan's poems to facing 20 commandos. And connected to the previous question, we live in a world where the idea of "the other", different from us is used to create fear of the other. How can literature help to defeat this fear? Break barriers and borders, walls?

literature brings everyone together in one space, regardless of race, religion, skin colour, or ideology. Usually when we read literature we strip ourselves of our prejudice. Good writers usually help their readers identify with certain characters and bring us closer to their pain and plight. When start asking ourselves "what if we were in their shoes?", truth about the fact that we are humans dawn on us and thus shatter prejudice.

A story about a small Palestinian kid's last moments as he bleeds to death following an Israeli missile that targeted a group of kids playing football is usually an invitation to imagine ourselves or our loved ones in this situation.

Good readers usually react responsibly, change their behaviours, attitudes, or even ideology. As Palestinians we're counting on literature to break all barriers and walls built by the Israeli occupation and its misinformation campaigns to give voice to the voiceless and face to the faceless and take Palestine to the homes, lives, hearts, and minds of people all over the world. Because literature liberates us from our prejudices and ideologies, it is an important tool of education and enlightenment. That is why we hope and have to work harder so that Palestinian literature reaches out to all, including Israeli occupiers.

Who knows, maybe one day they will realise the absurdity and brutality of their occupation. However, literature is a double-edged sword because it can also be used as a propaganda tool. This is true of much of Jewish literature in the end of the 19th century and the 20th century. For the Zionist movement, literature was used as a tool to convince the Jews of the world to go to Palestine.

To do so, among many other unethical things, the Zionists presented Palestine as empty, as a land



without a people, awaiting the so-called "rightful" people to go and enjoy its milk and honey. In much of Israeli literature, Palestinians are misrepresented and excluded. They do not have a voice or a face. And if they do, they're mostly terrorists or backward.

***Insisting on the discussion about the writer (and intellectual) role and involvement with what goes around him/her, in a recent interview Syrian writer Khaled Khalifa was saying: "I have always wondered about the ability of some writers to remain silent while the body parts of their own people are strewn about: murdered or drowned, refugees or prisoners; when a regime destroys a country and kills civilians, with impunity and for its own survival. This silence is disgrace itself, and it will follow those writers as much as those who justify crimes in any name whatsoever".***

Silence is betrayal. Silence of intellectuals and writers is complicity. It is said that the pen is mightier than the sword. And at times of war or great oppression and injustices like what's happening in occupied Palestine, Syria, Yemen, Iraq, etc. real intellectuals are texted. If they side with the tyrant or dictators and not with the op-

pressed, they become oppressors themselves simply because their words justify oppression or whitewash it.

***It is often said that solving the Palestinian question would actually give the Middle East a new perspective. Can you tell us how is the situation in Palestine at present? We read news of a prisoners hunger strike (it was called off after some 40 days, as Israeli authorities apparently have accepted prisoners' requests) and of yet another possible attack on Gaza.***

Israel is an occupation that depends in its existence on the destruction of the others, their heritage, their lives, their future, their land, and their livelihoods. In 7 decades of occupation, Israel uprooted over a million Palestinian olive trees and over a million Palestinians were imprisoned including thousands of kids and women, many without charge or trial.

Israel steals almost all Palestinian natural resources including water and prevents Palestinians from using any of these resources. Israel is literally turning the West Bank into a Swiss cheese with small pockets of Palestinian areas surrounded by Jewish only roads or settlements.

Palestinians cannot build on their own land and if they do Israel will demolish the homes and villages. Israel has long turned Gaza into the largest open air prison in the world. These medieval practices reflect Israel's disregard to non-Jewish lives and its insistence to destroy Palestine, her people, and any chance of independence or self-determination.

There are currently about 6 thousand Palestinians in Israeli prisons including many children, women, journalists, and lawmakers. Scores are kept without even a charge or trial.

Gaza is currently living its worst of days. Borders are closed by Israel; very few people are allowed or out and Israel allows the bare minimum of imports and exports. Students can't join their universities outside Gaza, sick people die waiting for Israel to approve their permit for medical treatment.

Two million people in Gaza live with about 3 hours of electricity, and you can only imagine how horrible this is. Thanks to Israel, there is about 45% unemployment in Gaza. Over 90% of Gaza's water is unfit for human consumption. The UN declared Gaza unfit for life by 2020.

In a word, what is happening in Palestine and especially in Gaza and areas like Jerusalem is a slow genocide. Israel want us all dead, or gone forever or living in fear and chasing crumbs of bread 24/7.

Gaza is suffocating in the worst sense of the

word. What is going on in Gaza now is a slow death or a systematic process to drive Gazans towards insanity and despair.

Rafah Crossing has been closed for nearly 120 days now. It means ill people die awaiting medical treatment. It means students can't join their universities. It means businessmen can't do their work. With most civil employees getting about 50% to 70% of their salaries, it means a lot less money gets into Gazans' pockets. That means less food on the table. It means young people do not go to universities. It means people struggle to provide for their families.

**Let's talk about the initiative Gaza Writes Back. When did you start this, who is involved, what are the campaigns it runs?**

The idea to compile a book of stories came to me during Israel's 2008 attacks against Gaza that lasted 23 days. I spent these days telling my kids stories to distract them from the explosions and the gunpowder that was suffocating us. These stories sparked a passion for storytelling and took me back to my mother's and grandmother's stories. They made me realize I, as a person, am the sum of these stories. When I went back to my classes, I started assigning my students to write short fiction instead of research papers. I held several training courses in short story writing and creative writing. The result was amazing. I picked 23 stories from more than 100 pieces I collected. We wanted the 23 stories to counter Israel's 23 days of terror.

Gaza Writes Back is first and foremost a book of literature, a book that came for the same reasons why all literature is written, and artistic activities are as old as human life.

They signify willingness, usually daring, to resist the repetitiveness and dullness and dreariness of life. Literature defies all acts of suppression and oppression because oppressors are always dull and repetitive, while makers of art are creative and innovative. Literature stands out as a testimony for the generations to come. But literature is too a powerful means of self-expression and a sharp reflection on the world we live in, be it oppressive, repressive or even completely falling apart.

The short fiction pieces in Gaza Writes Back were compiled to become a testament of the importance of one's determination to live and resist occupation and oppression for the future Palestinians just like we now read Ghassan Kanafani more than history books. Moreover, writing a book like Gaza Writes Back is part of our duty and moral obligation as young Palestinians to reach out to the whole world to educate them, and thus us, about our plight under the racist Zionist occupation.

Gaza Writes Back humanizes the Palestinian plight and universalizes it. It gives voice to the voiceless and a face and a name to the faceless at a time when the all-powerful Israeli narrative is distorting all facts and figures. And the book, I believe, generated more books and literature in Palestine.

More young Palestinian writers are now more willing to write and express themselves openly, because they have seen how a short story or a book can make a huge difference. Several young Palestinians have approached me and asked me for advice or feedback on their pieces. In my classes at the Islamic University, Gaza, I am witnessing a surge in the number of students who want to write, especially fiction. And I also know that many are now working to document the last war in the form of stories similar to those in Gaza Writes Back.

The book was published in the United States and sold globally, in addition to being translated into Italian, Turkish, Bengali, Malay, Persian, and Japanese. People from all over the world, including South Africa, South America, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, England, France, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, have been contacting me for either interviews or a permission to teach part of my book in their classes. The feedback we receive is amazing. And we have witnessed first-hand during our book tour in the US show just how significant a book like this is in educating people and raising awareness.

Several people have contacted me asking to work on "Gaza Writes Back" for the MA's and PhD's. We hope the book can be translated into more languages.

<https://thisisgaza.wordpress.com/2014/09/04/spanish-translation-of-my-poem-i-am-you-soy-vos/>

# TALAL A.S. ABU SHAWISH

## Literature is the most civilized tool of resistance

INTERVIEW BY J.M. ARRUGAETA - O. CASAGRANDE

TALAL A.S. ABU SHAWISH WAS BORN IN 1967, IN THE REFUGEE CAMP OF NUSSEIRAT, IN THE CENTER OF GAZA, THE SAME YEAR IN WHICH ISRAEL LAUNCHED ITS "SIX-DAY WAR" OCCUPYING GAZA, CISGIORDANIA AND OTHER ARAB TERRITORIES. HIS CHILDHOOD WAS SPENT IN A FAMILY EXPELLED FROM ITS LAND, "IN THE MIDST OF DIFFICULTIES, DEATH, POVERTY AND LOSS" AS HE SAID. THE MAJORITY OF THE DISPLACED PEOPLE DEPENDED ON THE HELP OF THE UNRWA, WHICH WAS CREATED ESPECIALLY TO HELP THEM. TALAL BEGAN HIS STUDIES IN THE SCHOOLS OF THAT INSTITUTION, CONTINUED THE PRE-UNIVERSITY IN THE OCCUPIED AREA, AND LATER JOINED THE TEACHER TRAINING INSTITUTE, OF THE SAME UNRWA, IN RAMALLAH, WHERE HE GRADUATED IN ENGLISH. HIS SOLID AND CONTINUOUS LITERARY WORK BEGINS WITH A TRILOGY OF STORIES AND THEN PASSES TO THE NOVEL. A LITERARY CAREER THAT HE SHARES WITH TRANSLATION, HIS WORK AS A TEACHER AND, OF COURSE, HIS IDENTITY AS A PALESTINIAN.

### *How do you relate to literature?*

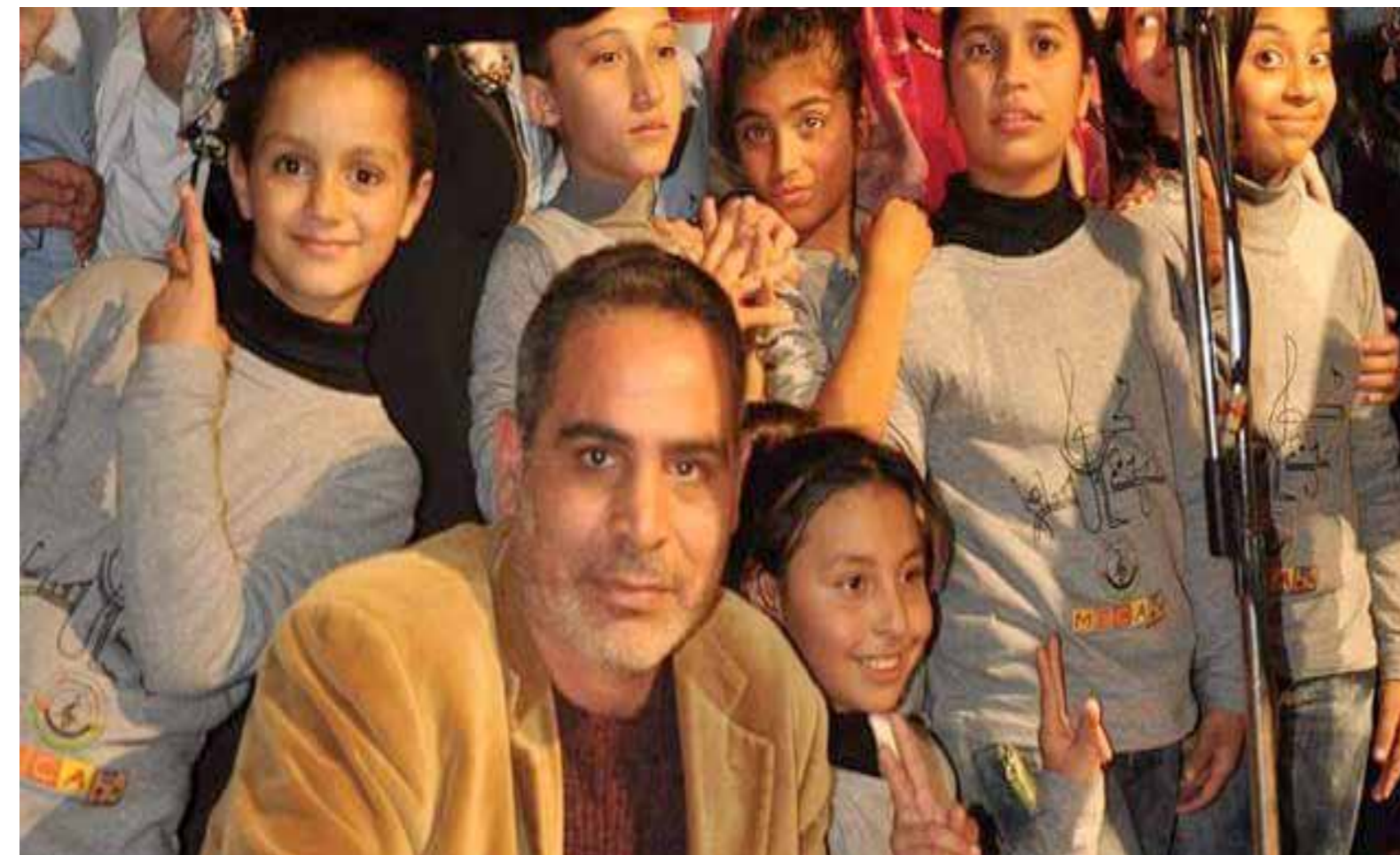
In primary school, before I turned 15, I was greatly influenced by a veteran left fighter who lived in the same refugee camp and had a huge library in his house. I started borrowing books and reading them with enthusiasm. Through these readings my interest and my inclination towards literature was formed. I read a lot, Arab, European, North American, Latin American and Asian authors, like the Egyptians Naguib Mahfouz, Youssef Idriss, Eduar Kharrat, and Ibrahim Abdel Maguid. Works by Arab writers from the Maghreb, such as Al-TaHER Wattar, Al-TaHER ben Jalloun and Mohamed Benis.

I also read Abdel Rahman Moneif, Gabra Ibrahim Gabra and Hanna Mena. From other literatures I met authors such as Collen Wilson, Henry Miller, Alberto Moravia, Jorge Amado, Paulo Coelho, Ernest Hemingway.

### *And how do you decide to take the step from reading to writing?*

I was held in administrative detention four times and in each of them I spent at least six months in the Kitsout military prison, without any accusation or trial. During my stay in prison I began to write poems, some ideas and things that occurred to me. They had a romantic character and mostly revolved around a single theme: the dream of freedom, the liberation from the Israeli occupation and the establishment of an independent Palestine, like the rest of the peoples of the world. That was the central issue of most of my writings in prison.

After the signing of the Oslo Agreements, in 1993, I had the opportunity to work as an English teacher in one of the refugee schools of the UNRWA, and I enrolled to the University of Jerusalem, to continue my studies and obtained a BA in English language. At the same



time, I persisted in my literary attempts by publishing works in the local press and participating in story contests organized by the Ministries of Culture and Youth. In 1996 I got the first place in one, and in 1998 I participated in a story contest organized by the Ligurian Region, Italy, and they gave me the first prize. These awards encouraged me to continue with my literary inclination.

**Your literary work began with the short story.**

Yes, after my return from Italy I published the

first compilation of stories, which was the beginning of my career as a professional writer and as an intellectual: "Goodbye to the Prophets", edited by the Union of Cultural Centers. The second "Remains which are not for sale", in 2000, published by the Union of Palestinian Writers. And the third, the same year and with the same editors, was called "The Murder of a Paint". These trilogy of stories also helped me to join the Union of Palestinian Writers.

**And from the short story you pass to the novel.**

Yes, the stories did not completely fill my lit-

erary pretensions and I began to write novels in a serious way. The short story does not give the writer enough space to say everything he has in his mind while the novel gives him a much more extensive area and greater possibilities to vary and diversify its beginning.

My first novel is entitled "We Deserve a Better Death". I wrote it in 2012, the same year I continued with "Mid-Eastern Nightmare" and then "Season of Love and Blood", the last two published by the Palestinian Writers Union (UEP.) And in 2016, a book of short stories and texts appeared, which I named "Time dedicated to joy", published by Ed. Kalima-Publicaciones.

**Your books are distributed in Palestine but it is almost impossible to read you outside.**

Despite the state of siege and the blockade in which the Gaza Strip has been living since 2007, I have managed to get my books to Egypt through a contract with Ed Yassmin, Printing and Publications. This way I could re-publish all my books and opened the possibility of divulging my literary production in other countries. But until now I have not been able to translate my works into other languages. That is one of my dreams and I work a lot in that sense.

**Do you speak of translations. Can we consider translations a form of literature?**

Translation is a creative process that adds to the literary work itself. I feel that my duty towards myself and towards what I defend also has to do with translating, which is translating messages towards the West, which in my case is a coherent literary message and far from what is disseminated by fairs and the media corporate. I have a lot of faith and I am convinced that a novel, a story, a narra-

tive, can convince the world of the rights of the Palestinian people, through the humanitarian message created by our intellectuals, through poetry, the story, the novel, theatre work. That is why translation is a fundamental part of my literary plans.

**Beyond literature, what other artistic expressions are important to you and to your work?**

I have a great interest in art, music and film, all that the Israeli occupation prevented us from enjoying. I follow all the artistic and musical creations because I am always interested in the levels that are reaching and thus be able to know and feel the popular taste, as far as its development or underdevelopment goes.

I am convinced that literary and artistic disciplines are not in competition. Where literature flourishes, music, film, theater and music will flourish too. When one of them suffers a setback the other forms of expression also suffer as part of the collective taste and inevitably there is a deterioration of the values of society and their collective memory.

**Let's talk about the creative process in your case. Are characters coming first? or the plot...?**

My work in refugee schools, my own life in a refugee camp makes the environment around me very rich as far as both characters and events are concerned. No matter where I look, I find a character for a story or for a novel. In the midst of this abundance of living material I put to work the narrative imagination to treat the subject, enrich it and so make sure that my work is endowed with quality and variety. There is the child, the woman, the worker, the fighter and there are also stories of secret loves.

**My work in refugee schools, my own life in a refugee camp makes the environment around me very rich both in terms of characters and events**

*What importance do you attach to language?*

Language is the envelope of ideas, without which they cannot be developed or expressed. Language is the main axis of literary work. I consider myself a writer who has made use of classical Arabic, mixed with particular fragments of the dialects used in various Arab societies, where each community describes its own linguistic framework supported by the genuine Arabic language. Our contact with Western literature, through the knowledge of their works, also contributes to developing new molds for modern Arabic, it helps us to be more flexible in their forms of expression, according to the numerous and developed literary styles.

*Do you feel part of a generation of writers?*

I believe that I belong to the second generation of Palestinian authors. The generation that was born with the setback of 1967 and that closely followed the Palestinian cause and the Arab-Israeli conflict from then until now.

That generation developed its literary tool and approached the Palestinian theme away from the classical forms and tried to convey

a civilized literary message, in interaction with the thinking of the universal community, which defends at the same time values such as freedom, human rights and of women, in addition to other contemporary problems.

*How would you describe the contemporary Palestinian literature?*

In my opinion, Palestinian literature has had its approach to universality, many works are translated into different languages. The knowledge and mastery Palestinian authors have of universal literature, both through their knowledge of other languages and through translations, help to enrich our literature, and the proof is that there are numerous works that are still competing for international awards.

Our novels, our literature in general, have reached a high degree of human understanding in regard to the right to life, freedom, justice and peace, regardless of the conflicts and conflagrations that occur. Our creators have also assimilated the rights of women to their freedom. All these elements have contributed to Palestinian literature reaching a new level. Perhaps a good example of all this is the increase in the incursion of women



in our literature, with very interesting voices such as Sahar Khalifah or Leila Al-Atrach.

*In the Gaza Strip, where do you live, is there a "cultural policy"?*

The complex political situation constitutes a brake, a serious and destructive obstacle. Palestinian authors struggle with their own forces and possibilities to carry out their projects. Institutions are absent, they are focused on their political or daily debates. The destructive division between the West Bank and Gaza has had serious consequences, usually suffocating our literary projects. We only have to have faith in our personal projects and in the efforts of the writers and creators.

*What is literature for you?*

For me, literature represents in a general way the memory that illuminates and tries to address the world to presage the human right to life, to freedom, to dignity and to justice. Moreover, and more specifically in the particular, as a Palestinian, it seems to me that

literature is the container of our rights and at the same time it protects us from loss and disappearance. Literature is one of the most civilized and important instruments of our resistance.

*Syrian author Khaled Khalifa in an interview said: "I have always wondered about the ability of some writers to remain silent while the body parts of their own people are strewn about: murdered or drowned, refugees or prisoners; when a regime destroys a country and kills civilians, with impunity and for its own survival. This silence is disgrace itself, and it will follow those writers as much as those who justify crimes in any name whatsoever".*

What he says is true, without any discussion, and I fully agree with him. I believe that silence is death, especially if it is the silence of the writer, the poet, the narrator, the painter or the musician. All of them together are the best armed battalion in the war



**“ Silence is death, especially if it is the silent of the writer, the poet, the narrator, the painter or the musician. All of them are the best battalion in the war for justice**

for justice, for implementing and defending rights, consecrating freedoms and achieving dignity. That's why they should not shut up. I believe from the bottom of my heart that the word written by a poet or an author can have a much deeper effect than thousands of rifles.

The clamor of a book makes memory, forms public opinion. This is why the silence of a writer is a crime, it is collaboration with crime. You should never be silent in front of any type of violation of the human right to life, freedom, justice, dignity.

***We live in a world where the concept of the "other" is often used to spread fear towards the different. How can literature help to counteract these fears?***

It is very striking that Palestinian literature does not include treating the Jewish personality, or its image, as the real opponent that led us to exile, misery and suffering.

The image of the Jew remained present / absent until 1967, when the Palestinians saw this "other" devour what land was left to them.

It is precisely at that moment that his image appears as an occupier-usurper, without this containing contempt or racial discrimination towards his being Jews, rather the contrary. The Jews are that human mass that was decimated and dispersed in a horrible way in all corners of the world.

It is that mass that came to occupy Palestine and became the cause of its misfortune, of its dilemma.

For example the Palestinian intellectual Ghassan Kanafani in his novel "Return to Haifa" shows the Jew as a being who hates and despise injustice and rejects what his people do to the Palestinians, contrary to what we find in the Israelite novel, which has worked hard to represent the Arabs and the Palestinians as ignorant and cheating, beings without civilization. This is very evident in the works of Yael Dayan and León Uris.

As far as I am concerned, in my novel "Seasons of Love and Blood" I have represented the Jewish character as a very important character, a protagonist. I presented him as



a human being from beginning to end. This Jew was forced from Europe, this character suffers his presence in a society that oppresses the Palestinians.

I feel that every time the level of humanism grows, his rejection of the occupation projects increases and he is getting closer to the recognition of Palestinian rights. I see that our contemporary literature touches the human understanding of people's rights to life, to freedom, to justice and to peace. The "other" is a human being that needs to be understood and treated in all his human

value so that it lives with the right of any other human being.

***Unfortunately it is inescapable when speaking with a Palestinian not to refer to the political situation and confrontation in the Middle East.***

Things are very complex at all levels. Israel has imposed a siege on the Gaza Strip for ten years.

It prevents trips, receiving medical attention and prohibits the provision of basic products and services.

**I am convinced that a just solution for Palestine would serve to alleviate the acute conflicts and divisions that the world is experiencing, not just the Middle East**

It has launched three aggressions in eight years, in 2008, 2012 and 2014, destroying all the essentials for life, with the excuse of fighting Hamas, which it accuses of being a terrorist organization.

The situation in the Gaza Strip is catastrophic, the unemployment rate is 40%. The UN estimates that there will be no basic conditions of life in this territory by the year 2020. At the same time in the West Bank the population is experiencing daily agony at military checkpoints, between cities and towns, and also through the wall of racist segregation and all other measures that involve the occupation.

***The situation of the Palestinian prisoners continues to be terrible and there are many news about hunger strikes, protests.***

There are 7,500 Palestinian prisoners living in harsh conditions, really subhuman. Israel does not apply the international covenants of Geneva with regard to the rights of prisoners. I have personally suf-

fered these repressive measures. There were recently 1,800 prisoners who went on hunger strike for 41 days. Their demands were simple, merely human.

***Would a political solution to the Palestinian question serve to find a way out of the conflict that is bleeding the Middle East?***

Palestine and the Palestinian question have a great international symbolism. I am convinced that a just solution for Palestine would serve to alleviate the acute conflicts and divisions that the world is experiencing, not just our region.

The Palestinian question is a symbol for all people who fight for justice and peace in the world.

The Israeli occupation system must end and the Palestinians must achieve their right to freedom, to justice and to the establishment of an independent state, through their right to self-determination. This would be the prelude to achieving world peace.

***Gaza again under aggression, Israeli forces kill peaceful protesters ...***

In the Strip we barely enjoy electricity for four hours a day, we suffer from a supply of drinking water that is suffocating, our sea is polluted and even the Ministry of Health has prohibited to bathe in it. There is an incessant deterioration in the conditions of health care. Israel imposes a blockade on the importation of hundreds of commercial products.

None of these things lead us to peace. Expectations and possibilities that may at any time occur a social uprising are very strong and this will repercute even more on the catastrophic conditions in which we live. It is unavoidable a regional and international pressure to end the suffering of the Palestinian people. The situation in which we live in is a shameful stain for the world and the whole mankind.

***As well as a writer you are a teacher, what future awaits your students?***

The school, with its children, reflects the

society that surrounds us. In my school there are more than a thousand children, children of humble workers, of fighters, of martyrs, of imprisoned people. When I look around and start listening, my mind leads me to think about stories, my workplace is a very fertile ground and it greatly inspires me.

I deal with these children very closely and I feel happy when I get them to connect with the school library. I'm glad to see a child borrow a story or a book. I tell you with pride, the children at my school are very special.

***What are you working on at the moment?***

I am working on the writing of a new novel to which I have placed the provisional title of "Urban House". The theme is the experience of emigration to Europe. At the same time I'm writing another book whose characters are children: I want to title it "That's how they start!".

# HAITHAM HUSSEIN

## Memory is a weapon for Kurds

HAITHAM HUSSEIN WAS BORN IN 1978 IN AMUDA, SYRIA. HE TRAINED AS A TEACHER FROM THE INSTITUTE OF ARABIC LANGUAGE IN HASAKAH (1998) BEFORE GOING ON TO TEACH ARABIC FOR A YEAR. AFTER THAT, HE WENT ON TO SERVE MANDATORY MILITARY SERVICE, WHICH WAS TWO AND A HALF YEARS IN SYRIA. THIS TURNED OUT TO BE A MAJOR TURNING POINT IN HIS LIFE. DURING THE LAST WEEK OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, WHILE HUMANITY WAS PREPARING TO BID THE CENTURY FAREWELL AND RECEIVE ANOTHER, HAITHAM WAS SUFFERING FROM THE PAINS OF HIS BURNED BODY IN HOSPITAL IN THE CITY OF HOMS.

INTERVIEW BY J.M. ARRUGAETA - O. CASAGRANDE

*The incident you said, was a major turning point in my life.*

Indeed. During the last week of the twentieth century, while humanity was preparing to bid the century farewell and receive another, I was suffering from the pains of my burned body in hospital in the city of Homs. There, no one cared about my condition. No one treated me. My health condition got worse and I almost died as a result of the terrible medical negligence.

After several days, my father saved me and took me to military hospital in Damascus. I stayed there for months and after that I couldn't walk well for months. I still suffer the effects of burning on my legs, but actually the strongest suffering is the psychological effects. In fact, until now I have nightmares of fire chasing me. I am yet to recover fully from this trauma.

I lived in a Kurdish environment, and naturally, I learnt Arabic when I entered primary school. I began to write poetry, and then moved to the novel. I found the world of the novel wide enough to narrate part of our stories and tragedies. I found that thwarting the

crimes committed against us as Kurds in particular, and Syrians in general, needs a different style of confrontation. The novel was my choice of confrontation.

*What is your memory of you writing?*

The writing builds on a legacy of my memory: childhood, the society in which I grew up, and the communities that moved among them and witnessed as well as observed them closely. I draw many details from the memory of childhood, the memory of the city in which I lived and the cities that moved to later, whether in Syria, or outside it. Each city is present in my memory, and their details of daily life are brought in the stories and reflected through some characters. I see that memory is crystallized through the memory of reading. The accumulation of readings formed a certain formula of memories that I imagine myself that I lived or somehow witnessed. Then there is the imagination that gathers memories and creates memories of an imaginable future, which gives writing a renewed space and unlimited ability to sail between times and places. Sometimes I imagine myself hobnobbing with the Italian novelist Italo Calvino



(1923-1985) in his novel "Invisible Cities" traveling with him through the ruins of many cities, and discovering maps of the imagination that give the cities a lot of desired feelings and images. My past and future, visual and invisible cities are the furniture of memory and the reservoir of memories and imaginations.

**When did you actually decide or think you could be only a writer?**

When I chose to study Arabic language and literature, I was driven absolutely by a sense of my own world. I did not want to be a teacher but it was almost the only option after graduating. I found that teaching could secure my daily sustenance but I was looking for a different path for my life through literature. It called for a lot of reading, which I did. Reading was engineering my imaginable world that I was seeking, but, at the same time, it was countering to my real world as I felt alienated because I was not going to rush to gain more money through teaching Arabic particularly to students on private courses, or indulge in other works that would have taken me away from the world of writing which I was immersing into.

Following discharge from the military service after the severe burning incident, I could not

ably execute activities that needed physical strength or movement. I was confused thus resorted fully into literature as my real medicine and way to a better life. Therefore, I curved my destiny for a writer. I tried to maintain two parallel lines: the line of working in formal teaching for a monthly salary, and the line of writing which was an adventure in the sense that, at that time and largely so up to now, writing didn't accrue financial benefits in the Arab world in general and in Syria in particular.

As fate would have it, writing brought me hardships and problems with Syrian intelligence. They were interrogating me after each new book or article. They wanted me to stop writing and focus on teaching to stay safe within the country. There was hardly anything interesting or safe about the life they were talking about. Therefore, I can say that writing was my adventure and a trip to the depths of self-realization through my identity and who really I am.

**What are your influences, not just literary, but musical, cinematographic, cultural ...**

I think that everything I have encountered in my life contributes to the furnishing of the world of literature, writing and imagination. Every detail is enriching my inner world. I usually watch

**“Our life as Kurds in Syria, especially in Amuda, was a renewed journey of suffering, limitations and censorship”**

films and listen to music, especially classics. I am keen to stay close to the theater when I have the opportunity. Most importantly, I keep in touch with my people because they are the reservoir of stories and protagonists.

**You are Kurdish, how was life as a Kurd in Amuda? What limitation and censorship -not just and not only as a writer, but in your youth for example, how would you find Kurdish books, stories, music?**

Our life as Kurds in Syria, especially in Amuda, was a renewed journey of suffering, limitations and censorship. We could not act freely in anything. We were in a big prison and trapped in different details of our lives. We could not write or read in our own language. For years, it wasn't allowed talking in our Kurdish language in schools and government departments.

There has been a permanent insistence by the Syrian regime to inform the Kurds that they are strangers, foreigners, unwelcome, and questionable in everything they do. Publishing a book in Kurdish language considered a crime for the regime. The Syrian regime was working on the destruction of the Kurdish personality, Kurdish history and future. We were not allowed to hold a wedding or a party except with the security ap-

proval of the intelligence services. Kurds are being isolated from their reality, cities, history, music and literature. The intelligence tried to make them a schizophrenic group and far from their presence and personality.

**Related to my previous question, do you speak Kurdish? And do you write in Kurdish at all?**

Kurdish is my mother tongue, I live with it, I speak it with my daughters, wife and my family.

**As for Arabic, it is my mother tongue in writing and communication. I read in Arabic more than Kurdish, because my circumstances required that. I did not learn the Kurdish language in an academic way, but it is my mother tongue, which I can't live without it. In 2007, I translated short plays from Kurdish into Arabic.**

In fact, this translation was a response to an Arab chauvinist man. I was once in a literary gathering, and when he knew that I am a Kurd, he began indirectly to underestimate the Kurdish culture, claiming that we have no novelistic, cinematic and theatrical traditions.

And that was the moment when I was prompted to translate these short plays to assure him that Kurdish literature exists despite the brutal efforts of the security system in Syria to erase, marginalize, abolish and completely wipe it out.

**Have you suffered censorship for your work?**

There was always a nasty censorship of my work, whether novels or articles. After every press interview, there was investigation and interrogation by the intelligence of what, for example, I meant by this or that sentence. In addition, my books were banned partially in my country. Some were available in Damascus, because the Kurdish situation was different there, and the regime was convinced that Kurds would melt among the millions of people living in Damascus. Thus, they would not pose a threat to them. My books were available also in my city only in secret, or I distributed them through a network of friends.

**The Democratic Autonomy in Rojava accords a special place to education, language and culture for a country is enriched by cultural diversity. Indeed in Western countries, culture and education are the first to suffer from cuts ... Why is culture and education so important?**

I do not think that there is real autonomy in the Kurdish areas of Syria. There is a foggy transitional phase of contradictions. What we fear a lot is that this will affect an entire generation. Though some schools in the same city conduct teaching instruction in both Kurdish and Arabic, there is an air of chaos and confusion. Everyone is watching what will result from the ongoing war to be able to stabilize or change the situation in accordance with the formula that will be imposed in Syria in general and in the Kurdish areas in particular. I believe that education is gaining the greatest importance in the process of human building after the war is over.

**Going back to your own writing, how do you write? At home, outside, with music...**

In recent years I changed several countries,

and have moved to more than ten houses in about five years but I write permanently at home, and rarely do I write from cafes and libraries. Despite the noise by my two daughters (Heivy and Rose) at home, I have no other choice - currently.

I try to adopt myself and make their noise as rather a soothing musical background to my writing; though incidentally, I can't write well when I listen to music because my focus is going to what I listen. Surely, a cup of coffee must be on my side as long as I write.

**And in terms of a story? Does a character come first? Or is it the plot to come first? Tell us a bit about your creative process ...**

The outline of the story is almost crystallized in my mind. When I start writing, new threads enter in the line of writing; the stories are intersecting but supporting the main story that I would like to present.

Working on the novel industry needs precision, concentration, skill, patience, dedication and keenness on experimentation and renewal. These elements support what can be described as talent or creativity.

**Let's talk about your last novel. How did it come about? Why did you decide to set your novel in 2004, after the Qamislo uprising? What was the picture of Kurdish people in this uprising?**

I tried to present a part of contemporary Kurdish history in Syria, after the establishment of the State of Syria and its independence from the French colonization.

The Qamishlo Uprising came as an important event in this history. It marked a major turning point in the history of the relations between Kurds and Arabs in the Kurdish areas.



And the Syrian regime played a bad role to disintegrate its social components by wedging a conflict among them thus auguring well with the saying "the internal despot is not less bad than the foreign colonizer." For the Kurds, both are colonizers, and it is high time to get liberated from these colonial shackles.

**Why choosing a woman protagonist? Surely Kurdish women have been and are on the frontline against ISIS. How has the role and perception of women changed during the war?**

In fact, I have chosen a woman to be the protagonist of my novel as an attempt to give her the voice and capability to express herself in the atmosphere of pressure, repression and violence that she has been living and suffering from for decades. The protagonist in my second novel "Hostages of Memory" is also a woman. I think there is confusion in presenting the image of Kurdish woman in the Western and international media. I see that her image as a warrior on the frontline against ISIS as only for temporary employment. In my opinion, this image doesn't enhance the freedom of woman and does not mean that Kurdish woman is necessarily free. There is also a big deal of arbitrariness affecting Kurdish woman in the four parts of Kurdistan. You can find ignorance and denial of education and forced marriage and other restrictions. There is

a continuous tragedy in Kurdistan region of Iraq, especially in the continuation of female circumcision. This is what I find to be a historical crime against Kurdish woman.

**The novel is set in the suburbs of Damascus in 2004.**

There is more than one place in the novel. There is the small Kurdish town, which may be a model for many Kurdish towns, the capital, Damascus, and places in between, especially the suburbs of Damascus, where tens of thousands of displaced Kurds have been living in miserable conditions. They were used by many people, and a section of them was humiliated and insulted. The image of Kurds there was exported as that of backward, ignorant and poor people. I lived among these groups and experienced some aspects of their suffering.

**Can you share with us your experience of the war in Syria?**

I lived in my house in the countryside of Damascus, which was bombed and thus condemning me to displacement around mid-2012. There were difficult times of fear as clashes were a daily occurrence. We hoped that the war would not last long and that the international community would not accept the ongoing open massacre against us, but it turned out that we as Syrians



face our death, which is happening before the eyes of the world as a kind of reality television, and that there is no hope of a nearby possible intervention. The town was devoid of its population, so I was displaced with those who moved to the city of Amuda. I could not write a novel about the war, so I decided to write a research about the literature of war titled "The Novelist is Beating the Drums of War" (2014), in which I attempted to portray the tragedies of war as global writers from East and West described in their works, autobiographies and experiences.

**Memory you said is very important. Why?**

I always say that the memory is a weapon for us. It is history that illuminates our future. Memory is the point of hope that maintains our inner balance, and keeps it in connection with the past and the future. It keeps the connection of the humans with their land, people, customs and traditions. Imagine human beings without memory! What kind of humans we would be!

**In a world where identity appears to be in a deep crisis, how to reclaim and re-define this concept? What is identity to you?**

For me, identity is a constant and renewed question that I seek to approach and present my perspective about. Many live in a crisis of identity in their reality. They can't reconcile with the various colors that constitute their human identity.

I think that the difference crystallizes a more appropriate formula for identity. The identity for me means the human. Personally, I feel that I'm a mixture of integrated identities: a Kurd by birth but who lived in an Arab country. I speak Kurdish and Arabic fluently.

My parents are Muslims, and my paternal grandfather was Armenian, while another one was an Arab. I live in Britain now, and the mother tongue for my daughters is English in addition to Kurdish thus I carry multiple identities. There is nothing that can be configured as pure identity, but there is a comprehensive human identity, which is sacred. I see nothing is sacred but man. And there is nothing or any form that can forcibly impose itself upon this various identities.

**What role can culture play in resolving conflicts?**

I think culture plays an indirect role in resolving conflicts, and this role is very important in the long term. Culture contributes to the expansion of man's perception and creates for him living choices.

It gives us room to share everything with others and accept them as they are. Culture shows us that the world is much wider than what may be portrayed by a racist or fanatic. Intellectuals are the fuel of desired civilian life away from the absurdities and crimes of war.

**“ Many lives in a crisis of identity in their reality. They can't reconcile with the various colours that constitute their human identity ”**

**Do you feel part of a Kurdish generation of writers? And related to this, how would you define the Kurdish literary scene? In all four parts of Kurdistan.**

I feel that I belong to more than one generation. There is always an extension and continuity between the generations. I belong to the Kurdish writers who write in Arabic, but I write about my Kurdish life, my Kurdish reality and society within the diverse Syrian society, and recently, I wrote a biographical book about my experience as a refugee in Britain. For each part of occupied Kurdistan has a special literary scene, and unfortunately there is a kind of separation between the Kurdish writers in parts of Kurdistan. The communication revolution has helped to bring together what was separated by the years of accumulated division. There is an Iranian Kurdish generation, Iraqi Kurdish one, Kurdish generation in Turkey, in addition to a Syrian Kurdish generation. Within this circle, I belong to a generation of contemporary writers in the Arab world who are writing in Arabic. The image of the generation here is a picture of identity which is intertwined and complex.

**One last question: how was the relationship among reporters in Syria, both before and during the war (if it has changed at all)?**

The relationship between the writers in Syria was as tense as always are the various details

of Syrian life under the Assad regime. There are opposition writers who were forbidden to participate in any official activity and were not given an opportunity to appear or express themselves and their products. They went abroad and tried to write and publish in Lebanese and Arab newspapers. And among these writers themselves, you can find a kind of staleness and separation.

Also, you find another kind of writers who are coordinating with the regime. They were living privileged and considered as a formal face of Syrian cultural regime. The regime was also keen to export and market them abroad as secular intellectuals, and is now exploiting them in its war on the Syrian people to improve its ugly image and defense of its hateful sectarian policies.

The Syrian revolution came to be a historical point that introduced the writers to one another, away from the sensitivities and hatreds planted among them by the regime. Now there are Syrian writers residing abroad, carrying the concerns of their country and are keen to remember and remind Syrians and the world of what was happening and still happening in Syria. In fact, they are keen to maintain the Syrian identity open to the other. This identity can contribute to the restoration of building of the Syrian soul after the war.



## BIOGRAPHIES

**V.I.S JAYAPALAN**

Born in 1944, in the town of Uduville in the northern province of Sri Lanka, which is the Tamil homeland, known as Eelam. During the 1960s he was associated with radical anti-caste movements and with the Communist Party of Ceylon. He was also a prolific poet, and his poems and short stories have earned him to be considered amongst the finest Eelam Tamil poets of the modern era. He was the first student union president of Jaffna University in the late 1970s, during the early phases of the rising militancy among the Eelam Tamil youth against the national oppression and structural genocide levied by the unitary state. He was also associated with Eelam Tamil militancy, and his literary works reflected some of the dynamics wrought upon the Tamil people and homeland by the decades of national oppression and war.

**NAYROUZ QARMOUT**

Born in the Syrian capital, Damascus, on 14 april 1984. A palestinian refugee from her village, Deir Sneid (territories of 1948), she lived in the refugee camp of Yarmouk till she was 10, finishing there her primary school. She finished her studies in Gaza, where she is currently living, as she returned to Palestine at the end of 1994, after the Oslo Peace Agreement. She did her secondary school going from school to school in the Gaza Strip, especially those in the Refugee Camp of Jabalia and finally in the City of Gaza.

**REFAAT ALAREER**

Born in 1979 in the Gaza Strip, Shujaya. he was born and raised under occupation, which means "every move I took and every decision I made were influenced (usually negatively) by the Israeli occupation". he finished a BA in English language and literature from the Islamic University-Gaza in 2001, and a MA in Comparative Literature from University College London (UCL) in 2007. He is currently about to finish a PhD in English Literature at University Putra Malaysia (UPM). Refaat lives in Gaza with his wife and 6 kids. he teaches world literature and creative writing at the Islamic University-Gaza. As a kid, he says, "I grew up throwing stones at Israeli military Jeeps, flying kites, and reading".

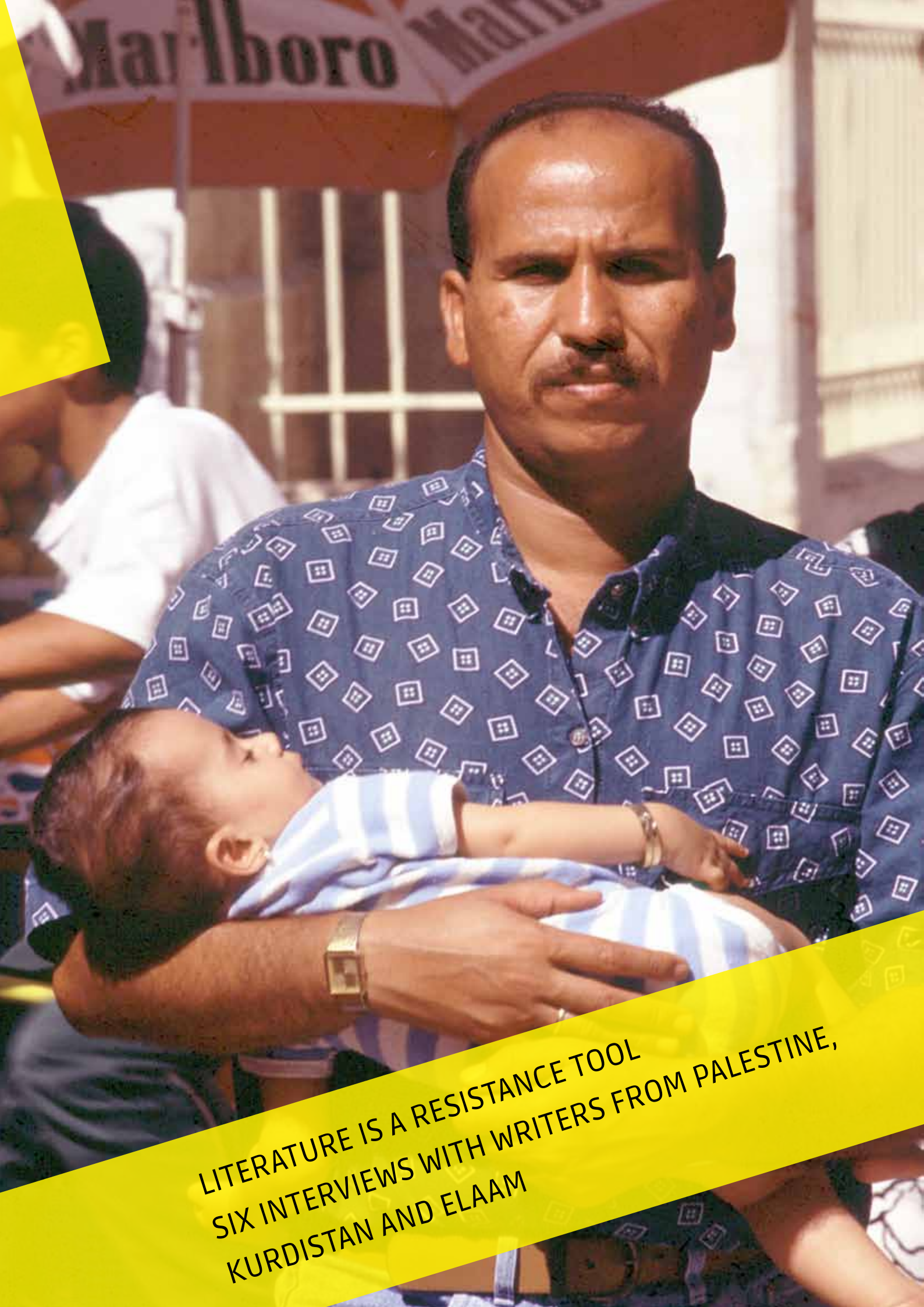
**TALAL A.S. ABU SHAWISH**

Born in 1967, in the refugee camp of Nusseirat, located in the center of Gaza, the same year in which Israel launched its "six-day war" occupying Gaza, Cisgiordania and other Arab territories. His childhood was spent in a family expelled from its land, "in the midst of difficulties, death, poverty and loss" as he said. The majority of the displaced people depended on the help of the UNRWA, which was created especially to help them. Talal began his studies in the schools of that institution, continued the pre-university in the occupied area, and later joined the Teacher Training Institute, of the same UNRWA, in Ramallah (West Bank), where he graduated in English. His solid and continuous literary work begins with a trilogy of stories and then passes to the novel. A literary career that he shares with translation, his work as a teacher and, of course, his identity as a Palestinian.

**HAITHAM HUSSEIN**

Born in 1978 in Amuda, Syria. he trained as a teacher from the Institute of Arabic Language in Hasakah (1998) before going on to teach Arabic for a year. After that, he went on to serve mandatory military service, which was two and a half years in Syria. this turned out to be a major turning point in HIS life. During the last week of the twentieth century, while humanity was preparing to bid the century farewell and receive another, Haitham was suffering from the pains of his burned body in hospital in the city of Homs. 2013, it is all male.





LITERATURE IS A RESISTANCE TOOL  
SIX INTERVIEWS WITH WRITERS FROM PALESTINE,  
KURDISTAN AND ELAAM