

Occupational Hazards

October 7, 2004

When I finally get Liana Badr on the mobile, she is in her car in the center of Ramallah, unable to reach her office or to turn and go back home. She sounds distraught: "They're invading the town. Going into the banks. The kids are throwing stones and there's word that one person has been killed..." My questions seem a bit theoretical, but I fax them through anyway.

"Yes, the occupation affects my writing," she replies. "I can't work for very long. It's as though concentration becomes claustrophobic. The situation controls you. It affects you like a fever; it's always there. It's very hard to concentrate on one thing. I find myself trying to work on several projects at once."

When I first met Badr, 10 years ago, I was impressed by her energy, her output, her looks, her will to optimism. When I saw her last year there were dark circles under her eyes, her words seemed speeded up, her energy more brittle. Badr was born in Jerusalem and brought up in Ariha (Jericho). In 1967 she fled with her parents to Amman, but Black September drove them out to Beirut in 1970. Then the Israeli invasion drove them out of Beirut in 1982. She lived in Damascus and Tunis and returned to Palestine after Oslo in 1994.

"The writer," she has said, "feels a need to create the world from the beginning every time-and that need is even stronger as you see your world vanishing in front of your eyes." Moving from city to city she produced four novels, three novellas, and three collections of short stories. But today, she finds writing particularly challenging: "The givens are very ugly. I'm obsessed now with the emotions that a person has as she tries to remain human under circumstances like these. To try to create aesthetic form under such ugly circumstances is a big challenge."

This is the challenge every Palestinian writer faces. Adania Shibli tells me she retreats into "a kind of autism." Shibli is the current most-talked-about young writer on the West Bank. Slight and tomboyish in jeans and cropped hair, she whizzed me around the streets of Ramallah in a small white car. She is from Al-Jalil (the Galilee) but says she cannot live in the "completely consumer society" of an Israeli city. She works with young artists in a Palestinian cultural foundation.

It was Friday when we visited. I wandered around the light rooms looking at posters, computers, magazines; the instruments of cultural activity. On a table were some books sent over by an organization that works with children from the camps. They were *My Story* books where the children set down in words and pictures their history and their wishes. Every one I picked up said it was very

difficult to see the future. Many of them wrote that they dream of becoming doctors, many asked, "Am I going to end up performing a martyrdom operation?"

Shibli describes sitting in front of a man "who's talking about how a missile hit his car and killed his wife and his three children and I am taking in the details of how much gray he's got in his hair. That's fiction. Reality now is too frightening, impossible to grasp. Yet you could say that fiction becomes a kind of perversion." Her short story "Performing with Many Particles of Dust" (2002) is a study of a young woman's day: she goes to the post office in Jerusalem to send a parcel, visits a friend in Ramallah, and considers whether to buy meat. That's all. But it takes the concentration of a tight-rope artist to maintain enough neutrality (or cool) to get through the day without mishap and it leaves you exhausted as you share the minutiae of the characters thoughts, counterthoughts and metathoughts.

Shibli's work is published in *Al-Karmel*, the literary magazine that has shared the Palestinian liberation movement's fortunes since it was started by the poet Mahmoud Darwish in Beirut in 1981. It is run by the writer and translator Hassan Khader and, since 1996, has been coming out of Ramallah. Khader has always been part of the Palestinian movement and has lived through its wars of the last three decades. *Al-Karmel* is an example of how Palestinian culture sees itself: strongly rooted in Arabic with an internationalist outlook. In the last six months it has published pieces by Herbert Baker, Russell Banks, J. M. Coetzee, Dwight Reynolds, José Saramago, Efrat ben-Zeev, as well as many Arab authors.

Darwish, still the magazines mentor, has said that the highest aim of the writer is to give his work an aesthetic that enables it to live in a different time and in a different consciousness. Khader feels that the current chaos instigates a fictional response: "It's seductive, but it's treacherous too." It poses the danger that the writing it produces will be too raw, too premature to survive the transplant into another consciousness. His strategy is to create a distance between himself and what's happening, "trying to let events cool down a little, sometimes allowing a space of time (not just an emotional or psychological space)-to assert itself-these are all formulae to lessen the risk."

Khader is an editor as well as a writer-under curfew, he once sent his final proofs to the printers in an ambulance-and *Al-Karmel* is still managing to come out twice a year. "When the [Israeli] soldiers trashed the Sakakini [Cultural Center]," he says, "my office got off lightly. Yet the papers were all over the floor and I still keep the draft of a poem with the print of a muddy boot on it. Maybe the soldier who trod on it didn't even notice, but he left his signature on that poem."

Is there room to write outside the situation? Darwish has famously asserted his right to write about things that are not Palestinian, his right to play, to be

absurd. Yet in his obituary of the Palestinian poet Fadwa Touqan, who died last November, he asks what the poet should do at a time of crisis, a time when he has to shift his focus from his inner self to the world outside, when poetry has to bear witness?

The poet Mourid Barghouti, after 30 years, finally succeeded in obtaining a permit to visit Ramallah, his home town, for two weeks in 1997. That journey became *I Saw Ramallah* (2000). "The problem with writing what is outside yourself," he says, "writing as part of a collective, is that this will not produce literature unless it has truly become part of yourself-it is no longer outside. It becomes part of your inner structure. There is no point in setting down events, anecdotes. But do events pass over us like mercury on paper? The moment of contact between the event and your soul, that's where literature is born."

Every Palestinian writer I spoke to insisted on their right to make a professional or aesthetic decision not to write about the situation, but it's a theoretical right. The events that make contact with the soul are all shaped by the occupation. "There is no bit of my life that is not under the Israelis' control," Badr says. "They control our health, they control our friendships. I wasn't permitted to go see Fadwa Touqan before she died in Nablus."

Perhaps that's why so many are turning to the essay, or to what they call "fragments": literary responses to events that, as writers, they need to speak to immediately without waiting for the desired transfiguration into fiction or poetry. Khader's *Splinters of Reality and Glass* (autumn 2002) examines what it's like to experience the occupation simultaneously on the streets and on television. It is a wonderfully articulated account of the dynamic relationship between, on the one hand, violence on or by Palestinians and, on the other, the media-whether Palestinian, Arab, or international: how the image has subsumed and then shaped the reality. Perhaps predictably, everyone I spoke to saw the militarization of the Intifada and the suicide attacks in negative terms. And yet, how often do the various forms of Palestinian civil resistance get into the western media?

I asked the Palestinian writers I spoke to how they viewed Israeli writers. Their immediate response was literary: Badr says she's read them all and thinks some of them are brilliant. She adds that she doesn't think they present a national phenomenon; the terms of reference of each writer connect up to different cultures. Barghouti says he was always moved by the poems of Yehuda Amichai. Khader praises David Grossman and Aharon Appelfeld. I ask if their perception of a writer was colored by the writer's political allegiance? Shibli tells me the writer she admires most among the Israelis is Shai Agnon, and "he wasn't particularly nice to the Palestinians."

I asked whether they saw any possible relationship between themselves and Israeli writers.

Khader told me that in 1993, when he was living in Tunis, he had translated Grossman's *The Smile of the Lamb*. Grossman contacted him to thank him and to offer his help with any linguistic problems. When Khader returned to Palestine after Oslo the two met at distant intervals. Their talk was of politics. In March 2000 Khader ran a long interview with Grossman in *Al-Karmel*. The interview, he wrote, had taken two years to set up, but he understood Grossman's reluctance: "When an Israeli (most often from the left) meets Palestinians and writes about them it is his version that will be published, and his sympathy for the Palestinians endorses his view of himself as a defender of certain values. ... Also the craft of writing persuades you that rendering someone in an imaginative linguistic discourse doesn't just give them a voice but captures them as well."

A few days after Camp David failed (October 2000), Grossman contacted Khader to organize a meeting between Palestinian and Israeli writers in Jerusalem: "He said [Ab] Yehoshua, [Amos] Oz and even Yitzhar Simlanski wanted to come. I agreed but said if we were to have a formal meeting we had to agree on some points. I wrote down: Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 lines, dismantling the settlements, Jerusalem one unified capital for two states, Israeli recognition of its moral responsibility for the problem of the Palestinian refugees, and I put in some explanatory notes and faxed it. A few days later he responded, saying my note read as though it had been written by a lawyer. So the meeting never happened."

Khader has written a book about the crisis of identity in Israeli literature: "Their works tell you more about them than the statements they give to the press. Oz, for example, is a declared lover of peace-maybe he really does love peace. But I find that his works are problematic in their representation of Arabs and Palestinians. Yehoshua transforms Jewish existential crises into narrative forms and looks for fictive solutions which are at odds with his declared political stands. He is supposed to be politically a hardliner, but he expresses a true sense of crisis and vulnerability in his work. Grossman went against the current and wrote a novel that was critical of the occupation and suffered the inevitable attacks. He showed considerable sensitivity in his fictional treatment of the Palestinians. I admire his honesty and I admire *See under: Love*, the wonderful book he wrote about the Holocaust."

Barghouti puts it more trenchantly: "They all carry a whiff of the establishment. Look at South Africa: the white writers who allied themselves with the liberation movement rejected apartheid, clearly and publicly. Some of them joined the ANC. As long as the Israeli artist subscribes to the official Israeli narrative, there is a great big hole in the heart of his alliance with the Palestinians. You cannot hold on to your ideological position and then join the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Palestinians. The ones with the kindly hearts-there are many of those, we meet them, we talk to them. Politically, it leads nowhere. It does them a lot of good-the Israelis-it eases their consciences, it pays dividends, it plays well on the world stage. It does nothing for the Palestinians."

Badr is more diplomatic: "It seems that the price of loyalty-of belonging-to Israel is very high. So you have writers who by any criterion are secular, and yet they posit that this land is theirs through a 2000-year-old covenant! Or take Yehoshua, he still believes in the politicization of religion-to allow for a Jewish state of Israel. Or take Oz, or Grossman; they believe themselves progressive but they are entranced by their collective mythology and lament the future of Zionism. Their literature is more developed than their ideology. We have to give them that they are genuinely seekers of peace, and democratic, and artists. At the same time they cannot let go of their Zionism. It's a great contradiction in their lives. So they write about the narrowly personal.

"Yehoshua in *The Lover* has an Arab character, Naim, a character that's really vivid. In an interview he said the character had run away from him. Brilliant writers imprisoned by ideological justifications. But in the end we have to say that they are for peace-of a kind."

I asked the Palestinian writers about the future. "My poems now," said Barghouti, "seem to be all about death. But then half the numbers in my phone book no longer answer."

"Terror and destruction," Badr replied, "and killing on both sides until Israel stops thinking in military terms. Until they become really democratic-not just among themselves but with everybody."

Khader was not optimistic: "Probably a more overt apartheid system which continues for years. But it shall eat away at the soul of the Israeli state."

Israeli writers, Khader says, are facing more and more a situation similar to that of French writers at the time of the Algerian war of independence and American writers at the time of Vietnam: "Should they take a stand against colonialism or should they agree to be a cosmetic instrument for it? They have not yet made up their minds."

Palestinian writers, on the whole, agree that in some ways they are in a less difficult position than Israelis. As Khader puts it, he may have problems with his passport but he has none with his identity.

Ahdaf Soueif is an Egyptian novelist, journalist, and university lecturer dividing her time between London and Cairo. She is the author of the novel *The Map of Love*, which was short-listed for the Booker Prize.