



# GAZA WRITES BACK: SHORT STORIES FROM YOUNG WRITERS IN GAZA, PALESTINE

Refaat Alareer (ed.), 2014, \$20, 204pp ISBN: 9781935982357

## BOOK REVIEW

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In September 2005 Israeli troops and settlers were withdrawn from Gaza after thirty-eight years of occupation and military control. The Oslo Accords of 1993 outlined that Gaza, together with the West Bank, should become part of the Palestinian Authority. A Palestinian state would potentially be formed with the two areas joined by an access strip. However the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF), having previously occupied the ground space of Gaza, were merely trans-located to the airspace, border crossings and territorial waters that surround it. A separation barrier now completely encircles Gaza's land border, with movement in and out controlled and monitored entirely by the IDF. A bureaucratic system of identity cards and travel passes is in operation, which serves to render travel in and out of the area practically impossible for many Palestinian residents. The oppression, domination and control, it seems, continues, with Gaza being dubbed 'the world's largest open air prison'. Residents suffer, along with regular power cuts, lack of medical supplies and basic goods, and huge unemployment, intermittent air strikes at the hands of the IDF. Between December 2008 and January 2009, Israel launched a twenty-three day full-scale military offensive, known as 'Operation Cast Lead', on Gaza which resulted in the deaths of more than 1,400 people, leaving many thousands injured. As bombs tore through the cities and refugee camps, much of the infrastructure was destroyed and many homes were levelled. It is this unimaginably harsh and distressing period which is negotiated and recorded in the recently published collection *Gaza Writes Back: Short Stories from Young Writers in Gaza, Palestine*. Fences, checkpoints, occupied airspace and military strikes, it would seem, cannot silence voices that demand that their stories are heard.

Edited by Refaat Alareer and written by fifteen young Gazan writers, *Gaza Writes Back* is a unique collection of twenty-three short stories, which represent each day of 'Operation Cast Lead'. Despite Arabic being their first language the majority of the stories were written in English as many of the writers are studying or have studied English at university. This could be viewed as a reflection of the need to write in English in order to reach a wider audience, or to succeed in a literary career; however for Refaat Alareer, who teaches Comparative Literature and Creative Writing at the Islamic University of Gaza, the collection allows for 'a much needed Palestinian youth narrative without the mediation or influences of translation or of non-Palestinian voices.' About half of the stories evolved from assignments undertaken in Refaat Alareer's classes, and although a number of his students

are regular bloggers, many had not written fiction before. In order to promote the collection the editor, together with two of the contributors, Yousef Aljamal and Rawan Yaghi, toured several U.S. cities during April 2014. They shared excerpts of their writing and took part in panel discussions. Contributor Sarah Ali was also due to join the tour. Yet despite having obtained the necessary travel permit from Israel, together with her U.S. Visa, she was prevented from leaving Gaza by the Israeli authorities. Fortunately Refaar Alareer and Yousef Aljamal were studying in Malaysia before the tour, whilst Rawan Yaghi was studying in the U.K., so their journeys were unaffected.

The stories range in style and length, with some lasting only a page or so. They negotiate a variety of themes. As with much Palestinian writing, concerns of ever-diminishing place and land are recurring motifs; however a number of other ideas and concerns are explored by the writers. Jehan Alfarra's *Please Shoot to Kill* and Rawan Yaghi's *Spared* each provide a disturbing snapshot of an already challenging daily life. We see the attempted normality of an evening of studying or a football match with friends interrupted by inconceivable violence. In *Please Shoot to Kill* we are presented with the reality of living subject to trade sanctions and a crippling lack of medical supplies. Hospital teams are forced to make impossible choices about which of their patients can live and which must die. Some of the writers, such as Nour El Borno, attempt to interrogate the psyche of Israeli soldiers. In *A Wish for Insomnia* she constructs a narrative of guilt by exploring the psychological suffering that torments an Israeli soldier: despite her own continued hardships she has the compassion to attempt to imagine what life may be like for those who commit atrocities against her. Rawan Yaghi's *A Wall* is a perfectly formed descriptive encounter with the Separation Wall. Yaghi offers an evocative description of the wall's aggressive imposition on the natural landscape as she writes that "the sky was half-eaten by the wall, and the sun was no better": the wall here dominates not only movement and freedom, but also access to light and air. The reader shares the protagonist's sense of frustration as their fragile human body attempts to destroy the wall: skin and bones are no match for this imposing concrete structure. Mohammed Suliman's *We Shall Return* is intensely critical of what he portrays as a consistently ineffective Palestinian leadership and a lack of input from the wider Arab world. The protagonists of his story attempt to make a decision about their future sixty-five times, with each of their failed attempts representing a year since the *Nakba* (the 'Catastrophe') of 1948.

Given its subject matter, this text is, of course, not an 'easy read'. Each of the stories challenges, disturbs, and unsettles the reader in its own way. The brevity of the stories often imitates the immediacy and urgency the writers must have felt during 'Operation Cast Lead', as well as reflecting the hand-to-mouth, day-to-day existence which many Gazans endure. However the text is not necessarily without fault. The stories are works of fiction but, on the whole, the chosen subject matter positions the contributors as witnesses to Israeli military violence, oppression and occupation first and foremost, and as writers second. The result of this is that some of the writers struggle to balance the political messages they wish to convey with their literary creativity.

Although there is a substantial Palestinian literary heritage available in both original English and in English translation, this text is one of the few to showcase work by writers from Gaza rather than the West Bank, or the Palestinian diaspora: the location from which authors such as Raja Shehadeh and Mourid Barghouti have written. *Gaza Writes Back* follows in the footsteps of recent texts from other Gazan writers such as Izzeldin Abuelaish and Raba'i Al-Madhoun. Abuelaish's memoir *I Shall Not Hate* (2011), similarly provides an insight into the experiences and aftermath of enduring 'Operation Cast Lead', during which he lost three of his daughters and his niece, whilst Al-Madhoun's *The Lady from Tel Aviv* (2013), a fictional text, is rooted in the author's own experiences of returning to Gaza after

nearly forty years of enforced exile. Such texts, together with *Gaza Writes Back* provide a humanity to an often faceless and brutal situation, documenting the daily lives and suffering of the people of Gaza.

The writers that have contributed to this collection represent a new generation of Palestinians who refuse to allow continued Israeli occupation to attempt to silence them. Despite a lifetime of confinement and oppression, they now have the tools to counteract attempts to block their voices. Many of these young writers, connected to the world via social media, blogs and email, are regularly sharing and discussing their experiences of living under occupation with the wider international community. Cyberspace allows them to access the rest of the world, a world which they are physically prevented from exploring, and provides a space for unmediated discussion and the sharing of stories. As one contributor, Sameeha Elwan, notes, cyberspace is a newly centralised space, one in which ‘the act of storytelling is constantly in process’ as it ‘provides scattered Palestinians with a place which holds new possibilities of forging new ways of belonging or place-making.’ For these young writers, cyberspace offers limitless possibilities together with the opportunity to communicate with displaced Palestinians living in the Diaspora. It provides the potential for the development of alternative forms of community that continue to resist occupation in innovative ways.

Readers of *Gaza Writes Back* will be rewarded with a greater understanding of the challenges faced by those who are essentially trapped in Gaza. Each story is crafted differently and each stands as testament to the importance of creativity and storytelling in the face of oppression, misinformation and military control. These are stories about human beings; about mothers, fathers, children and friends, who would like to have the opportunity to live their lives without the persistent threat of attack. They expose details of Gazan life, providing insights into issues such as class divide and the struggles of family life, insights which cannot be construed from international news reports. In doing so they seek to inform international perceptions of Gaza and the people who live there. In deed given the IDF’s current military assault on Gaza, dubbed “Operation Protective Edge”, this text remains intensely significant and particularly important as a means to provide insight into the effects of such action on a population. Such messages of hope and resilience ‘write back’ to an occupation which continually attempts to both suppress Palestinian cultural production and to deny Palestinian existence. They highlight the importance of storytelling in not only humanising the Palestinian individual but also in contributing to the construction of a wider national narrative. Indeed, through the act of recording and sharing their individual experiences, these writers contribute to a ‘bottom up’ creation of Palestinian national narrative. In the words of editor, Refaat Alareer, “Gaza writes back because storytelling helps construct Palestinian national identity and unity”. Whilst such stories continue to be written, told, and crucially, heard, Palestine will continue to exist.

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