

FESTIVAL REVIEW

Palestine Writes and the Politics of Language

Review by Ahmad Abu Ahmad



Abstract

Palestine Writes literature festival (Philadelphia, September 2023) offered a rich space to vocalize and vitalize the multitude of Palestinian experiences across historical Palestine and throughout the *shatat*, and to broaden our commitments as Palestinians in literature and beyond. The festival, bravely held despite a vicious and prolonged attack to defund it and suppress its voices, hosted a multitude of literary and scholarly voices that addressed questions of collectivity, creativity, and fragmentation, with the politics of language, translation, and audience being a recurring theme for panelists. From investigating the potentialities of writing exile, displacement, and critique to the realities of translating Palestine, the festival identified the urgency of themes such as (mis)translation and bilingualism, and the role linguistic subversion plays in inhabiting and inscribing Palestine across cultures. The festival, and despite the general absence of a cohesive inquiry into the question of Palestinian literature written not by, or for, Anglophones, has nonetheless stirred conversations about national-symbolic and thematic clichés, the (re)creation of Palestine through language, the conditions of writing in/ from exile, and the collectivity of the Palestinian wound. In this review, Ahmad Abu Ahmad interrogates the linguistic realities for Palestinian authorship and their audience, and invites us to rethink the relationship between Palestinians, their lived experiences, and language.

Keywords

Festival; literature; language; linguistic; translation; *shatat*; bilingualism; Hebrew; exile; subversion.

In September 2023, Philadelphia hosted the Palestine Writes literature festival, a celebration of literature, knowledge, art, and innovation that vocalized and vitalized the experiences of Palestinians around the world.¹ This celebration was bravely held despite a vicious and prolonged attack to defund it and suppress its voices, marking yet another effort to live, learn, and teach Palestine in the face of academic and other institutional and political censorship.

The urgency to “de-exceptionalize” Palestine and embrace the multitude of Palestinian experiences permeated the festival. Organizers and participants emphasized the necessity of decentering our sorrows as Palestinians, and committing to giving and standing in solidarity with other struggles without the expectation of reciprocity. This was made clear from the opening remarks of festival organizer Susan Abulhawa, which acknowledged the festival’s presence on the ancestral homelands of the Indigenous Lenni-Lenape (or Delaware nations), the ongoing fight against gentrification in Philadelphia, and the first panel on solidarity and allyship with Gary Younge, Roger Waters, and Viet Thanh Nguyen.² As Huda Fakhreddine eloquently put it, by understanding Palestine as belonging to Palestinians as well as to all who take it to be “a compass, a direction, [and] a moral stand,” we not only expand the meanings of being Palestinian, but also broaden our commitments as Palestinians.

This is a commitment, first and foremost, to our varied experiences and visions of and for Palestine and Palestinian literature. Maurice Ebileeni identified a common ground of historical and political landmarks that Palestinians have formed and recognize as a collective, although forcibly dispersed and displaced, and at the same time attested to the difficulties of grasping how Palestinians across historical Palestine and throughout the *shatat* (the forced exile or scattering; diaspora) have developed differently.³ Ebileeni introduced the late Palestinian-Danish poet Yahya Hasan (1995–2020) as an example of the disparities in the sociopolitical conditions and structures that Palestinians maneuver, and the discrepancies in the possibilities for critique. Hasan, who was born into a Palestinian family in Denmark, occupied an intermediate position between languages, political sensibilities, and cultural belonging. Caught in socio-economic precarity and in a violent limbo of fragmentation, Hasan unleashed his rage both at the violence he experienced at home and publicly, and the incessant violence against Palestinians – a violence that he experienced second-hand. He writes in his poem “Childhood”:

AND ONE LAST BLOW ON THE ASS ON THE WAY OUT THE DOOR
HE TAKES BROTHER BY THE SHOULDERS STRAIGHTENING HIM UP
KEEPS BEATING AND COUNTING
I LOOK DOWN AND WAIT FOR IT TO BE MY TURN
MOM SMASHES PLATES IN THE STAIRWAY
MEANWHILE AL-JAZEERA TRANSMITS

HYPERACTIVE BULLDOZERS AND RESENTFUL CORPSES
GAZA STRIP IN THE SUNSHINE
FLAGS BEING BURNT
IF A ZIONIST DOESN'T RECOGNIZE OUR EXISTENCE
IF WE EXIST AT ALL
WHEN WE HEAVE WITH PANIC AND PAIN
WHEN WE GASP FOR BREATH OR MEANING
IN SCHOOL WE AREN'T ALLOWED TO SPEAK ARABIC
AT HOME WE CAN'T SPEAK DANISH
A BLOW A SCREAM A NUMBER⁴

However, Hasan's estrangement and rage remains largely inaccessible to the non-Danish reading public, including the majority of Palestinians, also because it has not been widely disseminated in Arabic or English translation.

The question of language and audience was a recurring theme for panelists throughout the festival, yet, and apart from the conversation with Ebileeni, a cohesive inquiry into the question of Palestinian literature written not by, or for, Anglophones remained largely absent. My aim here is to challenge the primacy of Anglophone-Palestinian texts not only to the festival and its role in recognizing and disseminating the works of Palestinians from the global *shatat*, but also to the general Palestinian readership whose attention rarely extends to the writings of Hasan, Karim Kattan (in French), Sayed Kashua (in Hebrew), or Palestinian-Chilean author Lina Meruane (in Spanish):

Y entonces le digo que de ahí proviene una parte de mí. Le pregunto si conoce mi apellido. Le menciono otros apellidos palestino-chilenos y a continuación le cuento que en Chile vive la mayor comunidad palestina fuera del mundo árabe. Que los primeros palestinos inmigraron desde cuatro ciudades cristianas de Cisjordania. Que a Chile siguen llegando los suyos, sólo que ahora vienen en calidad de refugiados. Que los últimos en llegar venían de Iraq. Ahora son todos musulmanes, como usted, le digo. Y le digo además que aunque la comunidad es fuerte yo fui criada como una chilena común y corriente. Veo desde atrás su cabeza asintiendo a todo lo que digo, pero cuando llego a la última línea Jaser da vuelta y me corrige. Usted es una palestina, usted es una exiliada.⁵

And then I tell him that part of me originates there. I ask him if he recognizes my last name, but he has never heard it before. I mention other last names from the colonia and then I tell him that Chile has the largest Palestinian community outside the Arab world. That the first Palestinians emigrated from four Christian cities in Transjordan. That their successors are still coming to Chile. That the most recent emigrants

were fleeing Iraq. Now they're all Muslim, like you. They're all refugees, and my country takes them in, and maybe in time they'll become like regular Chileans. Like me. From behind I see Jaser's head nodding at everything I say, but when I get to this last phrase, he turns around and corrects me. You are Palestinian, you are living in exile.⁶

What potentialities of writing exile and critique by Palestinians exist beyond the linguistic and cultural boundaries of Arabic and English? Palestinian writers in Arabic such as Adania Shibli, Majd Kayyal, and Sahar Khalifah affirm for Ebileeni the importance of social criticism in Arabic and Arabic's ability to (better) accommodate self- and social critique. In contrast, writers in English are for him more likely to be constrained by the necessity to balance critique with the risk of aggravating biases against Palestinians (or Arabs more broadly), and thus to reduce or abstain from critique all together. In addition, they must also *explain* Palestine via symbols and themes that at times border clichés, so their texts might be received and understood by English readers as Palestinian. "To reach English," writes Fady Joudah, "Palestine passes through a corrupting prism, and is often received as ethnography."

For some readers this positionality mobilizes solidarity. For others it confines Palestinians to the framework of benevolence toward the pulverized... Enter Palestine in "original" English. The overlap zone with Palestine in Arabic is not small, but the empathy field in English is malnourished. Questions of audience further dilute Palestine in the domestic affairs of empire. As subject of foreign policy and as local newcomer, not yet a bona fide American, Palestine in English is doubly distanced.⁷

Does reaching English thus means complying, by and large, with the clichés of national symbols and dogmas from which Mahmoud Darwish orders his orators to refrain in *Jidariyya* (2000): "So wait Death til I have settled the funeral arrangements in the clear spring of my birth/ and have forbidden the orators to lyricise again/ about the sad land and the steadfastness of figs and olives in the face of time's armies."⁸ Or is it our duty as Palestinian readers and scholars to urge the Anglophone-Palestinian writer to mitigate the distance to Palestine by, in the words of Elias Khoury, "eating the oranges":

You should have eaten the oranges, because the homeland is something we have to consume, not let consume us. We have to devour the oranges of Palestine and we have to devour Palestine and Galilee ... We have to eat every last orange in the world and not be afraid, because the homeland isn't oranges. The homeland is us.⁹

For Ahmad Almallah, to write in English is to probe one's positionality in a language that dismisses you.¹⁰ Almallah spoke about infusing his poetry with Arabic and practicing (mis)translation as ways to complicate the reading experience and

inscribe Palestine *on his own terms*. This refugeehood in language, as described by Fakhreddine, works “to recreate the whole world as Palestine,” an imagination that also corresponds with Lena Khalaf Tuffaha’s proposal to subvert language for one’s own purposes:

In my language
the word for loss is a wide-open cry,
a gaping endless possibility.
In English loss sounds to me like one shuddering blow to the heart,
all sorrow and absence hemmed in,
falling into a neatly rounded hole,
such tidy finality.
In my language
the word for loss is a long vowel stretched
taut and anchored between behemoth consonants, reverberating –
a dervish word
whirling on itself
in infinite emptiness,
the widening gyre,
the eternal motion of grief.¹¹

Novelist Isabella Hammad stressed that writing in English is not just intended to communicate and disseminate Palestinian literature for/in the West, but also for the global English-speaking audience.¹² Hence, and while considering her primary audience to be Palestinian, the English novel enables her not merely to narrate Palestine to the Anglophone reader, Palestinian (or in Palestine) or otherwise, but to also explore the condition of exile through the novel as a form. In *Ra’aytu Ramallah* (1997), Mourid Barghouti asks: “And what about entire generations, born in exile, not knowing even the little that my generation knows of Palestine?”¹³ To be conditioned by exile, Hammad proposed, is to gain an extraordinary perspective through a deeply uncomfortable source, unfamiliar and bewildering to those who are rooted in place.¹⁴ Novelist and filmmaker Saleem Haddad attested that while his multiple positionalities as a displaced writer limit his authority to write from a single position, they enrich his capacity to simultaneously inhabit, and write, a multitude of places/positions.

Inhabiting exile in English also provokes questions on the general conditions of translating exile and Arabic literature more broadly. In a panel dedicated to translation, maia tabet, Nariman Youssef, and Mohammad Sawaie spoke of the intricacies of navigating an Arabic text into English translation. Sawaie spoke of finding intimacy in the source text and conveying it not through literal translation but by utilizing linguistic and cultural components native to the host culture. For Youssef, translation begins with articulating the source text’s impact on her as a reader, and then working

toward recreating this impact in English. tabet noted the risk of triggering unconscious biases in the reader and the difficulty of conveying cultural specificities into English, sometimes leading her to resort to transliteration and glosses.

Although tabet, Youssef, and Sawaie engaged with the question of *how to translate*, it remained unclear, during the panel and the festival more broadly,¹⁵ if there is anything unique about the reproduction of Palestinian literature in translation, whether from Arabic or other languages. How to translate the colonial violence, permanent refugeehood, protracted death, and ungrievable lives in Palestinian literature? How to translate the narratives of erasure, ruptures, contradictions, silence, and cries? And how to translate the memories, dreams, love, and even sarcasm against the daily realities of settler colonialism and national contestation? Mahmoud Shuqair spoke about the Palestinian collective wound as inspirational to his writing and the realities of its incessant multiplication.¹⁶ While this wound, I would argue, is more palpable to the Arabic reader and the Arabic language due to their sociopolitical, historical, and linguistic proximity to it, it is critical to probe its conveyance into languages including, but not limited to, English. While acknowledging the language restrictions of the festival being held in North America, examining the translation of Palestinian literature into languages other than English remains nonetheless crucial to understanding the malleability of languages to accommodate Palestinian narratives.

Sawaie quoted Fanon: “To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture.”¹⁷ What does it mean, as Palestinians, to take on different worlds, different cultures? In contrast to English, often seen as a “universal language” for writing exile and a primary language for translating Palestine, Hebrew, for instance, presents a more complicated linguistic reality for Palestinians and Palestinian literature. As a speaker of both Arabic and Hebrew by virtue of being a Palestinian born in Israel, and notwithstanding the limited number of bilingual speakers of both Arabic and Hebrew among the festival’s attendees, I am convinced that a cohesive investigation of the linguistic realities for Palestinian authorship and their audience remains incomplete without accounting for Hebrew. Witness its infiltration into Palestinian life and its institutionalization as a requisite for Palestinian survival (in Israel, but also in East Jerusalem and primarily for workers from the West Bank and Gaza), in addition to the ways Palestinians use Hebrew to subvert Israeli/Zionist culture and disrupt its boundaries.

The prospect of a productive engagement with the politics of Arabic and Hebrew offers an opportunity to disrupt temporal and national, in addition to linguistic, boundaries. How might a return to the linguistic and literary scene of nineteenth century Palestine allow us to examine different conditions of contact between Arabic and Hebrew? Must Palestinian literature remain locked into the antagonistic relationship with Hebrew established by Zionism?¹⁸ Ebileeni makes the case, for example, that the first Palestinian novel is *Nikmat ha'avot* (Vengeance of the Fathers), published in Hebrew in 1927 by Ishaq Shami, an Arab Jew born in Hebron.¹⁹ How does this expand our perception of what constitutes a Palestinian text? Like French for Kateb Yacine, Hebrew for (many) Palestinians is also a “spoil of war.” How does writing Palestinian literature in, or translating it into, Hebrew disrupt both our conception of Palestinian

literature and the presumed Jewishness/Israeliness of the Hebrew language?²⁰

The variety of Palestinian experiences is not only a question of the languages into which Palestinian texts are born, written, or translated, but also a responsibility, and an invitation, to thoroughly engage with Palestinian literature as intrinsically cross-lingual and cross-cultural, across historical Palestine and throughout the *shatat*. Language is not just a tool for conveying or expressing Palestinian experiences, but is intrinsic to the daily lived experiences of Palestinians.²¹ There is certainly room to expand and deepen our thinking about the relationship between Palestinians and language, and to the extent that Palestine Writes offers a venue to do so, its significance and potential extends well beyond the literary.

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Endnotes

- 1 The literature festival was held at the University of Pennsylvania, 22–24 September 2023.
- 2 This panel was moderated by Rachel Holmes.
- 3 Ebileeni was in conversation with Susan Muaddi Darraj about his latest book *Being There, Being Here: Palestinian Writings in the World* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2022).
- 4 Yahya Hasan, “Childhood,” trans. Jordan Barger, online at (actionbooks.org) bit.ly/3SSqwxB (accessed 4 November 2023).
- 5 Lina Meruane, *Volverse Palestina* (2013), 27–28.
- 6 “Andrea Rosenberg translating Lina Meruane – *Becoming Palestine*,” online at (drunkenboat.com) bit.ly/3QUSveB (accessed 4 November 2023).
- 7 Fady Joudah, “My Palestinian Poem that *The New Yorker* Wouldn’t Publish,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 7 June 2021, online at (lareviewofbooks.org) bit.ly/3QvRp7r (accessed 5 November 2023).
- 8 Mahmoud Darwish, *Mural*, trans. Rema Hammami and John Berger (Verso, 2017), 42.
- 9 Elias Khoury, *Gate of the Sun*, trans. Humphrey Davies (Picador, 2007), 25, originally published in Arabic as *Bab al-Shams* (1998).
- 10 Almallah was in conversation with Lena Khalaf Tuffaha and Nada Matta (moderator) about his second poetry collection *Border Wisdom* (2023).
- 11 Lena Khalaf Tuffaha, “Dhayaa’,” in *Water and Salt* (Red Hen Press, 2017). Tuffaha read from her latest poetry collection *Kaan and Her Sisters* (2023).
- 12 Hammad was in conversation with Saleem Haddad about her recently released novel *Enter Ghost* (2023).
- 13 Murid al-Barghuthi, *I Saw Ramallah*, trans. Ahdaf Soueif (Anchor Books, 2003), 97.
- 14 Hammad was in conversation with Sahar Mustafah, Hala Alyan, and Saleem Haddad, moderated by Alexa Firat.
- 15 It was not feasible to attend every panel, so I write based on my experience of those panels I did attend and the descriptions of panels that I did not.
- 16 In conversation with Ibrahim Nasrallah, Huzama Habayeb, and Mahmoud Muna, moderated by Huda Fakhreddine.
- 17 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (Pluto Press, 1986), 38.
- 18 This is vital not only to examine how a securitized Arabic was prioritized to ensure the advancement of the settler-colonial telos and, at the same time, undermine Palestinian sovereignty and govern the native Arabic-

speaking population, but to also understand the conditions of (positive) contact between Arabic and Hebrew. My attempt here is to probe Hebrew prior to becoming the national language of the settler-colonial movement that emptied “the land of its [Palestinian] inhabitants,” and ensured the irreversibly of their expulsion. Antun Shamma, quoted in Levy, *Poetic Trespass: Writing between Hebrew and Arabic in Israel/Palestine* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 25.

- 19 See Salim Tamari, “Ishaq Shami and the Predicament of the Arab Jew in Palestine,” *Mountain against the Sea: Essays on Palestinian Society and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008). Shami’s text remains a product of the local (and regional) environment, written by an Arab Jew about the native Palestinian population, despite being entangled in the polemics of the local-ethnographic and the universalistic-artistic, that is, the clash “between the need

to speak from an ethnic Arab (Jewish) position and the national [read Zionist] canon’s universalistic dictates,” as articulated by “Second Aliyah writer and critic Yosef Chaim Brenner, who occupied a position of unequalled influence during the early years of Shami’s career.” Hannan Hever, “Yitzhak Shami: Ethnicity as an Unresolved Conflict,” *Shofar* 24, no. 2 (Winter 2006): 125, 132.

- 20 Texts that have been written or translated into Hebrew – not without certain controversies – include but are not limited to authors like Shamma, Shuqair, Nasrallah, and Khoury.
- 21 As such, one might also consider the use (or absence) of ‘*amiyya* (vernacular Arabic) in Palestinian texts, as well as the dialectical differences among Palestinians, and bilingual texts such as Emile Habibi’s *al-Waqa’i’ al-ghariba fi ikhtifa’ Sa’id Abi al-Nahs al-Mutasha’il* (The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessoptimist) (1974), which uses Arabic and Hebrew, or Almallah’s *Border Wisdom* (2023), which uses Arabic and English.