

'If I Must Die... Let It Be a Tale': How Palestinian Writing Fights Erasure

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Stories are vital for those denied the right to have memories, a history, a home. In the resistance against oblivion, Palestinian writers have a crucial role to play

Art has always played an essential role in [Palestinian](#) resistance to [Israel's](#) attempts at symbolic and factual erasure. Palestinians protest, testify and document creatively through stories, music and videos circulating on social media, among other things.

However, Palestinians cannot tell their stories unhindered. Palestinian perspectives are marginalised, questioned, or supplanted by Israeli ones.

European guilt for the Shoah and the persistence of the Zionist myth of the return to the promised land have strongly hindered different perspectives on Israel's establishment in the Global North.

Israel's dominant narrative has overruled the reality of Palestinian victims of the [Nakba](#), i.e. the transformation of historic Palestine into the state of Israel, established on 78 percent of its territory.

"We were the people dislodged from the land. We were the indigenous inhabitants who were thrown out to make way for a Jewish state," wrote [Edward Said](#) in *Power, Politics and Culture*. "We are, in fact, victims of the victims."

Palestinians must consent to Israel's claims to the land and the rewriting of history.

"I decided to become the poet of Troy because Troy did not tell its story," wrote Palestine's national poet, Mahmoud Darwish, in [Palestine as Metaphor](#). "And thus far we have not told ours, despite the accumulation of our works."

Suppressing voices

Israel systematically tries to conceal its crimes by [covering up](#) traces, fabricating lies and suppressing voices.

This dynamic of obfuscation and obstruction is one of Israel's characteristic strategies today. As in the previous [Gaza wars](#), the Israeli government justifies the bombings of hospitals by claiming that Hamas uses them for military operations.

Convincing evidence it does not provide, nor does it allow international investigations.

It also denies that it carries out intentional attacks on civilians.

"They did not mean to kill the children./ They meant to./ Too many kids got in the way of precisely/ imprecise one-ton bombs/ dropped a thousand and one times/ over the children's nights." Fady Joudah.

A phrase that is commonly heard is that “in Gaza, there are no innocent civilians”, as if Hamas’ presence in Gaza, or even expressing support for it, justifies the deliberate killing of civilians.

Erasure - the concealment of crimes, documentation and narratives - was an important strategy even at the beginning of Israel’s colonisation of historic Palestine.

“My general impression is that for most Israelis, their country is invisible,” wrote Said in 2007’s *From Oslo and Iraq to the Road Map*. “Being in it means a certain blindness or inability to see what it is and what has been happening to it.”

That erasure occurred in various forms, including the destruction of Palestinian villages, towns, infrastructure and culture, as well as through epistemic violence.

Israel’s ingenious [policy of erasure](#) is reinforced by the tacit complicity of political, social and academic circles in the West.

“There have been new states built on the ruins of old,” Said wrote in his 1984 essay *Permission to Narrate* published in the London Review of Books. “The unique thing about this situation is Palestine’s unusual centrality, which privileges a western master narrative, highlighting Jewish alienation and redemption.”

Transformed and mutilated

A recent example is the cancel culture in Germany. This led the organisation LitProm to cancel the award ceremony for [Adania Shibli](#)’s novel *A Minor Detail* (2020), originally scheduled for the Frankfurter Buchmesse in October 2023, in order to prioritise Jewish and Israeli narratives.

“I would have liked to tell you the story/ of a nightingale that died/ I would have liked to tell you/ the story.../ had they not slit my lips.” Samih al Qasem’s poem *Slit Lips*, published in the anthology *Victims of a Map*.

In Austria, Palestinian-French writer [Karim Kattan](#) was asked during a conference not to address the current political situation. This incident confirmed Kattan’s suspicion that Palestinian thinking, writing and living are sometimes tolerated but “never welcomed”. Palestinian narratives have a right to exist if they fit into rigid frames.

Historic Palestine shrank; it was transformed and mutilated.

Adania Shibli in [Minor Detail](#) wrote: “It’s been a long time since I’ve passed through here, and wherever I look, all the changes constantly reassert the absence of anything Palestinian: the names of cities and villages on road signs, billboards written in Hebrew, new buildings, even vast fields abutting the horizon on my left and right.”

While Israel endorsed the principle of “land for peace” during the peace process, it continued to oppose the Palestinian right to self-determination. Through settlements, the construction of the wall and the policy of fragmentation, successive Israeli governments have made a Palestinian state impossible.

“There is no light/ to help me see/ the boundaries of my state:/ my non-existent state.” Mosab Abu Toha, *Things You Might Find Hidden in My Ear, Poems From Gaza*.

Art against oblivion

All attempts at erasure notwithstanding, Palestine has not disappeared. It is both an idea and a reality that is indestructible.

Palestinian artistic production is crucial to that resistance. Through art, Palestinians seek to make visible underexposed and erased facts and expose distortions of the truth.

“It is easy to blur the truth with a simple linguistic trick: start your story from ‘Secondly.’ Yes, this is what Rabin did. He simply neglected to speak of what happened first. Start your story with ‘Secondly,’ and the world will be turned upside-down,” wrote Mourid Barghouti in *I Saw Ramallah*.

Especially when official sources are scarce or manipulated, counter-documentation through art and other alternative channels is essential. NGOs and research groups have an important role to play: they provide forensic evidence, refute Israel’s truth claims and foreground victims.

“They tried to make us invisible: the bullets silenced us, without fear they disappeared into our flesh.” Zeina Azzam, *Ferguson and Gaza*, in *Gaza Unsilenced*.

But literature is also invaluable in this respect. Fiction makes absences visible, and highlights and depicts what is not officially recorded. It is a way to break the silence.

The more their rights have been taken away, the more important language has become for Palestinians. For those who are part of a refugee community, “living in words is not a metaphor”, as [Tamim al-Barghouti](#) put it during a 2016 talk at Oxford University.

Language and stories are no luxury for those who have been denied the right to have memories. Writers cannot undo disenfranchisement, but they can save experiences and narratives from oblivion.

They also have an important part to play in nurturing political engagement. A well-known example is the resistance literature of which Palestinian writer [Ghassan Kanafani](#) was the founder.

Because of his political involvement with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and his support for armed resistance, Kanafani was killed by the Israeli Mossad in 1972.

Kanafani's novel [Men in the Sun](#) (1962) is a stinging critique of neighbouring Arab countries abandoning the Palestinians to their fate. He also thought Palestinians should stand up for themselves more and raise their voices.

Transformed land

Of course, there are also many Palestinian writers who consider engaged art to be a straitjacket. Some writers, such as Adania Shibli, prefer to deal with injustices indirectly and depict oppression through silence.

Even Darwish, regarded as the Palestinian national poet, indicated that he wanted to escape the pressure of the expectations he experienced as a Palestinian writer and rather dedicate himself to individual - or metaphysical - themes in his work.

“War preoccupies me. But I’m ashamed to write about it. I flagellate my metaphors then implore them.” [Asmaa Azaiza](#), *Do Not Believe Me if I Talked to You of War*.

It is beyond doubt that artists can enable the recognition of cloaked or forgotten Palestinian experiences and evoke through language the lost or transformed land.

Displacement, occupation, exile, discrimination, imprisonment, and war crimes mark Palestinian art.

“In order for me to write poetry that isn’t political/ I must listen to the birds/ and in order to hear the birds/ the warplanes must be silent.” Marwan Makhoul.

There is therefore no escape from the continuous threat of violence. In the current war in Gaza, the Israeli army is deliberately targeting artists.

“If I must die/Let it bring hope/Let it be a tale.” Refaat Alareer, *If I Must Die*.

In December 2023, Israeli army [killed Alareer](#). His [poetry recalls](#) his tragic fate and celebrates his life.

It also reminds us of the hell that is Gaza.

“In Gaza, breathing is a task, smiling is performing plastic surgery on one’s own face, and rising in the morning, trying to survive another day, is coming back from the dead.” Mosab Abu Toha, *Things You May Find Hidden in My Ear, Poems From Gaza*.

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