

Title: Letter from Palestine: Resistance through Storytelling in Refaat Al-Areer’s “If I Must Die”

Author(s): Lujain Aqra and Bilal Hamamra

Source: *Janus Unbound: Journal of Critical Studies*, vol. III, no. II (Spring 2024), pp. 7-12

Published by: *Memorial University of Newfoundland*



Disclaimer

The views, opinions, conclusions, findings, and recommendations expressed in this publication are strictly those of the respective author(s) and are not necessarily the views of *Janus Unbound: Journal of Critical Studies*, its editors, its editorial team, and Memorial University of Newfoundland (collectively, the “Publishers”). Authors are responsible for all content of their article(s) including accuracy of facts, statements, citations, and so on. The University gives no warranty and accepts no responsibility or liability for the accuracy or completeness of any information or materials contained herein. Under no circumstances will the Publishers, including Memorial University of Newfoundland, be held responsible or liable in any way for any claims, damages, losses, expenses, costs, or liabilities whatsoever resulting or arising directly or indirectly from any use of or inability to use the contents of this publication or from any reliance on any information or material contained herein.

Message from the Editors

The editors welcome letters on all subjects, especially if they discuss or comment on the works published in *Janus Unbound*. Please read our Guidelines for Authors prior to submitting your manuscript.



Janus Unbound: Journal of Critical Studies is published by Memorial University of Newfoundland



*Janus Unbound: Journal
of Critical Studies*
E-ISSN: 2564-2154
3(2) 7-12
© Lujain Aqra and Bilal
Hamamra, 2024

Letter from Palestine: Resistance through Storytelling in Refaat Al-Areer’s “If I Must Die”

Lujain Aqra and Bilal Hamamra

Introduction

Since the Israeli Zionist occupation of Palestine in 1948, Palestinians have always sought to bring to life the lost Palestinian landscapes through their literary texts. Literature enabled Palestinians to regain the lost Palestinian areas figuratively and to reflect on the traumatic experience of living under the Israeli occupation. The Palestinian story is a story of displacement and uprootedness. As Noam Chomsky and Ilan Pappé point out, “the tale of Palestine from the beginning until today is a simple story of colonialism and dispossession, yet the world treats it as a multifaceted and complex story—hard to understand and even harder to solve” (2015, 12). The Israeli military occupation aims to assert control over Palestine, both physically and linguistically. By dominating the narratives, Israel positions Palestinians as outsiders in public discourse and history. However, many Palestinian authors such as Mahmoud Darwish, Ghassan Kanafani, and Edward Said, among many others, have emphasized the pivotal role of narration in the (re)construction of the nation and, in the words of Tahrir Hamdi, “imagining Palestine,” which alludes “to people who indeed existed historically and concretely on this land” (2022, 2).

This letter sheds light on the Palestinian martyr Refaat Al-Areer, who dedicated his life to telling the Palestinian story to challenge the Israeli project. Refaat Al-Areer was born in the Al-Shuja’iyya neighbourhood east of Gaza City in 1979. He earned a Bachelor’s degree in English from the Islamic University of Gaza in 2001, followed by a Master’s degree in Comparative Literature from the University of London in 2007. He then completed his PhD at Putra University in Malaysia. Afterwards, Al-Areer worked as a professor of English literature at the Islamic University.

Al-Areer co-edited the book *Gaza Unsilenced* (2015) with the Palestinian writer Laila El-Haddad. The book included a collection of articles by Palestinian and international writers interested in Palestinian affairs. They discussed the Israeli aggression on Gaza in 2014, during which one of Al-Areer’s brothers was martyred. The book featured contributions from historians and prominent writers from Palestine and around the world, such as Rashid Khalidi, Richard Falk, Ramzy Baroud, and Hatem Kanaaneh, among others. The contributions

from such a wide range of authors and scholars helped to shed light on the complexities of the situation in Gaza and its significance in the broader context of Palestinian resistance and struggle for rights. In 2015, Al-Areer was also among the contributors to the establishment of the “We Are Not Numbers” initiative, which aimed to document the lives of the Palestinian people under occupation, moving away from the statistical discourse that often reduces people’s bitter experiences to mere numbers. The initiative included several young writers from Gaza who expressed the realities of life under siege and war. Among them was the young writer Yousef Dawwas, who actively contributed his writing to the initiative. He was also one of the martyrs of the ongoing war on the Gaza Strip, as his home was targeted by an Israeli airstrike on 14 November 2023.

It is noteworthy that since the beginning of the ongoing genocide against Palestinians in Gaza, Al-Areer, who was martyred along with eight members of his family in his sister’s house, dedicated all his energy to conveying the true picture of the genocide committed by Israel against the citizens of Gaza. He published reports in English on his X (formerly Twitter) account detailing the Zionist massacres and the human rights violations committed by the Israeli army. Al-Areer, in his compelling Ted Talk titled “Stories Make Us,” comments on the importance of oral storytelling in documenting the history and culture of Indigenous people living under colonialism. He poignantly says, “we love the story because it is about our homeland, and we love our homeland even more because of our stories” (Al-Areer 2015, 13:56-14:03).

In his book *Gaza Writes Back* (2014a), Al-Areer presents stories written by young Palestinians to empower the Palestinian narrative in the face of its erasure by Zionists. The book was not merely a collection of texts on the themes of war and the resistance against Israeli genocidal crimes. It was an attempt to create a generation of Palestinian writers who could put into literature what had happened, relying on memory and personal experience, which were foundational in these stories. Collectively, these stories reflect, in one way or another, the martyr poet’s own vision and conception of the relationship between literature and the Palestinian cause. Al-Areer concludes his article “Gaza Writes Back: Narrating Palestine” (2014b) with a poem titled “If I Must Die,” a poem that went viral on social media when Al-Areer was assassinated in the Israeli raids on Gaza on 6 December 2023.

In “If I Must Die,” the speaker’s contemplation of mortality transforms the Palestinian story, immortalizing it as a narrative of hope and resilience rather than a rupture of narration:

If I must die, you have to live
To tell my story, to sell my things
To buy a piece of cloth and some strings,
(Make it white with a long tail)
So that a child, somewhere in Gaza
While looking heaven in the eye,
Making it blush under his gaze,
Awaiting his Dad who left in a blaze—

And bid no one farewell
Not even to his flesh, not even to himself—
Sees the kite, my kite you made, flying up above
And thinks for a moment an angel is there
Bringing back love.
If I must die, let it bring hope.
Let it be a tale.

(Al-Areer, 2014b, 537)

Here, death is depicted not merely as a natural life event but as a consequence of colonial technology and systematic oppression. The word choice of “must” in “If I must die” signals an inevitable sense of death.

Building on the relationship between colonialism and the death of the colonized, Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian examines the politicization of Palestinian death in the context of Jacques Derrida’s “topology of mourning” (2015). The dead body of the colonized becomes part of this “geography” that must be controlled. Shalhoub-Kevorkian offers a reading of the boundaries of the colonized body beyond its physical existence, which Al-Areer explores in his poem through the ghost of death that haunts the poem through lost farewells and the desire to knit a story out of death. Colonial politics are built on controlling the space (*topos*) of burial. The burial policies of the colonized body either permit stealing the bodies of martyrs or prohibit the family from retrieving their children’s dead bodies, forbidding native Palestinians from mourning (Shalhoub-Kevorkian). The “flesh” of the father in “And bid no one farewell/Not even to his flesh” points towards his deceased body, to which his child could not “bid farewell.” The father’s body was probably not buried due to the colonial policing of death. However, what colonial powers cannot achieve is control over the ghost of the colonized body. Here, the dead body of the Palestinian martyr is an active agent, feeding the possibility of its return to life. The child will remain “awaiting his father” even if only in his memories, and the memory of his lost father will become a motif for continuing resistance. The speaker here contemplates the event of his death as a novel space of life through the continuation of his tale: “If I must die, let it bring hope/Let it be a tale.” The syntactic choices in the poem reflect a desire for autonomy in a strictly controlled political and cultural sphere resulting from the Israeli occupation. Al-Areer uses possessive pronouns such as “you” and “my” as a vehicle of self-narration to tell his story without the influence of colonial ideology.

“Flying a kite” reveals an image of autonomy as it, like telling stories, is beyond the appropriation and control of the Israeli occupation. The symbolic act of flying a kite expresses freedom and hope for Gaza’s children in the attempt to retake Gaza’s sky from Israel’s dominating drones. The kite becomes a metaphor for resilience. The power of lexical choices lies in their capacity to translate and immortalize experiences, enabling them to transcend the mortal confines of their speaker and to be preserved within the narrative.

The speaker narrates the experience of his expected death from a subjective point of view which highlights a personal experience: “If I must die, you have to live.” Discussing subjective points of view in the Palestinian canon, Aman

Sium and Eric Ritskes (2013) propose that indigenous storytelling, because of its very subjective nature, challenges the dominance of colonial narrative. Such subjectivity threatens Eurocentric claims of objectivity. This threatening position that indigenous storytelling holds arises from locating the story-teller within the subjective sphere, a space for indigenous communities outside and beyond the realm of the colonizing empire and its spurious objective narratives. The poem reflects a desire to tell stories beyond death.

In narrating the father's departure, who "left in a blaze/And bid no one farewell," the poet uses dashes at the end of the lines 8-9. Dashes serve as a symbol of the harsh realities of displacement and separation suffered by Palestinians. Caitlyn Bartz (2021) argues that dashes create physical and spatial fragmentation. The poem portrays through dashes the reality of spatial fragmentation in Palestine caused by the Israeli domination of space as manifested in the Israeli apartheid walls and roadblocks. In "Awaiting his Dad who left in a blaze-/And bid no one farewell/Not even to his flesh, not even to himself—" dashes create an audible silence, evoking a melancholic atmosphere beyond the expressiveness of words. Al-Areer's employment of dashes serves as a subtle yet impactful portrayal of the emotions of loss and sorrow that paints the scene of the father's departure. Positioning the dashes at the ends of the lines creates a meaningful silence and a sense of separation. The fragmentation of these lines narrates the experience of displacement in the context of two farewells. The first farewell is that of the child and his father, who "bid no one farewell" and "left in a blaze," so the child is left to battle his absence alone. The second farewell is an internal one separating the father from himself, portraying the impact of displacement on the individual's sense of self. Here, "not even to his flesh, not even to himself—" signifies a separation from the father's own physical being. Dashes in the poem become a vehicle to portray the experience of displacement in the two farewells.

Death is presented as a story of hope, for children will grow to narrate the Palestinian struggle for freedom. Al-Areer discusses Palestinian *Sumud* in *Gaza Writes Back*, and he argues that stories from Palestine are an integral part of what Palestinians call "*Sumud*," which he translates as "steadfastness" (2014a). *Sumud* is an anti-colonial mode of thought and practice that resists colonial hegemonic policies through everyday practices (Hamdi 2022). *Sumud* helps Palestinians manage their everyday lives despite the threat of Israeli colonialism (Johannessen 1970). The poem manifests *Sumud* through the incorporation of daily life routines, such as "sell[ing] my things," which depicts a practice of commerce despite the specter of death roaming around. The image of the child flying a kite reflects the steadfastness of Palestinians in finding beauty in life despite the horrific circumstances. For Palestinians, death is a tale that pleads for telling. Al-Areer constructs a space for atemporal survival in his stories, emphasizing that Palestinians live to tell stories of hope, loss, resistance, and survival.

The specter of death in Palestinian life is portrayed in "If I Must Die" through the contemplation of mortality and continuity. The image of the long-ing child and the portrayal of the angelic presence aim to construct an image of

hope. The speaker's adamant desire for survival is preserved in tales that narrate hope and resilience. In the trajectory of Al-Areer's writings, and precisely in "If I Must Die," death becomes a tale of Palestinian *Sumud* and hope.

Al-Areer's writing opens up a space for reflecting on the ways in which Palestinians, even in death, continue to influence and participate in the social and political realms, suggesting that the act of communication and the expression of ideas are not strictly bound by the physical presence of the speaker. This challenges the notion of silence in death, presenting an alternative view where the martyrs continue to speak through their lasting impacts, writings, and the ways in which their lives have shaped collective consciousness and cultural narratives. In other words, death is not absence; the strikethrough (dash) that traces it retains something of the stroke; the strikethrough remains writing—a vestige of a vanishing act and a paradoxical trace of a future-to-come.

Biographies

Lujain Aqra is an undergraduate student of English Language and Literature at An-Najah National University in Palestine. She is interested in the representation of trauma and violence in modernist and contemporary Palestinian literature.

Bilal Hamamra is an Associate Professor of English Literature at the Department of English Language and Literature, An-Najah National University in Nablus, Palestine and has a PhD in Early Modern Drama from the University of Lancaster, UK. His research interests include Early Modern Drama, Shakespeare, Women's Writing, Gender Studies, Palestinian Studies, and Pedagogy.

References

- Al-Areer, Refaat. 2015. "Stories Make Us." *TEDxShujaiya*, 16 November 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YsbEjldJjOw>.
- . 2014a. *Gaza Writes Back: Short Stories from Young Writers in Gaza, Palestine*. Washington, D.C.: Just World Books.
- . 2014b. "Gaza Writes Back: Narrating Palestine." *Biography* 37 (2): 524–37. <https://doi.org/10.1353/bio.2014.0031>.
- Al-Areer, Refaat, and Laila El-Haddad, ed. 2015. *Gaza Unsilenced*. Washington, D.C.: Just World Books.
- Bartz, Caitlyn. 2021. "A Voice of Silence: On Punctuation in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson." *Tracks* 3: 40–5. <https://www.wtamu.edu/files/docs/EPML/Tracks%203%20Papers/7%20Dickinson,%20Caitlyn%20Bartz.pdf>.
- Chomsky, Noam, and Ilan Pappé. 2015. *On Palestine*. Edited by Frank Barat. Chicago: Haymarket Books.
- Hamdi, Tahrir. 2022. *Imagining Palestine: Cultures of Exile and National Identity*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Letter from Palestine

- Johannessen, Runa. 1970. "Sumud: Steadfastness as Everyday Resistance." *Palquest.org*. <https://www.palquest.org/en/highlight/33633/sumud>.
- Shalhoub-Kevorkian, Nadera. 2015. *Security Theology, Surveillance, and the Politics of Fear*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [https://doi.org/10-1017/CBO9781316159927](https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316159927).
- Sium, Aman, and Eric Ritskes. 2013. "Speaking Truth to Power: Indigenous Storytelling as an Act of Living Resistance." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 2 (1): i-x.