A Critical Study of Poetic Outbursts to the October 2023 Israeli War Against Gaza

دراسة نقدية للثورات الشعرية عقب الحرب الإسرائيلية على غزة في أكتوبر ٢٠٢٣

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Abstract:

In the past few months, Palestinian poets have started to post verses on the exploding conditions in their country. The poets' outbursts are justifiable considering the brutal slaughter of their people and the killing and maiming of children in the course of the 7 October 2023 war.[1] Poetry proves to be an unmistakable medium for communicating the havoc in Gaza and the horrendous predicament of trapped civilians there. Some lines in one poem are more revealing than the extensive talk in the media about the place that has turned into a combat zone. Poetry is a distinguished genre of the Palestinian literary tradition. War, tragic displacements, and other evils of occupation have led to the emergence of poetic resistance. The study traces Palestinian resistance poetry responding to the present war in Gaza. The argument explores poems by Mosab Abu Toha, Haidar al-Ghazali, and Refaat Alareer. Abu Toha implores the world's peoples to rescue the innocent children who became trauma carriers. Moreover, al-Ghazali emphasizes the revolutionary role of youths worldwide in altering the dim reality of Palestinians. According to Alareer, this dim reality is constantly wrapped up in glimpses of hope for freedom. The discussed poets are contemporary voices presenting modern perspectives on the Palestinian plight. Furthermore, they play a crucial role in connecting past struggles to present reality.

Keywords:

Palestinian literary tradition, Palestinian resistance poetry, the 7 October 2023 war, Gaza, traumatized Palestinian childhood

الملخص:

بدأ الشعراء الفلسطينيون، خلال الأشهر القليلة الماضية، بطرح أبيات شعرية تنقل الأوضاع المتدهورة في بلادهم. وكانت ثورات الشعراء مبرَرَة بالنظر إلى الإبادة الوحشية لشعبهم وقتل وتشويه الأطفال خلال حرب ٧ أكتوبر ٢٠٢٣. وقد أثبت الشعر أنه أفضل وسيلة لنقل صورة جلية عن الدمار الكائن في غزة والمأزق الرهيب للمدنيين المحاصرين هناك؛ فبعض السطور في قصيدة واحدة أكثر دلالة من الحديث الإعلامي المُطول عن المكان الذي تحول إلى ساحة قتال. الشعر هو نوع متميز من التراث الأدبي الفلسطيني. على الجانب الآخر، الحرب والتهجير المأساوي وغيرها من شرور الاحتلال قد أدى إلى ظهور المقاومة الشعرية، وبالتالي فإن الدراسة تتتبع استجابة شعر المقاومة الفلسطينية للحرب الحالية في غزة، حيث تتناول قصائد لمصعب أبو توهة، وحيدر الغزالي، ورفعت العرير. يُناشد أبو توهة شعوب العالم أن يُنقذوا الأطفال الأبرياء الذين أثقلتهم صدمات الحرب وواقعها الأليم. علاوة على ذلك، يُؤكد الغزالي على الدور الثوري للشباب في جميع أنحاء العالم في تغيير الواقع المظلم للفلسطينيين. هذا الواقع المظلم، كما يُصوره العرير، يُغلفه باستمرار أمل الخلاص القريب والحرية. الشعراء الذين ستتم مناقشة أشعارهم هم أصوات معاصرة تقدم رُؤَى حديثة حول المحنة الفلسطينية، كما أنهم يلعبون دورًا حاسمًا في ربط صراعات الماضي بالواقع الحالي.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

التراث الأدبي الفلسطيني، شعر المقاومة الفلسطينية، حرب ٧ أكتوبر ٢٠٢٣، غزة، الطفولة الفلسطينية المُثقلة بصدمات الحرب

Introduction:

"Palestine," write Johnson and Stanton, is "an exceptional case within Arabic literary studies" (1). These words appear in the editors' note of a 2024 Special Issue titled "Palestine as Theory" in the *Journal of Arabic Literature*. They explain that "Palestinian literature fits uneasily into established field paradigms. It is a national literature with no nation-state; it is periodized by events within the history of its people that are nonidentical with the history of the

larger region" (1). Hence, the editors affirm that "there is a pressing need to understand Palestinian literature within its specific context" (1). Palestinian literature and its specific context are rooted in the Palestinian experience which becomes "a self-conscious experience when the first wave of Zionist colonialists reached the shores of Palestine in the early 1880s. Thereafter, Palestinian history takes a course peculiar to it and quite different from Arab history" (Said, *The Question* ix). The present study contributes to the Palestinian literary tradition and its distinguished historical background by approaching Palestinian resistance poetry directed at the current attacks against Gaza. "Poetry of Resistance" was coined in the 1950s by renowned poets like Mahmoud Darwish and Samih al Qasim "in response to the dispossession of the homeland and the establishment of a foreign state on two-thirds of the historical land of Palestine" (Mir 110). This literary mode "addresses concepts of history, nationalism, and the role of literature in the liberation struggle" (110).

The present military operations in Gaza are known in the media as the Israel-Hamas War. The next brief account of the war denotes how Palestinians "live under astringent Israeli control… [and] bear the living scars of frequent bombardments, mass expulsions, and systematic humiliation. Every Palestinian represents a concrete history of loss –of a society, a country, a national identity" (Said, *The Politics* 46). The conflict broke out when Hamas launched a surprise attack on Israel. As reported by the human rights organization, Amnesty International, "more than 1,400 people, most of them civilians, have been killed and some 3,300 others were injured" in Israel ("Damning").[2] In reply to Hamas attacks, "Israeli forces have launched thousands of air bombardments in the Gaza Strip" that "must be investigated as war crimes violat[ing] international humanitarian law" because they have "caused mass civilian casualties" ("Damning"). To explain, in the period from 7 October 2023 to 15 August 2024, "Israel's ground

and air campaign in Gaza has killed more than 40,000 people, mostly civilians" ("Gaza Death Toll"). Concerning injuries, from the beginning of the attacks until 22 August 2024, "93,144 were injured" ("Humanitarian Situation Update"). The UN Secretary-General has condemned "the collective punishment of the Palestinian people" and announced in July 2024 that "2 million people have been displaced –nearly the entire population of Gaza– and many of them multiple times" ("Humanitarian Situation in Gaza"). Furthermore, "[h]undreds of thousands of Palestinians have been facing near-famine conditions due to a near-all-out Israeli blockade on the Strip" (Hatem).

With these shocking numbers and constant atrocities in the Gaza Strip, the volcano erupts. Poets begin to post resistance poems on various social media platforms. Bloggers and electronic literary magazines support them by republishing these pieces and other earlier poems articulating the anguish of the present by Palestinian and non-Palestinian poets. The study tackles three of these poetic outbursts to the war, namely Abu Toha's "Younger Than War," al-Ghazali's (sometimes written as Ghazali or Al-Ghazali) "The Intifada of the Free Youth," and Alareer's "If I Must Die." The three poets are Gazans writing from the battlefield. Because of the pressing nature of the situation, their poems were published online as separate pieces to reach a wide audience and raise the world's awareness of the burning conditions in the Strip.

"In the absence of a centralized territorial national literary sphere," proposes Abu-Remaileh, Palestinian literature "has the potential of coming together in the digital realm. Data-fragments of Palestinian literature can be expressed together as a digital-whole" (96). Literary works "emerging from refugees and exilic communities, and more recently from the West Bank, are charting new digital paths of inquiry; making new virtual connections possible, and ultimately, drawing interesting links between the exilic and the virtual as a space of coming

together" (96). The analyzed digital poems exemplify these new digital pathways of Palestinian literature. The poets employed digital platforms to demonstrate the savagery and arbitrariness of targeting unarmed civilians and children in the war-torn Palestinian territory. Additionally, Abu Toha and al-Ghazali utilized photographs to direct the reader to deeper strata of meaning. Regarding "The Intifada of the Free Youth" and "If I Must Die," they have acquired remarkable popularity through moving readings on YouTube, X, and Instagram.

The discussion comes in three sections. The first sheds light on the concept of trauma among Palestinian children. The second is devoted to youths and their reaction to war. Hope in victory and freedom occupies the third section. The argument in these sections is qualitative and inductive to explore the contextual depth of the poems and to put forward broader generalizations related to the Palestinian poetic tradition. Besides, the descriptive and analytical methodologies outline the poetic textual analysis. These approaches help disclose the employed poetic techniques, motifs, and common tropes of the explained poems. They also prove the singularity of Palestinian poetry and its unique identity.

Discussion:

Traumatized Palestinian Childhood in Abu Toha's "Younger Than War":

Abu Toha (1992-) is a Palestinian poet, short story writer, and essayist. His first collection, *Things You May Find Hidden in My Ear* (2022), won many awards including the National Book Critics Circle Award, the American Book Award, the Palestine Book Award, and others. *Forest of Noise* published in 2024 is his second collection about life in Gaza during wartime. "Younger Than War" was published on 9 November 2023 with a brief introduction by the poet where he stated, "I wrote this poem last year." Although it was written before the October 2023 events, its thematic development is tightly related to the existing circumstances in

Gaza. Moreover, the poem occurs in three overlapping time circles. The first is related to the poet's childhood. In the second time circle, the poet's adult eye inspects Palestinian children's state one year before publishing the poem. The third is linked to its publishing date one month following the Israeli attacks. This time circle evolves from the poem's introduction which highlights the poet's fatherly instincts for his vulnerable children during wartime. The three circles intersect in one spot: Palestinian children's war trauma.

"Since the October 7 Hamas attacks, Israel has sustained an unprecedentedly brutal assault on the Gaza Strip. The Israeli government has stated that its aim is to eliminate Hamas…. But it is becoming increasingly clear that the war is in pursuit of a second goal: the mass expulsion of Palestinians from the Gaza Strip" (Alder). Therefore, Gazans were driven down the Strip through a "forced displacement… and mass destruction of civilian property and infrastructure" ("Mass"). Abu Toha, his wife, and their three kids were among those displaced civilians. Displacement among Palestinian refugees, argues Gatrell, is "the framework of a national culture that has 'rootedness' at its core and displacement as its tragic antithesis" (139). The displaced poet's house was in a United Nations refugee camp north of the occupied Strip. In the poem's introduction, he states that it was destroyed ten days before its publishing. As a result, he and his family headed south with many other homeless citizens. Looking at his children, he pities them for living through the brutality of war from an early age. This situation is reminiscent of his childhood under Israeli military occupation. He writes in the introduction about witnessing rockets at a very young age. Then, he observes, "[n]ow my youngest child, born in America in May 2021, is living through the third wave of Israeli bombing." The poet's lifetime suffering from childhood to adulthood is underscored in the poem which emphasizes irredeemable anguish in Gaza then and now.

"Younger Than War" is a twenty-eight-line free verse poem. It is written in one bulk so as not to create physical separations between past and present events. Most lines are dense for being crowded with detailed portrayals of heavy Israeli attacks. Caesuras and multiple end-stopped lines serve as brakes that force the reader to slow down and watch the dreadful occurrences near the poet. Rhythm is made heavy by multiple intervening multisyllabic words like "lightning," "wrathful," and "helicopter." The resultant music unsettles the reader. Equally, alliterative sounds recur heavily to generate threatening music as in "[*B*]urning *b*ombs" and "*f*ar *f*rom me as my *f*rightful cries." Varied war words are utilized to control the general mood of the poem such as "[t]anks," "blood," and "machine guns." To add intensity to events, some of these words are repeated. "[W]arplanes," "smoke," "burn," and "bombs" are appropriate examples. The poem is ultimately imagist; it appeals to the reader's senses and imagination to bring him/her to the heart of the cruel experiences of Palestinian children.

The poem displays three flashbacks. The first is from Abu Toha's childhood during an Israeli attack: "Tanks roll through dust, through eggplant fields. / Beds unmade, lightening in the sky." The reference to dust implies the underdeveloped nature of the place. There, tanks target eggplant fields to spoil the crop and add to the dietary hardships of Gazans. Peasantry is a major trope for the Palestinians "whose connections with the land seem to have been established before the beginning of time. There is a revealing interplay between identity and the land" (Mir 121). The reference to eggplant fields exhibits this interplay. The poet takes the reader into his house to watch the effect of this surprise ground and air attack on him and his brother. They rise in horror from their warm beds whose sheets and covers are still untidy from being slept in. They are terrified by explosions and flares that light up the sky. This image is understood from the metonymy in the word *lightning*. The poet's brother "jumps to the window to watch warplanes /

flying through clouds of smoke / after air strikes." The use of the verb *jump* designates how alarmed he was, and the words *clouds* and *strikes* come in the plural form to illustrate the ferocity of the attack. Visual imagery is explicitly deciphered from the lines while auditory imagery is implicitly interwoven in the alarming noise of aircraft engines and explosions.

In an original simile, the poet inspects these "[w]arplanes that look like eagles / searching for a tree branch to perch on, / catch breath." The warplanes are likened to breathless predatory birds to indicate their atrocity and the long duration of the military operation. The eagle-like warplanes ironically find no branches to perch on due to the long methodical Israeli policy of destroying agricultural lands and uprooting trees. "Since 1967, more than eight hundred thousand Palestinian olive trees have been illegally uprooted by Israeli authorities and settlers" (Shehadeh). By the same token, in March 2024, "[s]atellite analysis [of Gaza Strip] revealed to *The Guardian* shows farms devastated and nearly half of the territory's trees razed" (Ahmed et al.). Instead of catching their breath, "these metal eagles," goes the poem, "are catching souls in a blood/bone soup bowl." Pointing to metal in the lines as well as "concrete and glass" later in the poem is common in Palestinian poetry because of its centeredness on war and destruction. The use of the present continuous tense in *are catching* indicates the continuity of the killing from the poet's childhood days until the present time. Using this particular verb brings to mind catching animals in hunting fields. In consequence, the hunting field, namely the landscape of Gaza, is metaphorically compared to a bowl of blood soup with bones sinking at its bottom. "Zionism," argues Said, "divided reality into a superior 'us' and an inferior, degenerate 'them'" (*The Politics* 31). Therefore, these poetic depictions imply the soldier's engagement in a sportive activity and the falling victims' underestimation and inferiority. The image of reaping souls in

the lines gets uglier by the implied allusion to cannibalism. The troops sustain their lives by consuming the blood and bones of their fellow humans.

The assaults against the innocent intensify: "bullet[s] / fired from wrathful machine guns. / Soldiers advance, burn books." Personifying the machine guns as being wrathful and the soldiers' advance after air strikes underline a determination to exterminate life. As for burning books, it deprives Palestinians of accessing and keeping their cultural heritage. Regrettably, setting fire to books and erasing the Palestinian knowledge legacy are not mere memories from the poet's childhood. These cultural crimes are still being committed in his homeland. A few months after the poem's release, a "photo circulating on social media depicted Israeli soldiers setting fire to the library of Al-Aqsa University in Gaza City" ("Israeli"). Moreover, in November 2023 and February 2024, "Israeli forces completely destroyed Al-Azhar, Islamic, and Al-Aqsa universities, the three most important and largest universities in the Gaza Strip" ("Israeli").

In the second flashback, the adult poet portrays another air strike one year before publishing the poem. He records Palestinian children's behavior during these tough moments. "Our kids," he sighs, "hide in the basement, backs against concrete pillars, / heads between knees, parents silent." Trained in survival procedures, children hide in the basement instead of playing hide-and-seek in the open air. Their eyes are blocked by concrete. Nevertheless, concrete proves to be a savior of their jeopardized lives where protection is badly sought. This is the time for the loud crying of bombs; consequently, parents and kids must stay silent and listen. The parents' silence is a painful sign of their helplessness. They have no words to soothe their kids, so they keep quiet until the raid ends. The parents' utmost dream is to come out of it with their children uninjured and alive. "Humid down there," observes Abu Toha, "and heat of burning

bombs / adds up to the slow death / of survival." The basement's humidity is a metonymy of the place's poor ventilation, water leaks, or foundation cracks. These factors reveal the poor conditions of the building which should stand against the heat of burning bombs, too. The image ends with the depressing personification of survival which experiences slow death in the basement that turns into hell.

The third air attack in the poem's final flashback is "[i]n September 2000," the starting date of the Second Intifada. It was an uprising of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip to end Israel's occupation and create an independent Palestinian state (Araj and Brym). "Although the violence had nearly subsided by the end of 2005, the conditions causing it had in some respects worsened. Israeli settlement activity in the West Bank continued, and tight controls were placed on the movement of Palestinian goods and people, stifling economic growth" (Araj and Brym). The poet remembers how "after I had bought bread for dinner, / I saw a helicopter firing a rocket / into a tower." Israeli occupation deprives the child of enjoying a peaceful dinner after which he is tucked in bed for a pleasant repose and sweet dreams. Paradoxical to this wished-for ending of the day, the boy in the street is stopped by the loud noise of the helicopter and the exploding rocket. Residential towers and buildings are often targeted in the heart of densely populated locations in Gaza. A March 2024 report states that "Israel's airstrikes and bombardment of Gaza from 7 October 2023 through 9 March 2024 have resulted in the destruction or damage of an estimated 157,200 buildings –a whopping 55 percent of all buildings in the Strip" (Hatem).

The shot tower, recounts the poet, was "as far from me as my frightful cries / when I heard concrete and glass fall from high." Alliterative fricative /*f*/ is a harsh physical sound that invokes menacing danger. The horrified child was in great danger, but he could not even cry. His

frightful cries were unattainable because of the shock. The poet depends on visual and auditory imagery to keep the reader involved in the painful scene. At this point, the exploding sounds of falling concrete and glass from high elevations become like thunder in the boy's ears. His eyes are blurred by a cloud of dust storming around the building. Thus, his dinner was never eaten, and "[l]oaves of bread went stale." No appetite would be left in this youngster after being that close to death, after watching his neighbors shelled and displaced.

"I was still 7 at the time," observes the poet whose miserable childhood was trapped between war and bombs. "I was decades younger than war," he maintains, "a few years older than bombs." The hyperbole in the first line demonstrates that he was too young to witness the war's horror. The irony in the second line alludes to Palestinian children's acquaintance with bombs from birth. The poet seals the poem with the paradox between both lines to motivate the reader to contemplate the perplexing position of Palestinian children. They are old enough to be familiar with bombings but younger than war! The lines also raise a crucial question: Is there a definite time suitable for youngsters to witness wars and rockets? It is unnecessary to list the fatal physical and psychological consequences of being part of a war as a child. What is needed is to stop the children's misery and grant them a peaceful place to live in like the one in the photograph preceding the poem. The photograph captures a Palestinian mother in the company of her three children. One of them is carrying a book and running eagerly with her sister toward green plains sheltered by a clear sky and a bright sun.

As stated earlier, the poem adopts three time circles: two within the poem and the third is tied to its publishing date during the existing war. "I'm reading this poem to myself," ponders the poet wistfully in the poem's introduction, "and wondering if my children will be able to write poems about the bombs and explosions they are seeing." The misery of his children is symbolic

of that of each Gazan child. Like Abu Toha, Noor Hindi registers Palestinian children's predicament in her 2020 poem "Fuck Your Lecture on Craft, My People Are Dying." She says, "Colonizers write about flowers. / I tell you about children throwing rocks at Israeli tanks." Both poets agree that traumatized children will not write about flowers but about bombs, explosions, and tanks. The world's attention should focus on their never-ending dilemma which has reached an extreme point in the Gaza Strip now. Hence, the poem's interrelated time circles uncover a vicious cycle of mutilated childhood handed down from one generation to the other until it reached the poet's children in October 2023. The Palestinian cause is undoubtedly a continuous case, and the present should be seen in the eyes of the past.

The Youth Ablaze in Haidar al-Ghazali's "The Intifada of the Free Youth":

The study switches from childhood to youth by scrutinizing a poem dedicated to youths. The third flashback in Abu Toha's poem alludes to the Palestinian Second Intifada. al-Ghazali responds to the October 2023 events by calling the youth for a third non-ending intifada for a free Palestine. al-Ghazali (2004-) is a young poet and fiction writer trapped in Gaza. He studies English literature and translation at the Islamic University. Furthermore, he publishes and recites poems on his Instagram account, "@haidar.ghazali." For being always surrounded by death, his writings are shaded by dark gloominess. For instance, his poem, "Every Time I Leave the House," published in March 2024 reads, "Every time I leave the house, / I bid him farewell / for I may not come back." The first sentence in his account on Threads is "Haider, every time I write my last poem."

al-Ghazali composes poetry in Arabic and English; some poems are written in both like the one under study. "The Intifada of the Free Youth" was published on the front page of *The New York War Crimes* in May 2024. The next day, it appeared on the Instagram account

"Students for Palestine," an anti-racist student organization in solidarity with Palestine against apartheid, colonialism, and genocide in Gaza. Moreover, the poem was recited in June 2024 by the Mexican actress Melissa Barrera on YouTube as part of the Palestinian Festival of Literature. The free verse poem comprises six stanzas varying in length from four to eight lines. Lines are short, and most of them are marked by grammatical precision. Enjambments are employed in multiple lines for a flowing stream of thoughts. On the other hand, many end-stopped lines halt the poem's procession for visualizing and contemplating the situation. Some lines in the first three stanzas are tabbed off the poem's body, thus, bringing the reader's attention to their content. Bitterness is perceived in word choice; examples include "slaughtered," "bleeds," and "amputated." Repetition of words, phrases, and complete sentences is technically used to create music and establish the poem's overall tone and message. For instance, on the level of words, *humanity* and *blood* appear twice; the verb *kill* is repeated four times. Consequently, the poem is an appeal to humanity to cease bloodshed and killing in Gaza.

According to its subtitle, the poem is "*for the students rising up around the world*" (al-Ghazali 1, italics emphasis in origin). From the very beginning, the poem is devoted to the revolutionary spirits of the youth ablaze inside and outside Palestine. In doing so, the poet follows the pathway of earlier resistance poets who "called for national resistance and mobilized the masses to be steadfast in their resistance to the colonial powers" (Mir 110). "Today / is the intifada of the free youth in the / universities," declares the poet in the first stanza. This declaration is repeated at the beginning of the second stanza for emphasis and to hold the reader's attention. With the mounting offenses in Gaza, "[d]emonstrations in solidarity with Palestinians under Israeli siege in Gaza have spread across university campuses… around the world" (Regan). From 15 to 19 May 2024, for example, pro-Palestinian demonstrations were

scheduled where activists planned to hold protests in several cities across the US and Canada ("US"). The poem was published on the demonstrations' starting date as a poetic advocacy and to gain world support and sympathy. Reading the opening lines apart from this event holds further implications. The word *today* occupies a single line, and there is an obligatory pause by the line end. As a result, it gives the effect of a loud announcement that every day will witness the free youth's intifada as long as the war persists. The propagated-for intifada needs to be continuous until it achieves its target of peace restoration.

Nevertheless, the poet retreats from high spirits into despair when he realizes that the world youth usually "send their cries into the wind" (1). Protestors cry into the wind; this wind is a metaphorical depiction of the political bodies supporting the war. Their cries are likely in vain which is decoded from the phrase *into the wind*. The phrase indicates the uncertainty of the demonstrations' effectiveness and the diminishing hope inside the poet with the elongated attacks against his people. His fears are true considering the situation's stagnation until the very moment. The poet's fears are also consistent with Said's observations that "Israeli politics… seem rather more fixed and determinate than they may really be"; protests and initiatives "can continue indefinitely without significant change in the official Israeli position" (*The Question* 236).

Regardless of the validity or invalidity of the demonstrators' cries in the ears of world leaders, the poet is moved by the non-Palestinians' compassion for his countrymen:

Today, we see hearts wounded/
slaughtered like ours
weeping for mothers who had not
time to weep. (1)

The lines shed light on a bright side of humanity through the simile that compares the protestors' hearts to the wounded and slaughtered victims in Gaza. The protestors will even weep for the grieving mothers who are overwhelmed by successive calamities in a merciless war claiming their loved ones. Using academic jargon, al-Ghazali deems that "no-one will pass / who fails the Humanity Test" (1). Those who failed the Humanity Test worldwide during the current war are many. The UN Secretary-General's statement that the existing humanitarian situation in Gaza is "a moral stain on us all" is ample proof ("Humanitarian Situation in Gaza").

The poet employs anaphora by repeating the word *Today* for the third time to keep a consistent reference to the May 2024 protests. "Today the world shows a kind of / justice, / a kind of humanity" (al-Ghazali 1). The repetition of *a kind of* implies the scarcity of justice and humanity in the world and their temporality. Every time the situation escalates in Gaza, the world wakes up to the Gazans' painful distress and then goes again into deep slumber. Accordingly, the Palestinians are about to lose faith in the slightest change. However, the poet watches how with the current vicious assaults in his country, the world "cries with my voice, / bleeds with my blood" (1). The metaphor likens the world peoples to one body sending the same cries and bleeding from one open wound. Henceforth, the lines connote a collective identification with war victims in Gaza. Moreover, the poet's cries and blood are emblematic of the horrendous crisis of all Palestinians. The reader gets involved in their agony through aural and visual imagery in the words *cries* and *blood*.

The world, al-Ghazali adds, "boils like the amputated hand of a / child on the ground" (1). In wars, only the fortunate die. The less fortunate live with missing body organs. The boiling blood in the world peoples' veins is likened in the lines to a bombarded hand still boiling with the heat of explosives. The boiling image is a metonymy of extreme anger and near-explosion.

These are normal outcomes of the dreadful sights of Israeli troops' ruthlessness against defenseless citizens and their children. The inhumanity of the severed hand's scene augments by attributing it to a child. The poet does not allow the reader to have a look at his/her fate. S/he may have been lucky enough to join thousands of martyrs and escape this evil world. Or s/he may have survived the blast and will go through life with a mutilated body. This child's anguish recurs among numerous Gazan children who are vulnerable to major life-changing injuries. To explain, after three months of the progressing conflict in Gaza, "more than ten children a day lose a limb," and according to UNICEF, "around 1,000 children in Gaza have lost one or both their legs" (Halyk; "'Ten'"). Their suffering is doubled because "[m]any of these operations on children were done without anesthetic with the healthcare system in Gaza crippled by the conflict and major shortages of doctors, nurses, and medical supplies like anesthesia and antibiotics, according to the World Health Organization" (Halyk).

Targeting and mutilating children is not a new issue; it is as ancient as the Palestinian-Israeli strife. Liddell affirms that Palestinian writers have long explored the horrors of amputation. His thorough discussion of the matter is preceded by a photograph of a child amputee from Gaza at a temporary housing compound in Qatar in April 2024. After that, he provides a list of dismembered characters in Ghassan Kanafani's 1963 novel "Men in the Sun," Emile Habiby's 1968 collection of short stories "Sextet of the Six-Day War," and Yousri Alghoul's 2021 novel "Gallows of Darkness." The heart-aching topic was also tackled by the Palestinian politician, activist, and scholar Hanan Ashrawi in "From the Diary of an Almost-Four-Year-Old" (1988). The poem recently spread on blogs and magazines supporting Gaza. Quoting the poem in full, Hariss argues in his e-article that the writer "captures the world as seen by a Palestinian child [shot in the eye by an Israeli soldier], reflecting the questions and

observations of someone that young." "Next month," the child remarks, "on my birthday, / I'll have a brand new glass eye" as a birthday gift (Hariss). Strangely, s/he believes him/herself "old enough, almost four" and "'ve seen enough of life" (Hariss). Later in the poem, s/he pities "a nine-month old / [who] has also lost an eye" (Hariss). "[S]he's just a baby," the child ponders, "who didn't know any better" (Hariss).

The paradoxical reactions to the Israeli war in Gaza are confusing. Millions of opponents from numerous countries protest in refusal demonstrations. In contrast, many political bodies are either proponents of the war or turn a blind eye to it. The young poet solves the riddle: "We are a good world, / ruled by the devils of whiteness" (al-Ghazali 1). Whiteness is a synecdoche referring to the world leaders upon whom all the blame is laid. They are metaphorically compared to devils to exhibit their evil intentions and actions. Therefore, the lines establish an extended paradox between goodness versus devilishness, the ruled versus their rulers, and peaceful peoples opposing the innocents' killing versus leaders moved by political and economic interests. This divisiveness is the Palestinian case's quandary.

The poet poses the innocent, or even naïve, questions that keep popping into one's mind on seeing the world torn by territorial struggles: "Why don't we become one world? / Why don't we grow together?" (1). The lines address all human beings and disclose his yearning for this lost oneness and wished-for intimacy. Subsequently, he gives his unheeded voice and boiling blood to his fellow humans to stand up for him and his helpless people. "My voice," he adjures, "your voice, / my blood, if it makes you angry, / well, now it's yours" (1). Still haunted by the idea of the Earth's unity, the poet gives its dwellers the following piece of advice: "Teach your children / that the earth is one body" (1). The lines are a follow-up to the apostrophe employed in the preceding lines to keep the addressees focused. Besides, seeing the world as one wholesome

body is pure wisdom. War teaches the young man this wisdom from a tender age with its savagery. War also teaches him that the world's unity is an unattainable dream and that the answer to his previous questions is negative because of one thing, borders. Nonetheless, "borders," he argues, "are an invention" (1). He asks his fellow humans to teach their children this second lesson about borders. At first, they were a good invention to keep discipline, but later they turned into a curse with greed and craving for expansion and power. The line hints at the "colonial border discourse" where Palestinian geography, particularly borders, "emerged as a literary embodiment of special resistance to colonial and national fragmentation" (Eqeiq 26). The poet attempts to dismantle borders "as a locus of alienation and ultimately outline a decolonized map of Palestine" (26).

The third lesson for the addressees' children is a moral related to killing. This is an undiscussed topic with youngsters though war children are immersed in it. However, the poet asserts that children should be taught that "killing you will be easy / if you don't refuse to kill" (1). The children and their parents killed nobody, but the poet believes that they are complicit in the crime by keeping silent. Their silence is an implicit acceptance. Thus, he encourages them to refuse to kill because interests are temporal and change with time. Once interests clash, the killer can be easily killed by his partner with cold blood. The poet's focus on younger generations is a clever gesture bringing what Mir calls "resistant hope for the future" (121). This hopefulness depends on altering the mentality of passivity in individuals from a young age. Then, when they become responsible adults, they will possibly claim freedom for their human fellows.

In the final stanza, the poet turns his face to Israel yelling, "Stop killing us! / Stop killing us" (1). The repetition of the imperative indicates his uncontrollable rage and ended patience. The exclamation point at the end of the first line signifies his wonder at the Israelis' ability to

enjoy a cozy sleep at night after reaping all these guiltless souls most atrociously for decades. He collects what is left of his nerves and attempts to find a logical reason for Israel to stop killing his people. "Stop killing us / so we can work our fields / and feed you" (1). The lines touch on the Palestinian agricultural economy ruined by Israeli policies. After the occupation, agriculture was gravely affected by "politically created water and land scarcity to discourage competition with the Israeli market" and to generate a forced dependence on high-priced Israeli goods (Temper 76). The former final plea in the poem is a dream of co-existence between two peoples. "Two things are certain," argues Said, "the Jews of Israel will remain; the Palestinians will also remain" (*The Question* 235). Therefore, the poet draws an image of Palestinian farmers cultivating their lands peacefully and feeding their neighbors. This image can be attained if Israel halts its genocidal strategies. Anyway, the harmonious portrayal collapses considering its stark paradox to all the violence going on under the world's eyes. Furthermore, "Zionism aimed to create a society that could never be anything but 'native'… [, and] it determined not to come to terms with the very natives it was replacing with new (but essentially European) 'natives'" (88). Aware of these history-proven facts, al-Ghazali closes his poem with a period designating the end of his pleads and his finished talk. If he has more words to say, his throat will choke on them because of his irritation and profound grief.

Death Glazed with Hope in Refaat Alareer's "If I Must Die":

Zionist genocide targets all Palestinians; cultural and literary figures are no exception. In December 2023, it was reported that "[s]ince October 7, Israel has killed at least fourteen Palestinian poets and writers in Gaza" (Sheehan). The following lines commemorate one of those brilliant figures, the leading Palestinian academic and poet Alareer (1979-2023). He was a poet, writer, literature professor, activist, and an inspiring mentor of young creative writers (Altoma).

He was killed in northern Gaza on 6 December 2023 in a targeted Israeli airstrike that also killed his brother, his sister, and four of her children (Sheehan). "[M]y heart is broken," writes Abu Toha on his Instagram account, "my friend and colleague Refaat Alareer was killed with his family a few minutes ago…. I don't want to believe this…. This is very brutal."

Alareer was the editor of *Gaza Writes Back: Short Stories from Young Writers in Gaza, Palestine* (2014) and the co-editor of *Gaza Unsilenced* (2015). His poems were published separately online and were never grouped into one collection. However, a posthumous collection of his poetry, writings on literature, and personal correspondences titled *If I Must Die* is expected to be issued in December 2024. Although Arabic is his mother tongue, he chose to write in English. "I started writing in English," he remarked, "during Israel's 2008 offensive on Gaza that left about 1400 Palestinians dead. I still remember how I felt obliged to write back in English to reach out to the world to educate people about Palestine and save them from the dominant Israeli multi-million dollar campaigns of misinformation" (49). He was indisputably right in doing so. The media in the United States, for example, has long distorted the Palestinian case by systematically considering the Palestinians "to be terrorists. For a long time, nothing else about them was as consistently referred to, not even their bare human existence" (Said, *the Politics* 57).

Three weeks after the October 2023 events and five weeks before his murder, Alareer pinned his prophetic farewell poem "If I Must Die" to his X account, "Refaat in Gaza." In the aftermath of his killing, the poem "has been read aloud from stages and written on the subway walls; it has been printed onto banners, placards, flags, and kites held aloft in ceasefire demonstrations around the world" (Sheehan). Many readers think that the piece was Alareer's poetic outcry to war in Gaza. Nevertheless, the poem was first posted on his blog *In Gaza, My Gaza!* on 27 November 2011. A thorough account of the poem's far and recent history is

provided by Altoma. He states that the poem has lately reached millions of readers and viewers by various means such as social media; newspapers; multiple translations (more than 100 languages); public gatherings, vigils, and forums; artistic adaptations; and others.

The central theme of the poem is death, a death that is glazed with hope. This notion is mirrored in form and sound devices. The poem consists of nineteen lines that differ in length. More than half of the lines are terse to create a sense of immediacy as if the poet is writing his will hastily before his imminent death. This is how all Palestinians feel; death is always at the door. Simultaneously, the poem is a continuous narrative of hope. This continuity is achieved by using successive enjambments that lead to a breathless enthusiastic reading. No punctuation marks are used in the last line. The open ending adds to the earlier effect of continuity. Likewise, through this technique, the last line brings the reader to the first line again. It feels like the poem will be told over and over endlessly. Music is implemented by the use of anaphora and the regular beats of iamb in most lines. "If **I** must **die**" is a fine example of both (bold emphasis added). The discordant sounds of the end rhyme disclose the poet's troubled life in Gaza. Meanwhile, a few lines end with rhyming words like "thing*s*"-"string*s*," "abo*v*e"-"lo*v*e," etc. to bring about faint optimism to the piece. Optimism is also prompted via internal music including alliteration (e.g. "*b*ringing *b*ack"), assonance (e.g. "k*i*te"-"fl*y*ing"), and consonance (e.g. "i*t* whi*t*e").

"If I must die," states the poet at the poem's outset, "you must live." The apostrophe in the second line addresses his fellow citizens who must live to carry the Palestinian flag, resist their enemy, and conjure hope in freedom. The apostrophe can also be directed to Palestine. The poet accepts death willingly and sets forth to establish a family in a land plagued by death to keep his country alive. The use of *must* in both lines indicates the inexorableness of death in

Gaza and the Gazans' insistence on life. Semantically speaking, there is a literal paradox between *die* and *live*. Despite that, death in Gaza is sadly part of people's daily life routine. Men, women, and children are buried in their houses to conserve what is left of their country. Their death is the paid bill for the lives of coming generations. It should be remarked that Palestinians must live not to enjoy life but to keep bearing the burden of colonialism until one day the morning of peace dawns to eliminate their endless mourning. Therefore, the poet's encouraging words to his countrymen in the poem prove crucial during the current troubled times. Currently, "[n]owhere in Gaza is safe," and the UN has warned about the catastrophic levels of food insecurity; the spread of communicable diseases; and the severe reduction in access to water, sanitation, and health services ("Humanitarian Situation in Gaza").

Palestinians, writes Alareer, must live "to tell my story / to sell my things." Once dead, the poet leaves behind the story of his martyrdom to be told and an inheritance to be sold. From this point on, the poet begins to foresee and narrate what exactly happened to him on and after 6 December 2023. He got killed, and his story was told by millions starting with his family members and his students to the whole world. The poet's inherited *things* were not his blasted house and ruined properties but his poetic and prose writings that will be sold soon in the forthcoming *If I Must Die*. His compatriots, continues the poet, must live "to buy a piece of cloth / and some strings." Muslim readers and non-Muslims acquainted with Islamic burial rituals will decipher the metonymy in the lines from the first reading. The reference is to the shroud, the white cotton cloth the dead body is wrapped in, and the Kafan strings that are tied in certain places around the body. The scenes of shrouded bodies of all ages are common in Gaza. Consequently, the lines symbolize incessant agony there. These are the very scenes that appeared in Zara's ad campaign called "The Jacket." It "featured the model Kristen McMenamy… holding

what appears to be a mannequin wrapped in a white cloth material," an image evoking Palestinian victims wrapped in shrouds (Fadulu). Although the fast-fashion brand said that it had shot the campaign before the war began, the campaign was criticized for being insensitive and offensive (Fadulu). As a result, the "photos posted on the company's Instagram page have since been deleted" (Fadulu).

After the heartbreaking portrayal of the poet's body in the white shroud, he states, "(make it white with a long tail)." The reader is shocked by the dramatic turn in the line that makes him/her visualize a kite, not a shroud. The sudden movement from the sorrow of death to the delight of kiteflying can be perplexing and may indicate a wrong understanding of the pronoun *it*. However, linking the line to the photographs before and after the poem's text leaves no space for doubting the line's meaning. The poem is preceded by a photograph of a white kite with a long tail attached to a Palestinian flag flying in a blue sky. In the second photograph, the same blue sky is crowded by dozens of kites of varied colors flown by crowds in an open landscape. The most remarkable kite among them is a white one in the upper left corner of the photograph. On a symbolic level, kites represent freedom, achieving dreams, joy, and hope, while whiteness points to purity and new beginnings. Hence, the single kite in the first photograph is an emblem of the deceased poet finding liberty in the sky after years of subjugation on Earth. In the second photograph, the many kites in the sky symbolize thousands of martyrs joining the poet's joy in freedom and hope in new beginnings where Palestine will be rescued from the clutch of occupation. The previous line is placed between parentheses. Parentheses lower the tone almost to the point of whispering to introduce a sudden shift in thought. This way, the poet cleverly glazes death in the first six lines with the hope of freedom in the seventh parenthesized line. As

mentioned earlier, the paradox between death and hope in free life is non-paradoxical in Palestinian poetry because both are concurrent in people's lives.

The poet grants the white kite, the hope of freedom, to Gaza's children. He wishes that it would be kept high in the sky

so that a child, somewhere in Gaza
while looking heaven in the eye
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[.]

The lines mark another dramatic turn as it leaps away from hope by zooming in on children broken by death and loss. The poet depicts a solitary child waiting for the return of his murdered father. Alareer refers to an indefinite child in an unspecified place in Gaza to generalize. To clarify, children at doorways awaiting the coming back of their killed fathers is part of their mutual suffering. Heaven in Gaza is presently a gateway to hell with falling bombs and rockets and flying warplanes. Consequently, it is personified as a ruthless person, and the child gathers all his/her courage to look it in the eye. The poet employs dashes in the above excerpt to halt the child's story procession for a moment and open space for demonstrating his father's agonizing death. Death in this place is haphazard and sudden. Therefore, the poor man was not given even a second to farewell his flesh or himself. This notion is emphasized by repeating the negating phrase *not even*. The poet attempts to appease the burdened child with the kite's delightful sight that may return the love of life to him/her.

Being unfamiliar with the sight of flying kites in Gaza's sky, the child "thinks for a moment an angel is there / bringing back love." Here, the poet endeavors to eliminate the child's misery by metaphorically describing the kite as an angel restoring love to a country devastated by the enemy's hatred and cruelty. In doing so, he corrects the distorted image of Palestinian children who are accused by some persons to be taught hatred. A whole piece is dedicated to the issue by Rafeef Ziadah in her 2011 performance poem "We Teach Life, Sir." She wrote it when bombs were being dropped on Gaza at that time. The poet recounts how a fellow journalist in London once said to her, "[D]on't you think that everything would be resolved if you would just stop teaching so much hatred to your children?" ("Rafeef Ziadah"). Her polite response was: "We teach life, Sir," a statement repeated eight times in the poem ("Rafeef Ziadah"). Ziadah's moving long poem suggests that Zionists are hatred breeders, and Palestinian children are hatred victims.

Near the poem's finale, the reader becomes aware of its multiple movements back and forth from death and pain to life and hope. This technique mirrors the Palestinian people's condition and how they incessantly swing between both cases. This psychological confusion is articulated in the poem's last lines where death is fused with hope: "If I must die / let it bring hope / let it be a tale." Alareer's death was inevitable because where he lived death was/is everywhere. The anaphora in *If I must die* accentuates this fact. His death brings hope to thousands of Palestinians and non-Palestinians holding up his words in the poem inscribed on white cloth kites in protests against Israel. His martyrdom story becomes a tale told in multiple tongues. And his poem turns into a kite flying among countries to gain support for Palestine.

Conclusion:

The study has addressed the Palestinian poetic reaction to the October 2023 war. This war wiped out entire families and caused horrific destruction of buildings and infrastructure. Gaza has turned into a giant graveyard. Accordingly, the discussion is centered on the violated childhood in Gaza, the revolutionary youth in the occupied land and the world, and the adults' hope of near salvation. In "Younger Than War," Abu Toha recollects three war childhood memories. The first portrays him and his brother during an airstrike. They wake up to explosions and the alarming sound of machine guns. The second memory is of Palestinian children during another strike one year before the October war. The situation is not much different from the poet's days of boyhood. They are seen hiding from burning bombs in the basement. Turning again to his childhood, the poet remembers the dreadful scenes surrounding him during the Second Intifada. It becomes clear that all abuses against Palestinian children from 1948 until now are a recurrent tragedy. This tragedy is the destiny of the present children in Gaza who are younger than war.

al-Ghazali's "The Intifada of the Free Youth" is a piece about the youth by a youth. It was published on the first day of some countries' university demonstrations advocating the Palestinian cause. He encourages youths around the world to keep a ceaseless intifada until the killing of his people ends. The world's leaders, he believes, have failed the Humanity Test. Subsequently, he pleads with the world's peoples to speak out and condemn because they share in the crime through their silence. He dreams of Earth's unity and peaceful co-existence among nations. His faint hopes for freedom materialize in Alareer's "If I Must Die." As foreseen in this poem, Alareer's martyrdom becomes a tale told by innumerable protestors in several countries to restore peace to the bleeding Gaza. The poet uses kite imagery to turn the mournful image of his body in the shroud to a soaring kite holding the Palestinian flag high. Then, the shapeshifting kite

turns into an angel of love carrying hope to Gaza's orphaned children. Alareer's poem discloses how Palestinians can change pain to hope; hope never dies in their hearts.

The study contributes to the academic body examining Palestinian literature by reading through the former unanalyzed poems. The first two pieces were too recent responses to the war to be included in literary studies. Alareer's twelve-year-old poem became popular only a few months ago after his murder. Through the argument, the study unveils that Palestinian resistance poetry revolves around two contradictory themes: wail, war, and death versus hope, freedom, and life. Contradictions are reconciled by considering part of the Palestinians' Islamic beliefs. They are promised in the verses of the Noble Qur'an that they will triumph over their enemy, that their martyrs will be rewarded with paradise, and that they will be endowed with patience on their calamities. Hence, the angry poets who may seem to be overcome by a frustrating reality encourage their fellows to keep their spirits up and continue their firm grip on life until they see Palestine free.

The study emphasizes that Palestinian poetry is controlled by common motifs, the phenomenon of timelessness, early wisdom, and traumatized childhood. Common motifs in this poetry include tanks, warplanes, soldiers, rockets, bombs, smoke, fire, blasted body organs, and disfigured survivors. These are the byproducts of the continuing wars and assaults in the country for successive decades. In addition, the timelessness of Palestinian poetry is one of its trademarks. To illustrate, Abu Toha wrote "Younger Than War" one year before the war, and Alareer's poem was published in 2011. Additionally, other past poems intervene in the discussion. All these timeless verses written before the October 2023 attacks have the same agony thread that touches on current events. Timelessness indicates the systematic relentless inhuman attitudes of the Israeli occupation against Palestinians. Concerning wisdom, it is gained

early in life because of the harsh conditions poets grew up in. al-Ghazali, for example, ages in his early twenties and adorns his poetry with morals and wisdom acquired from war cruelty. His dark poetics are unquestionably the result of his traumatized childhood. War trauma is a transgenerational legacy among Palestinian children. Thousands of them have been tirelessly mutilated physically and psychologically for years. Accordingly, this theme of Palestinian poetry becomes inescapable. Throughout the discussion, the children's misery is a notable joint point.

For further study, scholars should search for abandoned Palestinian poets on social media. Many of them posted some of their writings and departed life before even being known as poets like Alareer. He was not referred to as a poet before his death and was just noted as an influential academic figure. Other poets, particularly those living in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, do not have the privilege of being published in formal publishing avenues. Therefore, social media platforms represent a timely channel for their digital literary production. This invaluable body of electronic literature needs to be academically appreciated. Sometimes, the circumstances in the poets' occupied land take a serious turn as in the current war. They feel an urgent need to voice their predicament to the world in search of its support. Consequently, as in the case of the analyzed poems, they resort to online publishing for its immediacy and widespread nature. There are many inspiring online pieces of this type for further examination. They are all born out of the womb of the October war. Hala Alyan's "Naturalized" (20 October 2023), Sara Abou Rashed's "From the Sky" (November 2023), and al-Ghazali's "We Are Lovers" (February 2024) and "Every Time I Leave the House" (March 2024) are fine examples. These Palestinian poets and others dream of writing about fragrant flowers, untroubled skies, and serene plains, but they find nothing but blasts, blood, and rubble. Sincere prayers for them that their dream will come true one day.

Notes

1. Almost all poems and major events are identified by month and year or sometimes day, month, and year to give the reader a consistent timeline. This procedure is crucial for a study covering a short but crammed duration from 7 October 2023 until 26 August 2024, the paper's submission date.
2. The study relies on social media and electronic magazines and journals which were the only outlet for the studied poems and an appropriate source of up-to-date news. The author attempts to be selective of news sources and chooses those displaying the least bias and the most credibility.

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