

Review Essay

Preservation of the Heritage: Survival and Documentation by Palestinians

Books Reviewed: Kamal Boullata and Kathy Engel, eds. *We Begin Here: Poems for Palestine and Lebanon*. Northampton, Massachusetts: Interlink, 2007; Nadia G. Yaqub. *Pens, Swords, and the Springs of Art: The Oral Poetry Dueling of Palestinian Weddings in the Galilee*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007; Laleh Khalili. *Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine: The Politics of National Commemoration*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which has made headlines for decades, shows no sign of abating, for each side is convinced that it is in the right and demands to live upon its ancestral land. The Palestinian “problem,” which has produced a plethora of books, goes back to Israel’s 1948 war of independence and remains unresolved. In this essay, I shall review two books that deal directly with the Palestinian problem and their overall situation (especially of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon) and one on oral poetic duels among Palestinians in Israel. This latter book provides some between-the-lines insights about how Israeli Arabs cope with the Palestinian problem.

Each book deals with the Palestinians from a distinct perspective. *We Begin Here*, Boullata and Engles’ collection of poems, depicts the Palestinians’ sufferings, especially in Lebanon in the wake of the events there in 1982 and 2006. *Pens, Swords, and the Springs of Art* deals with a type of poetry competition held mostly at weddings of Israeli Arabs in Galilee (northern Israel), and *Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine* commemorates Palestinian refugees, victims of warfare and massacres in the refugee camps of Lebanon, Gaza, and the West Bank.

Due to the differences in modes of expression (poetry and prose) employed, as well as in their topics and the socio-political standing of the people they depict (Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, and Palestinians who are Israeli citizens), I shall review each book separately.

As the first book's subtitle indicates, *We Begin Here* is a collection of poems "for Palestine and Lebanon." Consisting of two parts, "Speak Out" and "And Not Surrender," the two headings form a slogan decrying the crimes committed against people everywhere. The poems in the first part, written after the Hizbollah-Israeli war of 2006, depict the perspective of those on the Lebanese side (among them Palestinians still living in refugee camps), most of whom were not participants in the war itself. The second part, a second edition of a book of poems published after Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982, presents poems that are similar in content to the first part: the sufferings of Palestinians, especially refugees, in Lebanon who are caught in the cross-fire either between terrorist groups and Israeli forces or among mutually hostile groups inside Lebanon.

Each part opens with a preface written by one of the book's two editors. Engel, who wrote the preface for the first part, is a communications/strategic planning consultant as well as a producer for social justice, peace, and human rights organizations. Boullata, who wrote the preface for the second part, is a painter whose works have been exhibited throughout Europe, the United States, and the Middle East. The book's cover, which alludes to the dispersion of the Palestinian people, depicts a 2000 encounter between a Palestinian woman who has lived in Lebanon since 1948 and a relative from Israel at the Israeli-Lebanese border.

A "Contributors" section at the end provides some details about the poets' lives and writings and a list of credits for those poems previously published elsewhere. Many of the contributors, all of whom are well known, have published books of poetry; some are active in other fields as well (e.g., short-story writing, translation, painting, and education [many are teachers]). Most of the poets are American; some of Palestinian ancestry (e.g. Kamal Boullata and Raja-e Busailah were born in Jerusalem, and Suheir Hammad is the granddaughter of Palestinian refugees from 1948). Among them are some Jews or people of Jewish ancestry (e.g., Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, Barbara Berman, and Denise Levertov).

The poems were chosen to reflect the sufferings of Palestinians living in the refugee camps of southern Lebanon during the wars of 1982 and 2006. The book's declared aims are to express support for the refugees, many of whom live in abject poverty; strengthen their spirits and let them know they are not alone; demonstrate the poets' awareness of wrongs committed against people everywhere, especially against Palestinians; and to shock the readers into doing more to bring peace, comradeship, and a better life into the world. In short, they remind the readers of a harsh reality that deserves to be addressed.

Overall, sixty poets are featured – some by a single poem, others by two or more. Several poets are represented in both parts by poems written more than two decades apart (e.g., James Scukky, Etel Adnan, and Samuel Hazo). The poems vary in length and style, for they take the form of reports, letters, dialogues, and tales. A recurrent theme is the heartrending suffering of innocents everywhere (especially in the first part), and specifically the tragic situation of the Palestinians living in refugee camps in Lebanon (in both parts), whose sad state is the result of regional battles for territorial control, power struggles among organizations with conflicting national or religious identities, and blood feuds.

In this volume, poets in a far-away land (the United States) write about events in the Middle East. They acquire their information from the printed and electronic media, which tend to focus on dramatic situations broadcast or reported, as far as possible, in real time. This can explain the specific choice of imagery in many of the poems.

The 131 poems (ninety-nine in the first part and thirty-two in the second) address a great variety of issues, public (peoples and states) as well as private (individuals); human-made catastrophes (Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and 9/11); wars in which helpless civilians are harmed; the sufferings of people forced off their land or living under occupation; the massacre of innocent people, including infants; the sufferings of widows or wives whose husbands are missing; and the doubtful efficacy of demonstrations. Many focus on the suffering of children in battle zones. We read of children looking for their parents, searching for food, or relating their harsh experiences ... and of the helplessness of parents who are powerless to protect their children in times of trouble. Nor are pets forgotten; several poems contain descriptions of pets (pp. 37, 151, and 154) hit by bombs or stray bullets. Those which survive are forced, in the absence of their owners, to burrow in piles of garbage for food. Some images are absurd (e.g., a headless man running and carrying his head in his hand [p. 24] and a blind Israeli carrying a pistol for self-defense [p. 167]); others are heartrending (e.g., children's things, which cause us to ask to whom they belong and whether their owners are still alive [p. 218]).

The poets frequently express their protest as rhetorical questions: Why must the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon live a life of misery in camps? Why are they massacred and kept shut in? Why does the world keep silent? When will change come, and who will bring it? Why are the guilty not prosecuted, and who should judge them? Between the lines we can identify the "villains": those who oppress the weak (especially Israel, in their view), who

help them (the United States), who remain silent (the Arab countries), and those who know what goes on but do not protest (the rest of the world).

The poems convey several messages: (1) wars, power struggles, exploitation of the weak, and oppression of the helpless are pandemic and part of life; (2) wars only fan hatred, create terror, and engender new wars; leave behind orphans, widows, and (physically and mentally) handicapped victims; and produce (especially in civil wars) only losers; (3) no countries, not even superpowers, are immune to terror and war; and (4) wrongs must be protested and war criminals must be brought to justice. The book is meant for anyone who loves poetry, especially those interested in the Palestinians.

Nadia G. Yaqub's *Pens, Swords, and the Springs of Art* reveals that the language and prosody of classical Arabic poetry were already very highly developed in the fifth century CE and served as sources of imitation for centuries. The evolution of classical-era poetry in the last two centuries has not reduced its importance among the Arabs. The *pens* and *swords* appear frequently in both classical and contemporary "poetry duels" as symbols of wisdom and militancy, respectively, while the *springs of art* refers to the cyclic renewal that this type of poetry has repeatedly undergone after hiatuses lasting decades.

This two-part book is the product of field work done in 1955 and 1956-57, when the author visited villages in Galilee (northern Israel) and the West Bank, attended wedding celebrations, and recorded poems. We read not only about poetry dueling, but also about the poets themselves, their audiences, and a folklore in which the modern and the classical are combined. The first part introduces Arabic poetry in general and, more specifically, poetry dueling as practiced from pre-Islamic days to the present. It pays special attention to oral duel poetry in the area during the second half of the twentieth century and its practitioners. The second part, an analysis of "Haflat Ibrahim al-Jabarin, Umm al-Fahm," presents the Arabic original and the English translation of this poem. The latter is accompanied by explanatory notes on terms, customs, poetic features, and the verses' meaning.

No recordings are supplied, however, although the text mentions the cassette and the side on which each part of the poem is recorded. The original text and translation are easily compared because the stanzas are arranged identically. The Arabic text is written in the poets' dialect (Galilean Colloquial Arabic), and the English translation is nimble and clear.

The book contains an appendix on classical Arabic duel poetry texts by such poets as 'Imru al-Qays and 'Abid ibn al-Abras as well as Abu Nuwas

and `Abbas ibn al-Ahnaf (without an English translation), an index of the names and terms appearing in the book (with references), and a list of books on Arabic poetry and literature published in the Brill Studies in Middle Eastern Literatures.

Chapter 1 deals with duel poetry in pre-classical times, of which only very scant remains survive (a fate to be expected of a largely oral literature), poetry competitions with umpires who decided on the winner, women who competed against men (e.g., Khansa, whose elegy for her four sons who died in battle is considered superb poetry), and celebrations honoring the victors. This discussion can enrich the reader's knowledge of numerous terms related to Arabic poetry and the competitive spirit that typifies certain types of poems (e.g., *mu`aradah* [declaiming an entire line], *mumalatah* [declaiming a hemistich], and *munaqadah* [praising one's tribe and insulting the other]). In addition, we meet classical-era poets from different periods who declaimed duel poems, as well as Arab writers who wrote about poetry and poets.

The chapter also analyzes the nature of classical Arabic poetry, its themes and the changes it underwent over time, the status of court poets and how they achieved renown (e.g., learning thousands of lines of verse by heart or starting out as a *rawi* [declaiming other poets' verses]) – which remain pretty much in force today, as several contributors informed the author. The main text and the notes contain anecdotes from classical literature about various episodes that took place during or after the duel poetry featured in the text.

Chapter 2 focuses on various aspects of duel poetry: its history and expansion throughout the Arabian Peninsula, the Middle East, and North Africa; sources of oral poetry (e.g., the Andalusian strophic *muwashshahat*, the Syriac poems of the Maronite Church, and ancient dialectal traditions, [p. 62]); the two language types used (Standard Arabic and dialect); the contexts – wedding celebrations, political events (e.g., an election victory), private parties, folk festivals, races, meetings, and even funerals (at the beginning of the Intifada, a poetry duel occurred at the funeral of a Palestinian man in the West Bank); and the accompanying musical instruments (e.g., the *mijwiz*, a two-piped wind instrument, and the *dirbakka*, a clay drum covered with hide at one end).

The author also describes how the seating arrangements for the guests and how their reactions encouraged the poets and contributed to the festive atmosphere. We also learn about the different kinds of wedding ceremonies (e.g., *al-`urs al-dini* [religious wedding], *`urs al-qa`ah* [hall wedding]; *sahra* [the groom's wedding-eve party]), the poems' themes, new kinds of meter

(*ataba* and *murabba`far`awi*), poetic devices; and the faith, occupation, and training of prominent poets who perform at poetic duels (e.g., Abu`Atif al-Raynawi, Sa`ud al-Asadi, and Fawwaz al-Mahajinah).

Chapters 3 and 4 analyze modern duel poetry, using the poem in the book's second part as an example, which the author compares with classical duel poetry. The reader can thus learn much not only about contemporary poetic duels and poets, but also about past poets and other prominent historical personalities in the Muslim world (such as caliphs). Yaqub analyzes the poems' contents, ideas, and poetic devices (e.g., meter, rhyme, and puns) and explains how poets cooperate to produce a successful performance (duel poetry is not a debate; it is a game). A good performance depends on their talent, improvisation skills, and their ability to coordinate ideas and philosophies. The poem's theme provides a framework within which they can express the relationships and values that bind Palestinian society together. Recitals can last for minutes or hours, depending on the occasion and whether unexpected interruptions occur.

The second part, a contemporary duel poem in Arabic and its English translation, begins with some comments on the difficulties of transcribing the Arabic poem due to the state of Arabic's diglossia and its numerous dialects. The author also notes various translation difficulties (e.g., the quality of the recording, noises, slurred pronunciation, and mistakes). She remarks that her translation tries to balance the written manuscript and the oral pronunciation and to preserve morphological forms, pauses in the poets' declamations, exceptional lengthening or shortening of words, and other changes. Only the translation has footnotes. The transcription method is the one usually found in scholarly literature. The book will be of interest to scholars interested in literature, poets, and anthropologists, both Arab and non-Arab.

The third book, Laleh Khalili's *Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine*, analyzes the commemoration of events and personalities in recent Palestinian history. It is based on her fieldwork: a ten-month stay in Beirut's Burj el-Brajneh refugee camp during 2001-02, additional shorter visits lasting between two and eight weeks, visits to the Palestinian Authority, interviews with hundreds of people, and a perusal of archival materials, works of fiction, and publications by NGOs. Khalili explains that she chose to write about the Palestinians because of their extended independence struggle and decided to focus on the refugees in Lebanon because of their vital role in the evolution of Palestinian national identity – in Lebanon they remained stateless and thus could develop various strategies and approaches.

The book contains nine chapters, including an introduction and a conclusion. Each chapter, and some sub-chapters as well, opens with an apt quote taken from a poem, a story, or a saying by a poet, writer, or intellectual (e.g., Mahmud Darwish, Elias Khoury, and Edward Said). References appear inside the text; the footnotes contain clarifications and additional explanations. Chapter 1, the “Introduction,” presents the topic and its problematic nature, her research method, and the contents of subsequent chapters. Chapter 2 puts forward various models that the Palestinian Arabs have emulated in their struggle for recognition and independence: international icons (e.g., Che Guevara) and conferences, martyrs for liberty or a better future, the historical symbolism used by emerging nation-states (e.g., Rome as the model for modern Italy; biblical Israel as the model for the modern Jewish state established by the exiled Jews; the ancient Egyptians and Persians as the models for modern Egypt and Iran), nationalist activities and revolutions aimed at liberation from colonialism or toppling the governing regime, and the inclusion of women in nationalist activities.

In chapter 3, she surveys Palestinian history to provide a background for understanding the politics of Palestinian national commemoration. She begins with the Arab defeat of 1948, as a result of which many Arabs in Galilee (northern Israel) fled to Lebanon, where they were exploited as cheap labor, denied political rights, and refused entry into Lebanese society. Their distress grew when they realized that they would not be able to go home. Terrorist organizations tried – but failed – to mobilize Palestinian youths for an armed struggle. Moreover, their activities resulted in destructive attacks by Israel and various groups in Lebanon that did not want the Palestinians there. The result was decades of suffering, which the Palestinians have commemorated in different ways.

Chapter 4 presents the forms of commemoration: history-telling in the form of novels combining personal biography with historical events (one of the most prominent of such authors was Ghassan Kanafani, who invented the term *adab al-muqawamah* [literature of resistance]); wall paintings (graf-fiti) and posters with figures, places, and slogans; publications in the electronic (e.g., radio, television, and the Internet) and printed (e.g., newspapers, journals, and textbooks) media; interviews with people who tell their story; conventions; naming children and places after martyrs, battles, and massacres; memorial days; commemorative plaques; museums; and monuments. The refugee camps, which have become commemorative sites in their own right, are regularly visited by tourists.

Chapter 5 deals with the dissemination of stories of heroism and of *sumud* (steadfastness), and stories about the suffering of the refugees, whose

tragedy is perceived as an inalienable part of Palestinian national identity and is used to demand justice and assistance from the world.

Chapter 6 follows the emergence of national heroes (*fīda'iyin* [guerrillas] and *shuhada'* [martyrs]) and how they are commemorated. In the 1950s and 1960s, the heroic martyr was a *fida'i*, a source of pride and prestige for his/her family, one who had “saved” the community’s honor and was therefore preferable to a *mujāhid* (holy warrior). Beginning in the 1970s, those who were killed in action were counted among the martyrs, as were men, women, and children who died violently (Ghassan Kanafani, who was killed by a car bomb, is considered an archetypal martyr; twelve-year-old Muhammad al-Durra, who was killed in a crossfire between Israeli troops and Palestinian militants in Gaza, became an icon). Additional methods of commemoration include exhibitions, mass funerals, cemeteries for martyrs, and mothers of martyrs expressing pride in their children’s death in front of television cameras. All of these serve to mobilize new activists and obtain more international recognition and support.

Chapter 7 plumbs the distinction between *battles* and *massacres* and how they are commemorated. In battles, whether among different Palestinian organizations in Lebanon or elsewhere (e.g., Black September 1970 in Jordan) or against an enemy army (Israel), the Palestinians suffered defeats; however, these events are commemorated together with long-ago Arab military victories (e.g., Dhu Qar, Yarmuk, Qadisiyah, and Hittin). In other words, military defeats become political victories. Palestinians have been massacred (in Palestine, Lebanon, and Jordan) at various times (beginning in 1947), but not all of these tragedies are commemorated equally. Usually Israel is accused even of those massacres that were clearly perpetrated by fellow Arabs – the massacre in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps was carried out by Lebanese Christian militias.

Chapter 8 is devoted to the methods of commemoration found in the Palestinian Authority. Opening with Yasser Arafat’s funeral in November 2004, first the official ceremony in Egypt and then the popular ceremony in Ramallah, it then reports on the new methods of commemoration introduced by the Palestinian Authority. These rituals no longer focus on personalities and events, but on the emerging state: military parades and slogans highlighting moments of glory in the revolution’s past. The iconic image is not a young resistance fighter, but rather a wounded bystander, a stone thrower, a prisoner, or a suicide bomber. Commemorating this suffering creates a perception that Palestinians suffer wherever they live, for the objectives are to mobilize international sympathy, obtain funding for the armed struggle, and receive humanitarian aid.

Arabic terms and names are not transcribed accurately (e.g., *`ayn* and *hamzah*, *t* and *t*, *h* and *h* are represented identically), which makes it difficult, on occasion, to read the words correctly. The book has a rich bibliographical list (pp. 228-52) followed by an index of names, places, and terms. This volume can be an eye-opener for anyone interested in the Palestinians and how they cope with the wars and struggles in which they are involved.

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