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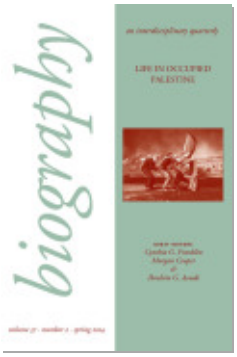

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TOWARDS A NEW LANGUAGE OF LIBERATION: AN INTERVIEW WITH RAJA SHEHADEH

CYNTHIA G. FRANKLIN

Raja Shehadeh is a lawyer and writer who lives in Ramallah. He is founder of the Ramallah-based human rights organization Al-Haq, an affiliate of the International Commission of Jurists. A legal research as well as a human rights organization, Al-Haq has monitored and documented human rights abuses and produced studies directed at applying humanitarian law to the Israeli occupation. In addition to his legal activism and writings about international law, Shehadeh writes fiction and memoir, and explores, through reflections on his own experiences and through stories about his family, the history of Palestine, and the impact of occupation on Palestinian land and people. His books include *Strangers in the House* (2002); *When the Bulbul Stopped Singing: Life in Ramallah Under Siege* (2003); and *Palestinian Walks: Notes on a Vanishing Landscape* (2007), for which he won the 2008 Orwell Prize for Political Writing. His two most recent books are *Occupation Diaries,* which was shortlisted for the Orwell Prize for 2013; and *Seeking Palestine, New Palestinian Writing on Exile and Home,* a collection he edited with Penny Johnson that won the MEMO, 2013 Palestine Book Award and that *Choice Magazine* selected as one of the outstanding academic titles of 2013. This interview was conducted over email after an initial meeting in Ramallah in May, 2013.

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Cynthia: *Can you discuss the relationship between your work for Al-Haq, the writing you have done on international and humanitarian law, and your writing of* Strangers in the House *(SH)?*

Raja: In the mid nineteen eighties I was driving along the central hills of the West Bank down to the plains and saw the preparations being made for building new Jewish settlements and digging out new roads. With a sense of dread about the future I began to imagine that if the Israeli occupation

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authorities are not stopped they would transform the land as we know it, create a new network of roads and link the infrastructure of the West Bank with Israel. We would then become strangers in our own land with total dependence on Israel for all basic utilities.

What does one do when you see massive changes taking place before your eyes, turning you into a stranger in your own country, allocating the resources of the land to the citizens of the country in occupation of your own? When as a Palestinian under occupation you have no voice? Your reality is represented by others in a false and distorted manner. And when you begin to speak out you find that you are overwhelmed not only by events taking place all around you but also by the long process of misrepresenting your history and how you got to where you are.

You feel the weight of the burden placed upon you to explain everything. To start from the very origin of the conflict. To go back in time to the mid nineteenth century when it all began. But no book of memoir can encompass such a long narrative and be readable. How then do you manage to write?

As a human rights activist I had established with others, in 1979, Al Haq, the West Bank affiliate of the International Commission of Jurists. The organization was documenting the violations committed by the Israeli military and publishing reports based on these personal testimonies. I spoke in the voice of a human rights activist through reports describing and analyzing the legal and human rights violations committed by the occupation authorities. As a writer I was keeping a diary in which I recorded how the events taking place around me were affecting my life and the lives of those around me, and using the material there to write memoirs.

It is not that there are no precedents in the world for what is taking place in Palestine. Nor is it the case that these sentiments felt by Palestinians are not shared by many around the world who feel similarly aggrieved. In the case of Palestine there are special features. Zionists espousing an ideology borne out of nineteenth century nationalism are attempting to wipe away thousands of years of local Palestinian history, declaring the land as belonging to members of a single religious group in a country that has always been multi-religious and multicultural. This massive project conceived in the nineteenth century gained greater momentum and has continued to be justified by events that took place in Europe and which mark one of the worst atrocities committed against human beings—the nature and details of which at the time were hardly known to the Arab inhabitants of Palestine.

Many a writer suffers from a lack of topics to write about. The case of writers in Occupied Palestine is the exact opposite. We are overwhelmed with materials. Often this leads to writing that is cluttered, that tries to tell all,

that insists on beginning from the early days of the conflict, as far back as the nineteenth century.

Perhaps the success of my memoir, *SH*, was due to the fact that the main theme was my relationship to my father. I describe my parents' experience with losing their home and properties in Jaffa in the course of the 1948 Nakba and the effect of the 1967 occupation on my father, who became one of the first Palestinians to advocate an end of the conflict based on the creation of a Palestinian state next to Israel. His involvement in politics consumed him and kept him distant from me at a time when I most needed him. Family relations are universal and most people can find something to relate to in a story about these relationships even when the context in which the drama takes place is remote from their own reality.

Writing this book freed me. For many years I gave so much thought to my father and our relation that whenever I tried to write about other matters I felt compelled first to write about him and my relationship to him.

The experience of writing this book and getting it published by a commercial publisher in the US made me realize what it takes to produce a publishable book.

In the book I also write about my experience of working in human rights and as a practicing lawyer under occupation. I use the experience gained from being active in these fields, but these are narrated in an entirely different manner from how I would do it in a human rights report. Much as these reports are important for documentation and for waging human rights campaigns, literary writing has greater power because if it is successful it involves readers in a deeper and more lasting manner by provoking their imagination, thus making the experiences that are the subject of the book part of their own.

Cynthia: *In the Preface to your book* When the Bulbul Stopped Singing *[published in the US as* When the Birds Stopped Singing*] you wrote, "Palestinians don't need to be pitied or viewed as unfortunates who deserve assistance and relief. They need people to understand their cause and work with them to bring justice and peace to their war-battered land." How did you come to write this book and do you think it served the purpose you described in the preface?*

Raja: It took me three years to write *Strangers in the House*. A few months after it was published the Israeli army invaded a number of West Bank cities, including Ramallah where I live. As I have always done I kept a diary of that time. My UK publisher suggested that I turn the diary into a book. At first I hesitated. I thought that my experience was nowhere near as bad as that of so many others who suffered to a much greater extent during those six months than I did. But after giving the matter more thought I realized that the most

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effective writing is not necessarily about the worst possible experience. Mine was that of an ordinary man whose suffering many people around the world can identify with.

A year after it was published, in the summer of 2004, *When the Bulbul Stopped Singing* was adapted for the theatre by one of Scotland's best-known playwrights, David Grieg. My involvement in the process and seeing how the play emerged from the book was very helpful to me in understanding theatrical writing and the way the theatre works.

What characterized *When the Bulbul Stopped Singing* was that it described the small world of the house in which my wife and I were confined during the siege of our town. The house became our whole world and yet we were at the same time inexorably connected to what was happening to others around us and to their suffering. Perhaps this was why the book lent itself to being turned into a successful theatre piece that has been performed in many parts of the world.

One of the deprivations that I felt during the siege was my inability to go out and enjoy spring walks in the hills around Ramallah. After the play was performed at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh, I remember noticing that a member of the audience, the literary agent of the playwright, was crying. When I asked her what in the play got her, she said it was the prohibition against taking walks. She told me: "Whenever I feel angry or confused I take a long walk in the hills around Edinburgh, and this always makes me feel better." The thought that she would be prevented from taking a walk profoundly affected her. She just could not imagine how she would have reacted if this had happened to her. It was these small details of deprivation under occupation that touched many readers of the book and helped them identify with the Palestinian predicament. Perhaps much more than would have been the case if I had described gruesome incidents of great brutality.

Cynthia: *Your personal narratives are permeated by love for your land, and also by grief and mourning. Can you discuss the politics as well as the poetics of writing in ways that foreground these emotions?*

Raja: All my adult life I have enjoyed hill walking. As a writer I enjoy describing nature. Having worked on such a small canvas in *When the Bulbul Stopped Singing* I wanted to expand my scope. There was so much to write about the land and what was happening to it that I thought this is the subject I would like to write about. But how to go about it? This was the question I had to struggle with.

I began reading travel writing. I read Robert Macfarlane, I read W. G. Sebald, Richard Mabey, and John McPhee, and many other travel and nature

writers. They all helped but what most fascinated me was Richard Holmes's book, *Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer,* where he retraces Robert Louis Stevenson's famous journey through the Cevennes that he described in *Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes*. And yet, as fascinating as these and other travel books were to read, I had to find my own structure for the book I wanted to write.

Over the years I have taken so many walks through the hills in Palestine and observed the changes taking place in them. Often after the walk I would describe in my diary what I saw and how I felt. These were very useful to me in writing *Palestinian Walks: Notes on a Vanishing Landscape* [US edition title: *Palestinian Walks: Forays into a Vanishing Landscape*]. I realized that my book would have to be about travels in both time and space in a land that was vanishing. I decided to describe seven walks spanning a period of twenty-seven years. Each of these walks begins at a certain point in time, the first as early as the late seventies, and ends in the present, describing along the way the changes that occurred in this particular stretch of the land. In the course of the walks I would describe not only what has taken place in the land but also to me and the changes in my own life, so it would be a double biography, of the land itself and the writer. The different locations of the walks would represent the different moods. The time of great disappointment following the signing of the Oslo Accords, when I felt that our struggle has come to a disgraceful end with a total surrender, would take place in the most arid part of the West Bank, in the Jerusalem wilderness leading to the Dead Sea. I ended the book with a meeting and a conversation with an Israeli settler in one of the *wadis* near Ramallah.

Cynthia: *Do you see* PW *or your other personal narratives as a form of testimony and witnessing? If so, how does that differ from the kind of testimony that happens in courts of law?*

Raja: In the course of the six walks described in *PW* I allude to the legal changes that the Israeli occupation introduced to the land law and that enabled the Israeli occupation authorities to claim most of the land as exclusively Jewish, dedicated entirely for building Jewish settlements.

In one of the walks I come upon a land that had been the subject of a land case in which I was involved. I describe the case and explain the legal aspects by narrating the story of the land and the Jewish settlement that came to be built on it. I had written so much about the land law in scholarly journals and books but I never got the satisfaction of hearing what readers of *PW* told me, that only now do they grasp what is happening in Palestine. There is a unique power to books that succeed in engaging readers and making them identify

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with the subject matter, making the experiences their own. This cannot be done in academic writing.

Cynthia: *In the Introduction to* PW *you write that "the writing itself was the eighth journey." Where did you venture next after completing that journey? Did you write any other travel books?*

Raja: By the time I finished writing *PW* I felt that I had become too confined in the West Bank and wanted to expand the canvas to include the region East of the Mediterranean. I wanted to find a way of re-imagining the region and going further back in time to the end of the First World War, which was the time when the region was fragmented by the colonial powers of the day, Britain and France, into the artificial mosaic of small nation states that it has now become. I did some research and found that a great, great uncle of mine had spent three years during the Great War travelling on foot and on horseback through the region in his attempt to escape Ottoman soldiers who wanted to arrest him on a charge of treason.

Fortunately for me he had kept a diary of his experience during these three years that described in detail where he went and what he saw and experienced. I decided to retrace his steps and write of the region as it existed during his time and how it has changed and what it has become at the time of writing. I called the book *A Rift In Time: Travels with my Ottoman Uncle.*

Through travelling imaginatively in the land of my great, great uncle, I realized how distorted the present-day geography of our region east of the Mediterranean has become, and the extent to which we have internalized this new geography. To reach the village in the Lebanese mountains which was the original home of my uncle's family, I had to cross the borders of three countries. Rather than travel north as he would have done, I had to first go southeast and then, after obtaining three different kinds of visas, make my way north in a trip that took me two days to accomplish. I remember looking at northern Israel from southern Lebanon and being surprised how geographically close it was. And yet I had to make an effort to distinguish between what is physically possible and what is practically impossible. I sadly realized that years of colonization and nationalism had fixed in my mind and that of my contemporaries the distorted geography of the land.

As I travelled through the countries east of the Mediterranean, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, and Palestine I continued to remind myself that all these areas were located in the Great Rift Valley, a long and deep trough extending from southern Turkey all the way to Mozambique that was caused by the movement of tectonic plates deep in the bowels of the earth.

At one point in my journey along the Jordan River I stood not far from the Dead Sea and described what I saw: "*The sea shimmered so peacefully in the morning sun. I felt a strong desire to follow the great fault, travelling through the Rift Valley starting north in the Syrian plains, through Lake Qaraoun in Lebanon and down to the Dead Sea and Lake Tiberias, examining how it developed from geological pressures on the tectonic plates far below the surface of the earth*" (53–54).

I had quoted at the outset of the book what Brian Eno has said: "Human beings are capable of the unique trick, creating realities by first imagining them, by experiencing them in their minds. . . ." Perhaps this is the most important contribution a writer can make, especially in a conflict zone, to try and think beyond the reality as it exists, to imagine and help others imagine how it could be and in this way enthuse the reader to seek change and yearn for better times. I decided to give loose reign to my imagination, and wrote: *"regardless of Palestine and Israel, British colonialism and the geopolitical realities, I still want to travel through this valley, imagining it as it had once been, all one unit, undivided by present-day borders. But until the political problems of this region are resolved—a prospect unlikely in my lifetime—a trip like this will not be possible. For now, all I could manage after crossing four of the five checkpoints along my way to the Galilee was to take a moment to contemplate the view in my unceasing attempts to assert my freedom"* (54).

Cynthia: *What do you feel are the best ways Palestinians today can work for liberation? How does resistance in the realms of economics, politics, law, and culture diverge or work together? Are there new cultural forms of expression or genres that you feel to be particularly important for Palestinians to resist, survive, and thrive in Occupied Palestine? What do you see as the greatest obstacles facing Palestinians today, and the greatest possibilities for freedom?*

Raja: I feel that writers can help by communicating to readers the nature of life under occupation. This is what I tried to do in my book *Occupation Diaries,* which was published in the summer of 2012. In it I tried to give the reader a sense of daily life under occupation. How one learns to manage despite the persistent tension, fear, and loss of hope. How important it is to find distractions through gardening and the enjoyment of simple pleasures, and the role that humor plays in preventing the temptation to resort to despair and self pity.

In a book published that same year which I edited with Penny Johnson, called *Seeking Palestine: New Palestinian Writing on Exile and Home,* we invited fifteen different Palestinian authors from Palestine and beyond to reflect on the meaning of exile and home.

In my Edward Said Memorial Lecture that I gave at Columbia University in October 2013, I suggested that a two-pronged approach would need to be pursued to bring about an end to the conflict with Israel. On the one hand, making Israel realize that the hiatus in the application of international law will not last forever and that it will begin to exact an economic price; on the other, encouraging it to see the benefits it can derive from making peace.

Until these two realizations come about, the Israelis, who show no sign of recovering from the euphoria of victory in the detrimental war of 1967, will continue to believe what Moshe Dayan, the Minister of Defense, declared at the time: that Israel is now an Empire. Why should this empire, now the sixth biggest exporter of weapons in the world, submit to international law? They will continue on their triumphant path until, as the German expression puts it, they triumph themselves to defeat.

Cynthia: *What are you working on now, and what are your future plans? How and why have you decided on these projects?*

Raja: I was asked to deliver the Edward Said Memorial lectures in New York and London. In these lectures I reflect on the categories and modes of representation—legal and cultural—that confine today's Palestinians, and the steps that need to be taken to move from the language of suffering and oppression to a new one of liberation and peace. My publisher suggested I publish an expanded version of the two lectures in a book.

This is what I'm working on at the moment.

A comment that I have so often heard from readers of my books is that my books sometimes bring tears to their eyes. I have long aspired to produce a book that would bring laughter to the reader. I am now working on an autobiographical novel in which I hope to succeed in doing just that.