

The Palestinian Poet Who Came Back

By **Pankaj Mishra**

My Happiness Bears No Relation to Happiness: A Poet's Life in the Palestinian Century

by Adina Hoffman

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Describing a watercolor by Paul Klee, *Angelus Novus*, which depicts a wide-eyed angel with hands raised as though in shock, Walter Benjamin once speculated that "this is how the angel of history must look" as the storm of progress that smashes everything in its way drives him relentlessly into the future, and "the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky." Rarely did the storm of progress cause as much widespread devastation as the transfer of populations during the creation of new nation-states and the consolidation of national identities after World War II. Whether Jews and Gypsies in Europe, Arabs in Palestine, or Hindus and Muslims in India and Pakistan, millions of people suffered the destruction of familiar landmarks and the uprooting to a new landscape—emotional as much as physical—of emptiness and ruins.

Faced with this man-made void, the biographer as well as the poet is forced to double as a social and cultural historian, seeking traces of human endeavor and dignity in vanished modes of existence. Adina Hoffman opens her superb biography of the Palestinian poet Taha Muhammad Ali with a careful reconstruction of his ancestral village (and frequent subject). Almost continuously inhabited since antiquity, Saffuriyya lay three miles north of Nazareth in Galilee, near Israel's present border with Lebanon. For centuries, this village of four thousand Muslims, sitting on a wooded rise, existed outside of history; it had its own rhythms dictated by agricultural and pastoral urgencies that survived the rise and fall of many empires— "always crops to harvest and sheep to graze, goats to milk, wheat to plant or thresh."

The harsh political education of the villagers, like that of many Europeans and Asians caught unawares by the collapse of old empires and the redrawing of borders, began in the twentieth century. World War I exacted some of its great human cost from Galilee, which was then the obscure margin of the sprawling Ottoman Empire. Hoffman describes peasant soldiers from the village returning, starved and often shoeless, from endless futile battles against the British in Sinai: Were they aware as they trudged that the Ottoman Empire was now a thing of the past and that the British, their enemies in the war, were soon to rule Palestine? Stumbling, famished, toward Saffuriyya, had they heard of the Balfour Declaration, the promise made that year by the British foreign secretary to establish in Palestine a "national home for the Jewish people"?

The implications of the lost war and the collapse of their Ottoman Muslim suzerains would become apparent to the residents of Saffuriyya only as Jewish immigration to Palestine increased under British rule. Born in 1931, Taha Muhammad Ali heard the "rueful mumbling" among his elders about the new residents in their midst; he himself saw Jews for the first time when a school group from a nearby kibbutz passed through Saffuriyya, the sun-tanned boys and girls walking together and, incredibly, wearing shorts.

A few militants from Saffuriyya joined the Arab rebellion that erupted in Palestine in 1936 against the rapid growth of Jewish immigration; the village suffered from the harsh British crackdown. But life in Saffuriyya went on with its own small joys and tragedies. Taha learned to read in an elementary religious school and first savored the imaginative life in an anthology of Arabic poetry. While still a teenager, he set up a small kiosk selling cigarettes and fizzy drinks to help relieve his family's straitened circumstances; a younger brother abruptly died of measles.

Another world war erupted in distant Europe and spread to the Middle East, again drawing young men from the village. Taha's business continued to grow. His cousin and bride-to-be Amira, a tall, graceful girl, became a source of longing. He bought his first modern book, a memoir of the nationalistic Palestinian poet Ibrahim Tuqan. Another sibling, a sister, also succumbed to measles.

As World War II ended and British withdrawal from Palestine seemed imminent, violence between Arabs and Jews intensified. In 1947, Taha's teenaged cousin was shot dead by a sniper apparently belonging to the Jewish militant group Irgun. The UN's decision to partition Palestine into independent Arab and Jewish states was met with disbelief in the village.

Armed irregulars from neighboring countries, part of the ragtag Arab armies that poured into Palestine to thwart the creation of a Jewish state, briefly appeared in Saffuriyya. But then the soldiers disappeared, killed in battle with the Haganah, the Jewish paramilitary organization, or gone AWOL. And though Arab refugees from cities conquered by the Jews streamed into nearby Nazareth, the village was calm again in early 1948; "it took a concerted effort to believe the newspapers...that grave things were happening elsewhere."

"The harvest began," Hoffman writes with a narrative brio underpinned by detailed interviews with the residents of Saffuriyya.

Taha pattered in his shop. The bells around the goats' necks clanged, and their bleating mixed with that flat brass music when the shepherds returned with the flocks from the fields in the evenings.

On the evening of July 15, 1948, two months after the state of Israel was officially established, Taha broke his Ramadan fast with a traditional meal and then set out with his new flock of sixteen young goats to graze on the hillsides around the village. He had been walking for about five minutes when

he heard an odd, low, whirring sound, something circling in the air above. As it lifted to a whistle, then mounted to a roar, he saw a brilliant flash, felt a crash and tremor, and another—then everything was smashing glass and rising smoke, shouts in the distance, wailing nearby, people running, children crying, the sixteen kids yelping in terror as they scattered.

The bombs of the Israeli air force were followed by a ground assault. When Dov Yermiya, a company commander in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), who was later revered as one of Israel's founding fathers, captured the village, it was mostly empty. Taha caught up with his fleeing family outside the village, part of the helter-skelter Arab exodus toward Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon.

Walking for two days and nights, they reached Lebanon. Taha was able to save his family from the worst degradations of overcrowded refugee camps. But the death of his only remaining sister and the immense grief of his mother finally made a precarious situation intolerable. A year after fleeing

Saffuriyya, Taha sneaked back into Israel with his family, leaving behind his betrothed Amira in Lebanon. He waited almost a decade for her before learning that she had married someone else.

New Israeli regulations put Taha and his family, along with tens of thousands of Palestinians, in a category of "Present Absentees" — Arabs with no right to reclaim the property they had briefly abandoned. In any case, Saffuriyya had ceased to exist. Soon after conquering the village, the Israeli military expelled its surviving inhabitants to nearby towns and villages. Saffuriyya's buildings were dynamited, its land shared out among new kibbutzes and a moshav, and its name changed to "Tzipori."

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My Happiness Bears No Relation to Happiness, the first full-length biography in English of a Palestinian poet, would be a remarkable achievement even if it merely commemorated the life and work of Taha Muhammad Ali. However, Taha's private strivings, triumphs, and disappointments are linked inseparably to the fate of his community; his biography describes as well the obscure but intense struggles of an entire people: the Israeli Arabs, or Palestinians with Israeli citizenship, who though constituting 20 percent of Israel's population are much less written about than their counterparts in the West Bank and Gaza.

This unavoidably broadened canvas poses daunting challenges to even a biographer as diligent and resourceful as Adina Hoffman, an Israeli-American writer and publisher based in Jerusalem. There are any number of Israeli official histories and memoirs about 1948 and its aftermath, but hardly any accounts by Palestinians of what they call the *Nakba*, catastrophe. Aware of this asymmetry of knowledge, Hoffman not only examines Israeli archives with unremitting skepticism; she also questions perspicaciously the Palestinian tellers of anecdotes and the few surviving Israeli witnesses to the past (such as Dov Yermiya, whose conviction that Saffuriyya was not bombed from the air turns out to be one of the partial truths cherished by both sides in an intractable conflict).

Occasionally, Hoffman may seem to romanticize Arab rural life, as when in a private museum she comes across some "heartbreakingly modest paraphernalia":

baskets and mortars, shaving kits and wooden dowry boxes, a gauzy woman's headscarf, trimmed with a dainty, handmade menagerie of silk-thread birds and flowers.

Appalled by some Israeli prejudices — according to Hoffman, "the Arabs are animals" was "a phrase one heard almost daily" in Jerusalem after a spate of Palestinian suicide bombings — she digresses often to mock received wisdom or prick a distended reputation in Israel.

However, much of her account of the early ordeals of Palestinian Israelis builds upon the research of the "New Historians": a broadly defined group of Israeli scholars, including Tom Segev, Ilan Pappé, and Benny Morris, who have challenged many Israeli nationalist myths. Hoffman describes Nazareth's unsanitary conditions in which Arabs, including Taha, fleeing or expelled from their towns and villages, improvised their daily existence. Their political situation was no better. Until 1966, Arabs in Israel lived under a form of martial law that severely restricted their right to travel; permits were required for journeys of a few miles.

Most Palestinian leaders and intellectuals had departed in 1948, leaving behind a "battered-down and largely illiterate peasant population." Arabs arrested while trying to return to their ancestral lands in Israel were described as "infiltrators" and expelled, if not executed. Taha himself was arrested after his return from Lebanon and pushed across the border; he managed to return, and then lived in fear of discovery until some months later he secured an Israeli identity card and moved to Nazareth, where he has lived for more than half a century, running a souvenir shop near the Church of the Annunciation.

Hoffman describes how the Palestinian Israelis created an underground literary culture even as they struggled to survive. Initially, there was little to read. Hoffman writes that "almost no Arabic books were available for sale in Israel" due to the blockade of Israel by Arab states and Israeli restrictions; censorship kept indigenous production of books and magazines to the barest minimum; there were no contacts between writers in Arabic and Hebrew. In one of her anecdotes, Hoffman describes how Arabs employed as olive pickers in Lydda and Ramla, neighboring towns of Nazareth, stole Arabic classics from the homes of Palestinians expelled by Israel.

A cultural lifeline opened when Sasson Somekh, an Iraqi-Jewish immigrant, brought books from Baghdad that introduced the modernist breakthroughs of Arabic poetry to aspiring Arab poets in Israel. The Israeli Communist Party, which alone admitted Arabs as members, published a newspaper, *al-Jadid (The New)*, which carried poems, essays, and stories by Nazim Hikmet, Pablo Neruda, Paul Éluard, Bertolt Brecht, Maxim Gorky, and other icons of left-wing reading circles.

But it was poetry festivals held from the mid-1950s in villages and towns throughout Galilee that became the most important means of political and cultural self-affirmation for an isolated population. These public recitals of poetry, the most popular Arab literary form, attracted thousands of Palestinians, many of them illiterate; the performers used verse to speak of subjects ranging from the injustices of the military regime and the ordeals of Palestinian refugees to the triumphs of anticolonial movements in Algeria and Vietnam and the promise of Arab nationalism.

Mahmoud Darwish, the national poet of Palestinians, who as a young man was among the early audiences and then later enraptured them himself, remembered the festivals as "folk celebrations." The other Arab poet who acquired his legend from the public recitals was Rashid Hussein. In one account he appeared on stage wearing a traditional kaffiyeh and, Hoffman writes, "set all hearts afire" with his poem "I am from Asia," "a declaration of deep identification with Nehru and his people's struggle." Alternately poet, publisher, journalist, and spokesman for the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), Rashid lived the intense but unfocused life of the perennial exile before dying in 1977 in his New York apartment of what his friend I.F. Stone called "homelessness."

Contemplating Rashid's tragically unfulfilled life (the biography is full of such briskly sketched but powerful portraits), Hoffman wonders

what force of history or character or sheer bad luck was it that drove Rashid to his smoky death in that cramped apartment on East Forty-sixth Street, while thirty years later Mahmoud Darwish received interviewers from all over the world in a grand office in battered, army-checkpoint-encircled Ramallah and Taha Muhammad Ali sat poring intently over a dog-eared dictionary in his Nazareth souvenir shop?

Certainly, Taha is the unlikeliest of Palestinian poets. Hoffman writes that Israeli police files, which contain the most trivial details about Arab writers and their gatherings, make no reference to Taha—the clearest sign of his invisibility during the long decades when Palestinian poetry developed its main body of work. Though he was in close proximity to the Marxist, mainly Christian, Arab poets, who often gathered at his shop, Taha was not overtly political, or much interested in apostrophizing in verse the Palestinian "people." Hoffman writes that Taha, who jokingly calls himself "a Muslim who sells Christian trinkets to Jews," "simply refused to accept the divisive terms dictated by others, whether chauvinistic Israeli bureaucrats or his more militant Palestinian friends."

In 1971, Mahmoud Darwish dramatically announced his decision to leave Israel at a press conference in Cairo. Taha, however, remained in Nazareth, with the result that he is still relatively unknown within the Palestinian diaspora. Unlike Rashid, who studied at Israeli institutions, or Darwish, who pursued his self-education in Hebrew, or the Marxist Emile Habiby, Taha received a very basic formal training at his village school. Mostly self-taught in Arabic and English, he did his first serious reading of the texts that inspired him to write while he was hiding from the Israeli military after his return from Lebanon in 1948. (A tireless autodidact, Taha experienced Israel's military victory over Egypt, Syria, and Jordan in 1967 less as a humiliation for Arabs than as an opportunity to get access to Arabic books in the occupied territories.)

He dabbled in fiction and essays but did not publish any poetry until he was forty. In 1971, he sent his first poem to Anton Shammas, the Palestinian-Israeli author of the novel *Arabesques*, and then a young editor at *al-Sharq*, a literary magazine in Jerusalem. Shammas remembers being "totally floored by it." More poems followed, many of them about Saffuriyya and its inhabitants, simple village folk who had been overwhelmed by historical forces beyond their understanding.

"Freedom consists," Tolstoy once said, "in my not having made the laws." Taha seems to have been similarly alert to the creative paradoxes of his isolation and lack of national tradition. Unencumbered by convention, he developed a highly personal and independent idiom, which blends colloquial with classical Arabic. Writing nonmetrical, unrhymed verse, Taha also used a lower register than most of his Palestinian contemporaries. Here, for instance, is the opening stanza of Mahmoud Darwish's most famous, if untypical, poem, titled "Identity Card," a monologue addressed by an Arab worker to an Israeli official:

Write it down!
I'm an Arab.
Card number, fifty thousand.
I have eight children
and the ninth is due after the summer.
So, are you angry?

Taha's best-known poem, published in 1973, is titled "Abd el-Hadi Fights a Superpower." Inspired by a radio report of Egyptian villagers trying to sell Coca-Cola to American marines on board the USS *Enterprise* in the Suez Canal, it has none of the incantatory fervor of the national bard. Abd el-Hadi, an ordinary fellahin, is characteristic of the figures that recur in Taha's early poetry:

In his life
he neither wrote nor read.

*In his life he
didn't cut down a single tree,
didn't slit the throat
of a single calf.
In his life he did not speak
of the New York Times
behind its back,
didn't raise
his voice to a soul
except in his saying:
"Come in, please,
by God, you can't refuse."
Nevertheless—
his case is hopeless,
his situation
desperate.
His God-given rights are a grain of salt
tossed into the sea.
Ladies and gentlemen of the jury:
about his enemies
my client knows not a thing.
And I can assure you,
were he to encounter
the entire crew
of the aircraft carrier Enterprise,
he'd serve them eggs
sunny-side up,
and labneh
fresh from the bag.*

In these early poems about Saffur-iyya, Taha seems to have created a folk mythology: a personal monument to the dignity and grace of the unremembered men and women of his village. His later poems deal more explicitly with the deteriorating situation of the Palestinians. In 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon in an attempt to expel the PLO from the country and install a friendly Christian government. The invasion, an inspiration of Defense Minister Ariel Sharon, deeply affected Taha, who, like many Palestinian Israelis, had relatives and friends just across Israel's northern border, including Amira, whom he had last seen more than three decades earlier, and who had become, in the intervening years, his most intimate, if invisible, muse.

Helped by a resourceful Israeli- Jewish friend, Taha visited Amira after the invasion to find that Israeli bombs had leveled her house along with many other modest dwellings in a large Palestinian refugee camp outside Sidon. A poem he published in 1983 after a long silence brings together the poet's two worlds, the real tangible one of history and the inner world of dreams and phantasms:

AMBERGRIS

*Our traces have all been erased,
our impressions swept away—*

*and all the remains
have been effaced...
there isn't a single sign
left to guide us
or show us a thing.
The age has grown old,
the days long,
and I, if not for the lock of your hair,
auburn as the nectar of carob,
and soft as the scent of silk
that was here before,
dozing like Arabian jasmine,
shimmering like the gleam of dawn,
pulsing like a star—
I, if not for that lock of camphor,
would feel not a thing
linking me
to this land.*

Upholding desire and memory over the abstractions of blood and soil, Taha transcends the territorial nationalism that, by a cruel irony of history, is a source of both pain and hope for Palestinians. In his beguiling mix of conservatism and absolute love of spiritual freedom, he resembles the great poets of Eastern Europe, Zbigniew Herbert and Czesław Miłosz, who also witnessed the obliteration of the world they knew, and whose sense of the precarious nature of things opened out into an intense but egoless awareness.

Taha's later poems convey not so much the troubled self-exploration that defines much contemporary Western poetry as the humility of a survivor of the storm of progress, for whom life itself is a source of wonder. And such is the lucidity and quiet urgency of his vision that it seems to force itself effortlessly from Arabic into English (with the advantage, admittedly, of some highly skilled translations by the poets Peter Cole, who is Hoffman's husband, Gabriel Levin, and Yahya Hijazi, who are jointly responsible for the translations published here).^[1]

A later poem titled "Warning" further underlines Taha's sense of aesthetic and spiritual autonomy:

*Lovers of hunting,
and beginners seeking your prey:
Don't aim your rifles
at my happiness,
which isn't worth
the price of the bullet
(you'd waste on it).
What seems to you
so nimble and fine,
like a fawn,
and flees
every which way,*

*like a partridge,
isn't happiness.
Trust me:
my happiness bears
no relation to happiness.*

In the last decade, Taha has become better known, including in Israel, where in 2006 a selection of his poems, translated by Anton Shammas into Hebrew, brought him a highly enthusiastic audience. Large crowds greet his appearances at international poetry festivals⁶ it was at one such event in Jerusalem that Adina Hoffman, who had already met Taha, heard him read his poetry, and decided to write his biography.

Meanwhile, his old landmarks continue to be erased. The Lebanese town in which he and his family had sought refuge was destroyed by Israel in its second Lebanon war in 2006; a Hezbollah rocket damaged the Haifa offices of *al-Ittihad*, the magazine where some of the most famous Palestinian writers once worked.

Taha, however, seems to be settling deeper into an Epicurean serenity in his old age. On the last page of Hoffman's book, we see him in his old haunts, the fields near Saffuriyya:

The vine's shade is a relief from the heat, and the dense smell of the summertime fields mixes headily with that of the boiling coffee. Taha, meanwhile, leans back on the couch. Lacing his fingers over his chest and closing his eyes, he lets out a sigh of⁶ it seems⁶ contentment, as he breathes in what remains of the Saffuriyya air.

Notes

^[6]See Taha Muhammad Ali, *So What: New and Selected Stories (with a story), 1971–2005*, translated by Peter Cole, Yahya Hijazi, and Gabriel Levin (Copper Canyon, 2006).