

Recollecting the Palestinian Past

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Gate of the Sun, by Elias Khoury, trans. Humphrey Davies, Archipelago Books.

“WHAT HAS terrified me most, for as long as I have been conscious, is that I am a writer,” Elias Khoury confessed in a 1993 interview published in the Beirut literary magazine *al-Adab*. “We live in an oral society that doesn’t write things down. . . . And my fear has been that our present and past are facing extinction.”

Terror at the awareness of his own bookish calling has, it should be said, hardly held the Lebanese writer back. On the contrary, fear of that verbal void and of what he describes in the same interview as the “enormous eraser” that Lebanese society has used to rub out its own history has only spurred his work over the years. A prolific novelist, critic, political commentator, and influential editor, Khoury has been a prominent member of Lebanon’s literary avant-garde for more than three decades. His previous novels are mostly short yet somehow capacious attempts to stave off this forgetting by transcribing events—especially the 1975–1990 civil war and the 1982 Israeli invasion—in a splintered, often hallucinatory style that seems meant to record not just what happened but, more essentially, how the horrors registered as they were unfolding. Floods of twice- and sometimes half-told tales, his books embody the very disintegration of war-torn Lebanese society and, in doing so, boldly risk replicating the collapse of the country itself.

For Khoury, such formal gambles are never mere abstractions; they are extensions of a life lived in flux and in conflict. This is a man who was robbed both of his house and his eyesight during his country’s civil war. Though he has since recovered both, these and other wartime losses inform every word that he writes. An Orthodox Christian, born in 1948 (as was the modern Middle East), he joined Yasser

Arafat's Fatah movement in 1967. During the civil war he broke rank with most Lebanese Christians and fought against the Phalange (and later the Israelis) alongside the Muslim leftists and the Palestinians, who had already begun to populate his books and to present themselves to him as the people with perhaps the ultimate unwritten story. If the specter of literary annihilation struck Khoury as frightening in the wider Arab context, it must have been even more terrifying for him to discover, when he turned to study Palestinian history, that the existential threat to that people's future was paralleled by the almost total absence of texts about their past.

Given the glut of contemporary polemics surrounding Israel/Palestine, mention of this vacuum may sound ironic. Has any persecuted people—the Jews aside—been written about more often than the Palestinians? Yet as anyone knows who has ever attempted to examine the last, traumatic Palestinian century from the inside out and ground up—that is, from the viewpoint of the *fellahin* (peasants), who constituted almost seventy percent of pre-1948 Palestinian Arab society—it is not ironic in the slightest. While in the years before the Nakba, or Catastrophe, middle- and upper-class Palestinian city-dwellers, many of them Christian, published newspapers, wrote books and letters in several languages, and snapped elegant family portraits at an impressive rate, there was no rural equivalent of this urban and urbane urge to preserve. In 1947, the literacy rate for Muslims in Palestine stood at roughly twenty-one percent. The number is a slippery one, since—as cultural historian Ami Ayalon explains in his excellent *Reading Palestine*—the notion of who counted as a literate citizen in this context was extremely fluid and may have referred to everyone from “fully educated people who could read [literary Arabic] texts of any kind,” to those who could “decode . . . a passage in a prayer book. . . or. . . sign their names.” Yet however one does the math, it is clear that the countryside was hardly a hotbed of paper-pushing activity and that whatever documents might once have existed were destroyed in 1948. The extant British Mandatory and Israeli archives do provide fascinating glimpses of life in the villages, but the leery, controlling attitudes put forth in those

police, army, and administrative files are, not surprisingly, quite removed from the peasants' own.

This is not to say that historical consciousness was foreign to the *fellahin*. An intensely oral people, they passed on their heritage over the years through the persistent retelling and reworking of tales, folk poems, songs, sayings—most of them rendered in Palestinian Arabic dialect, which is, by its very nature, an unwritten language. (It is perhaps important to point out here that Arabic is bifurcated into a single literary language—called *fus'ha*—and a terrific range of local dialects, each known as *'ammiyeh*. The former is the standard language of written texts, news broadcasts, and most political speeches and is uniform throughout the Arab world, while the latter is the tongue in which people speak, shout, shop, and joke. It varies so widely from place to place that an Arab from, say, Damascus would likely be hard pressed to understand the *'ammiyeh* of an Arab from Fez.) And while the rich and tenacious Palestinian oral tradition may have served its society well in the cohesive, rooted context of pre-Nakba village life, the events of 1948 meant the near-certain demise of this legacy. “The victims of the victims,” to use Edward Said’s apt phrase, the Palestinians found themselves wrestling not just militarily but also rhetorically with one of the more print-obsessed nations on the planet, a people of both *The Book* and the books.

In this fateful war of the words, the Israelis had, and still have, a tremendous edge. As the work of historians like Benny Morris has shown, even the nascent Jewish state took care to keep excellent records. And much of what gives a chronicle like Morris’s *Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem* its authority is its heavy reliance on written documents. Despite the ostensible farewell that his best-known book bids to many of Israel’s founding myths—he was the first to write systematically of the less heroic actions taken by Israel in 1948, including expulsions and massacres—Morris himself is a military historian, and one whose sympathies and research have been confined almost entirely to the Israeli point of view, however unflattering. He has also made clear his basic contempt for oral history by describing the “enormous gaps of memory and terrible distortion”

that he says hold sway in interviews. This skepticism and the concomitant refusal to listen to the only Palestinian record that exists—the spoken record—seriously compromise Morris’s otherwise valuable scholarly project.

Morris has been rightly criticized for underestimating the political and personal agendas that also hold sway as documents are written. (The debate is hardly new. Plutarch wrote, “It is so hard to find out the truth of anything by looking at the record of the past. The process of time obscures the truth of former times, and even contemporaneous writers disguise and twist the truth out of malice or flattery.”) And in fact when one dips into the same English and Israeli archives mentioned above, one quickly sees just how subjective the picture culled from such documents can be. Indeed, the very idea that a monolingual, homesick British constable, a paid Arab informant for the Haganah intelligence service, or a battle-bound IDF officer would leave behind a paper trail that might represent without bias the reality facing the frightened, unarmed residents of a besieged Palestinian farming community is problematic, to say the least. (Now and then Morris will qualify or question the information put forth by such sources, but most often he takes it at face value, as a statement of plain fact.)

In this respect, Morris and his more traditional Israeli colleagues appear, rather conveniently, to have missed the methodological boat. Since the 1930s, when the WPA Federal Writers’ Project conducted its groundbreaking interviews with former slaves—and many others, from sharecroppers to immigrants to streetwalkers—oral history has been used to record the experiences of everyone from Pennsylvania Second World War veterans to the Hmong of Laos to Oregon’s Japanese settlers. Over time much of the rest of the world has come to accept the critical use of such accounts (combined with the examination of written sources, photographs, and any number of other media) as a legitimate and important means of learning about the lives of ordinary people.

The larger problem is that Morris is not alone in his skepticism. If anything, his doubts about the reliability of the Palestinian

perspective are shared by many in the West and in Israel, and it is this mistrust that Elias Khoury confronted when he set out to write his 1998 novel *Gate of the Sun*. The book is woven in large part of stories that the author himself gathered over the years from Palestinian refugees living in Lebanese camps, especially stories of what happened to the peasants of the Acre, Safad, and Nazareth districts as their villages fell to the Israeli army throughout the spring and summer of 1948. When the novel was published in Hebrew in 2002, the journalist and historian Tom Segev lashed out in bizarrely hostile terms—accusing Khoury of the high crime of having written of a massacre (in the village of Sha’ab) that Benny Morris’s book doesn’t mention. According to Segev, Khoury had breached the terms of his poetic license. “The burden of proof lies with the author,” proclaimed Segev. “Khoury doesn’t present a single scrap of evidence to support his claims. He isn’t an author who is known in Israel and there is no reason to believe him.”

Never mind that the story of Sha’ab is in fact told, exactly as Khoury tells it, complete with the real names of many of the actual villagers, in several other seminal books, including Nafez Nazzal’s *The Palestinian Exodus from Galilee, 1948* and Rosemary Sayigh’s *Palestinians: From Peasants to Revolutionaries*. Both of these books are, it’s true, based on oral accounts and so would presumably not pass scholarly muster with Morris and Segev—but here Morris is inconsistent. “I have found interviews occasionally of use in providing ‘color’ and in reconstructing a picture of prevailing conditions and, sometimes, feelings. But not in establishing ‘facts,’” he writes dismissively, and then turns around and relies without comment on Nazzal’s book—that is, on interviews conducted years after 1948 but assembled in the form of a published text—as one of his trusted sources.

And put aside the fact that it would be a very peculiar novel that provided evidence of the bagged and labeled sort that Segev seems to be demanding. Segev’s condemnation is staggeringly tone-deaf to one of the central points of Khoury’s sophisticated novel. *Gate of the Sun* is, in essence, an attempt to reckon with the way stories are

told—and reduced and embellished and fetishized and forgotten and sometimes badly twisted. While Khoury certainly means his intricate story-of-these-stories to say something specific about Palestine and Palestinian perception, imagination, and memory, he is also engaged in a more ambitious and wide-ranging exploration of the way that human beings, everywhere, sustain and delude themselves with legends, both spoken and written. Israelis included. At one point, the narrator muses on a phrase that was traditionally used to start old Arabic tales—not “Once upon a time . . .” but “Once upon a time there was—or there wasn’t. . .” Perhaps all historians of the Middle East should consider opening their books with this frank caveat.



A vast and important novel—maybe the first fictional attempt to convey through its own sprawling scope the massive scale and complexity of the Palestinian tragedy—*Gate of the Sun* begins with a death and ends with a death, and spends the more than five hundred pages that separate these two mortal moments fending off (what else?) extinction. This campaign takes place, first, at the most basic, bodily level, as the narrator, Khalil, once a Palestinian guerilla, now a halfhearted male nurse, attempts to postpone the inevitable passing of the older Yunes, hero of the resistance, who lies comatose in the barely functioning Galilee Hospital in the miserable Shatila refugee camp on the outskirts of battered Beirut. These feel like the camp’s twilight hours: the other *fedayeen* have long since sailed away; the massacres and sieges that ravaged the place in the early and mid 1980s have passed; Lebanon’s civil war is history. Indeed, history itself seems to be history, and all that is left for Khalil to do is cling to its fading memory and watch the IV drip.

But how he clings. Besides bathing, powdering, and feeding Yunes the choicest mountain honey through the tube in his nose, Khalil tells his unconscious patient stories, and it is this talky therapy that he hopes will somehow miraculously stir the great man from his slumber. “I’m trying to rouse you with words,” Khalil explains

early on—with a nod to Scheherazade and perhaps also to Sleeping Beauty—though in almost the same breath he has the wisdom to admit the possible selfishness of his efforts: “I’ve turned your death into a hiding place for myself.” Running from forces both figurative and literal, the teller may in fact be the one most reliant on this narrative life-support system.

On the face of it, Yunes is a flesh-and-blood stand-in for the mighty, fallen homeland. To keep his heart pounding would be nothing less than to maintain Palestine’s pulse. “He’s a symbol,” Khalil goes so far as to declare at one point, when protecting Yunes from a doctor who views Khalil’s revered freedom fighter as a mere vegetable. “There’s no place for symbols in a hospital,” the doctor snaps back. “The place for symbols is in books.”

Or is it? As one enters the labyrinth of digressions, interruptions, and multiple variations that make up Khalil’s sometimes lyrical and sustained, sometimes lancing and truncated tales, the ailing Yunes comes to seem almost secondary as a symbol; he (or his comatose presence) functions most crucially as a passive goad for Khalil’s talk. And in many ways the death most central to *Gate of the Sun* is that of the symbol itself. For the universe of details that accrue through the time-traveling stories that Khalil spins are of the most homely and tangible sort: about the smell of the cave called Bab al-Shams—the titular Gate of the Sun—near the formerly Palestinian, currently Israeli village of Deir al-Asad where the border-crossing Yunes and his wife Nahilah, who stayed behind in 1948, would meet in secret for years; about the chaos that arose as the villagers of al-Birwa attempted to harvest their wheat amid the fighting in 1948; about the postcoital fried cauliflower with *taratur* sauce that Khalil ate in Shatila with his own lover, the elusive rebel Shams. “No ideas but in things,” these stories seem to be saying. Or in people. No Palestine but in Palestinians.

In one of his meandering monologues, Khalil reminds Yunes that Ghassan Kanafani—the Palestinian novelist, critic, and spokesman for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, who wrote several classic works of blunt yet affecting agitprop (the best known,

Men in the Sun and *Returning to Haifa*)—once interviewed Yunes in the 1950s about his dangerous stealth journeys from Lebanon to the Israeli-controlled Galilee. Kanafani took notes, but didn't ever do anything with what he'd scribbled. "He was looking for mythic stories and yours was just the story of a man in love." Had Kanafani not been murdered years ago by the Mossad, Khalil assures his oblivious charge, *he* would be the one sitting in this hospital room, trying to gather the scattered threads of Yunes's saga. "Times," he explains, "have changed."



Gate of the Sun is, in other words, a book in which nothing—and everything—happens. Stasis and motion are counterpoised as events pile up and begin to merge, so that it is sometimes hard to say if we are hearing of a bloodbath that took place in 1948 or one that transpired in 1982. (Khoury could not, of course, have anticipated the events of the last calamitous Lebanese summer—but one could easily add the bloodbath of 2006 to this grisly list.) Paradoxically, the book also relies on endless variety: every character, no matter how minor, has a singular story to tell. This multiplicity works slyly to undermine the popular notion that there are just two narratives—Israeli and Palestinian—locked in eternal, hopeless battle. Here the narratives are manifold, for Nahilah's story and Shams's story are also complicated alternatives to the stories of Khalil and Yunes, and to those of the hundreds of other characters who enter and exit the book. And the forces against which these people must fight are never just Israeli—or British or Phalangist. There are generational battles to be waged, as well as sexual struggles and wars with the self.

Translation, too, plays a role in this narrative proliferation. Soon after its Arabic publication, *Gate of the Sun* appeared in Hebrew translation with the valiant Andalus Press, which is devoted to publishing Arabic literature in Hebrew and has sent various shock waves through Israel and the Arab world by doing so with real flair, defying both Jewish bigots in Israel and Arab bigots in Egypt, for whom translation into Hebrew—"a dead language" according

to Cairene novelist Sonallah Ibrahim—equals normalization. For Khoury, meanwhile, the Hebrew translation of his book was central to its very being: he has described how, in a profound sense, the book was “written in two languages. . . Arabic and Hebrew at the same time. I mean that when I was working on this book I discovered that the other is the mirror of the self.” One sometimes feels the strain involved in Khoury’s earnest attempt to position these mirrors: the only scene in the book that rings false involves the meeting between a Palestinian refugee from a Lebanese camp and the Lebanese Jew—now an Israeli—who took over her house and still uses her furniture in what once was the village of al-Kweikat. Khoury pushes hard to create an empathetic equivalence between the Lebanese Jew who longs for Beirut and the Palestinian who longs for her village. As a political gesture, this scene is admirable, but in literary terms, the symmetry is too neat—hardly something that can be said of the rest of the raggedly abundant book.

Perhaps it suits a work so polyphonous and plural, but my own experience of reading this book, first in the Arabic and then in Humphrey Davies’s English translation, was in a sense like absorbing two separate novels. Khoury’s Arabic is a marvel of fluidity and incantatory control. As one story gives way to the next—and as Khalil’s first-person narration slips into the third and then slides into the second—one feels oneself carried on the rippling surface of the prose and by the alternation of dramatic tension and release that works as naturally as systole and diastole. This rhythmic exchange is part of the deep pleasure that the book affords in Arabic, and in some ways it offers a further gloss on the complex relation that Khoury posits between spoken and written texts: the book is composed in literary Arabic but possesses something of the unadorned directness of the spoken vernacular. The melodic nature of that plain version of the literary language gives it the lulling sound of a story read to a child before sleep—though the ironies are many, since Yunes has already drifted off, past dreaming, and it is not clear if Khalil is actually speaking aloud, or if his monologue is internal. He may well be talking to himself, though the silent presence of the reader (for whom, it

seems, the story is really being told and written) also complicates matters in the best way.

Davies's English—while clear, and true to the literal meaning of Khoury's words—is a far flatter affair, which never lifts off the page and into the realm of music. There are also a host of minor but irksome mistakes that show that he knows what the Arabic means, though not how specific words and elements come together in the Palestinian context. For instance, Davies translates “Resident Absentees” instead of the standard, oxymoronic “Present Absentees” (for the some 35,000 Palestinians who remained in Israel after 1948 but were not counted in its first census); he refers to the Revolt that took place in Palestine from 1936–1939 as “the Revolution”; and, more egregiously, he seems to confuse the Jaysh al-Jihad al-Muqaddas (literally the “Army of the Holy Jihad”), a specific force led in 1948 by ‘Abd al-Qadar al-Husseini, with “jihad” in the general Islamic sense. It may sound like nitpicking to mention errors of this sort, but such missteps indicate a more essential disorientation that mars the translation as a whole.

Still, while much of the poetry of the original is missing from the English, the narrative power of this remarkable novel comes through, as does its admirable openness. Most striking against the bleak historical backdrop is that the book—in both Arabic and English—offers a peculiar hope. It may be a work born of dread (“we live in an oral society that doesn't write things down. . . and my fear has been that our present and past are facing extinction”), but Khoury has pushed past his own anxiety by transcribing and making art of the spoken. In the process, he has also done away with so many other tired dualities that plague this part of the world: Arab and Jew, man and woman, high and low, us and them, now and then.