

## **Rewriting the Oppressor's Narrative: Literature as Resistance in Ramzy Baroud's *My Father Was a Freedom Fighter: Gaza's Untold Story***

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Words have the unique potential to sensitise human beings to issues that they have been ignorant of and to transport them to unseen or unexperienced realities. Literature by Palestinian diasporic writers has become a poignant tool to provide comprehensive and realistic glimpses of the massive sufferings of Palestinians which have been camouflaged by distorted historical accounts, literary works and manipulative media. This paper tries to analyse Ramzi Baroud's memoir *My Father Was a Freedom Fighter: Gaza's Untold Story* as an instance of resistance against the continued oppressive occupation of Palestine by Israel, the settler state. Moreover, the paper digs deep into how Baroud subverts the popularly accepted version of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and lays bare the profundity of the trauma and tribulations that Palestinians have been undergoing for years. The paper examines the potential of writing as a tool for persistent and sustainable resistance against oppression and how 'counter writing' can be used as a sharp weapon to subvert the falsity of the grand narratives in the spectrum.

**Keywords:** resistance, writing back, Palestinian occupation, grand narratives, manipulative media.

## **Introduction**

Literature being the finest expression of language, creates and recreates ideas generated in human perception with the unique capacity to transcend the limits of temporality and materiality. The post-colonial era saw the emergence of counter-narratives that dismantled the age-old perceptions and images the dominant propagandist narratives have established. Subverting the made-up ‘realities’ of the oppressor discernible in their histories and narratives, literature by the oppressed carries the voices of the underprivileged and makes them heard. With the writers from the margins reacting to the grand narratives of the centre, the facts and realities, hitherto remaining wrapped up surfaced themselves.

Literature plays a substantial role in the decades-long resistance of the Palestinians against the Israeli occupation. Though the state of Israel was formed in 1948, the country could emerge as a legitimate state and become acceptable to the global society only as an outcome of the pro-Zionist propagandist narratives perpetuated by the world superpowers. Resultantly, people across the globe, especially those in the West began to sympathise with the Jews whose harrowing Holocaust experience has not yet been forgotten. Mohammed S. Dajani Daoudi and Zeina M. Barakat (2013) in their article, *Israelis and Palestinians: Contested Narratives* state that the frame of reference that defines and creates borders around perceptions on Palestinian-Israeli issues “is Israel-centered, approaching the conflict generally from an Israeli perspective and seldom recognizing the existence or the legitimacy of a Palestinian perspective” (p. 61). Palestinian writers all over the world try to alter these prevalent, stereotyped perceptions. Challenging the manipulative media stereotypes catering to the vested interests of Israel and the Western powers, Palestinian writers, especially diasporic writers, bring forth the intensity of the massive sufferings Palestinians go through each day. Prominent writers like Mahmoud Darwish, Ghassan Kanafani, Mourid Barghouti, Sahar Kalifeh, Susan Abulhawa, etc. resist the occupation of their homeland with their soulful writings. “Going beyond the imposed legacy of history, Palestinian writers reclaim their loss and dispossession in miraculous words...Palestinian literature is at

the heart of the Palestinian struggle” (Salam Mir, 2013, p. 1). In the present paper, a memoir of prominent Palestinian-American author Ramzy Baroud is analysed to study how he uses his words as an act of resistance against the continued Israeli occupation suppressing Palestinians for decades.

### **Literature as Resistance in *My Father Was a Freedom Fighter: Gaza’s Untold Story***

From George Eliot’s 1876 novel *Daniel Deronda* which created favourable impressions about the establishment of a Jewish homeland in the East (Newton, 2011) to the Balfour Declaration of 1917 which gave legitimacy to the Zionist schemes, many factors played a midwifery role in the birth of Israel in 1948. But the fact that “on the land called Palestine” chosen for establishing a Jewish state, there had “existed as a huge majority for hundreds of years a largely pastoral, a nevertheless socially, culturally, politically, economically identifiable people...” was overlooked as insignificant. (Said, 1980, p.7). Palestine was intentionally and recurrently depicted as empty of inhabitants “not because there were no inhabitants...but because their status as sovereign and human inhabitants was systematically denied” (Said, 1980, p. 66). Palestinian writers strive to correct these falsely yet firmly established notions. “These writers and artists of resistance have taken it upon themselves to *bear witness* to an unspeakable past, something which the dominant History has been bent on silencing” (Hamdi, 2011, p. 23). Ramzy Baroud, for instance, delineates the real past of his homeland intentionally erased from the dominant grand narratives. In his exceptionally well-knit memoir, *My Father Was a Freedom Fighter: Gaza’s Untold Story* which interweaves personal history with that of Palestinian history, Baroud sketches the history of Palestine from the declining years of the Ottoman empire to the recent developments in the 21<sup>st</sup> century along with the history of his family. He brings to attention the lively memories of his ancestral village along with his ancestors enlivening their erased legacy. In poignant words, Baroud recreates the true image of Beit-Daras, his ancestral village: “On that very spot, on the shoulder of that small hill, huddled between numerous meadows and fences of blooming cactus, there once rested that lovely village.” (Baroud, 2010, p. 1) With extensive descriptions

of the geography, social life, commerce, culture, etc. of the people, he brings to life the real picture of the village to the world that was taught to believe that Palestine was inhabited by mere rouses and uncivilised half beasts who were in dire need of a Western process of correction. He reminds the world that the lives of Palestinians are much more than just facts and figures:

For Zionist Jews, Beit-Daras was just another hill, known by a code battle name, to be conquered, as it were. But it should be more than a footnote in David Ben Gurion's *War Diaries*, or Benny Morris's volume, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem*. It's more than a few numbers on an endless chart, whether one that documents victims of massacres, or estimates of Palestinian refugees still reliant on United Nations food aid. For Palestinians, its fall is one of many sorrows in the anthology which is collectively known as *al-Nakba*, or the Catastrophe. (Baroud, 2010, p. 1,2)

While speaking of Beit-Daras, Baroud is not only repainting the tainted image of his village but also the manipulated image of other Palestinian villages and their inhabitants. In contrast, Israeli writer and historian Shmuel Katz, for instance, draws an entirely different picture in *Battle Ground: Fact & Fantasy in Palestine* (1973), his work pertaining to the Palestinian exodus of 1948:

The Arab refugees were not driven from Palestine by anyone. The vast majority left, whether of their own free will or at the orders or exhortations of their leaders, always with the same reassurance—that their departure would help in the war against Israel. (p. 8)

With a detailed description of the villagers' resistance to the Zionist forces in 1948, Baroud thwarts such calculated manipulations in history:

... nothing was to convince the villagers of Beit-Daras to concede an enormously unequalled, ill-fated fight. The men scrambled to invest in a few rifles. Women volunteered their gold, and men donated much of their savings to purchase the rifles, an operation that was handled in extreme secrecy in nearby Isdud. (Baroud, 2010, p. 31)

The author adopts a unique style of blending the personal and the political. Throughout the narrative, the Baroud family history is placed within the larger frame of Palestinian history. Making the work appealing to different types of readers, Baroud narrates the tale of his family living through the tumultuous years of Palestinian history in a language that is simultaneously factual, sarcastic and poetical. Despite the long passages describing the socio-political developments in Palestine, the family saga keeps the reader hooked to the narrative making it lively and touching. And noticeably, the significance of incidents in their personal lives, often, is defined by political events:

I could finally articulate who I was, and for the first time on my own terms. My name was Ramzy, and I was the son of Muhammed, a freedom fighter from Nuseirat, who was driven out of his village of Beit Daras, and the grandson of a peasant who died with a broken heart and was buried beside the grave of my brother, a little boy who died because there was no medicine in the refugee camp's UN clinic. (Baroud, 2010, p. 132)

The work is also interspersed with facts and figures describing various historical occurrences with precision that educate the reader of the Palestinian issue and its real gravity much more accurately than history books or essay collections which are seldom read. The acclaimed Palestinian novelist Susan Abulhawa aptly describes the work in an interview "...when people write about Palestine, it tends to be in dry, sterile prose. There is nothing dry about this book. Even though it's non-fiction, it is full of emotion and wonderful characters." (Books, 2022, para. 2)

Recounting the saga of the toil of three generations of the Baroud family, *My Father Was a Freedom Fighter: Gaza's Untold Story* upsets the commonly perceived notions about Palestinians. When the media across the world depict Palestinians as aggressive terrorists, Baroud's account delves deep into the grim reality of their everyday lives in the suffocating refugee camps. He describes scenes from the camps in such an emotionally charged style that it is scarcely possible not to be stirred by them. "A sinking feeling always came at the sight of a mother slapping her face, pulling her hair, tearing at her clothes,

and reaching out to touch her lifeless child one last time” (Baroud, 2010, p. xiv). The true life of refugees in Gaza, the world’s largest open-air prison, is far from what is depicted in the camouflaged reports of the media and the polemical political narratives of the West. Viewed from the perspective of a common Gazan refugee, the memoir records the daily life in the refugee camps of Gaza which “...offered the refugees only one option, struggle or perish” (Baroud, 2010, p. 60). Baroud lays bare the facts of the ordeal of the Palestinian struggle for survival after the Nakba and in the ensuing years. He further strengthens his narrative with facts and figures as well as personal testimonies and disclosures from the survivors of the Nakba and other refugees from the subsequent generations that defy all manipulative justifications of Israel and the West. As Salman Abu Sitta, author and historian, states in the foreword to the book, Baroud “portrayed the ordeal over six decades... Gathered patiently from the recollections of the survivors, it stands out as an unblemished depiction of their plight. No amount of spin could obliterate this...” (p. xii).

The decades-long ongoing conflict between Palestine and Israel often becomes a topic of heated discussion in international circles. Obviously, the Palestinian cause is widely misunderstood owing to the Western propagandist narratives. Resistance to Israel is often represented as associated “not simply with ‘terrorism’ and ‘communism’ but also with anti-Semitism” (Said & Hitchens, 1988, p. 1,2). Representation of Palestinians “in such public locales as the American television screen, the daily newspaper, the commercial film, shrinks to a few stereotypes -the mad Islamic zealot, the gratuitously violent killer of innocents, the desperately irrational and savage primitive” (Said & Hitchens, 1988, p. 3). Even the factions that find serious fault with Israel discuss the resistance movements of Palestine matter-of-factly without properly gauging the magnitude of actual events occurring in the refugee camps of Palestine. Baroud ridicules such discussions in liberal circles regarding armed resistance by Palestinians in his memoir. Presenting a vividly detailed timeline of the beginning and subsequent development of Palestinian resistance, he brings to the fore the usually overlooked factors such as what

causes such actions from the oppressed population. In an interview by Maha Rahwanji, a Palestinian activist, Baroud says:

We think violence and non-violence, resistance and no-resistance, we always subscribe to this kind of discourse that this is almost like a technical question or a tactical question, you know should Palestinians use violence or not, I think if you truly appreciate Palestinian history, again the way it is, not the way we think it ought to be, you would truly understand that resistance in Palestine was not a matter of strategy, it was a matter of necessity.” (Rahwanji, 2011, para. 5)

Baroud dismisses the rampant misconceptions about Palestinian resistance organisations and their leaders who are portrayed as remorseless terrorists. Discussing the tumultuous political developments in Palestine elaborately, the author throws light on the real picture unblemished by propaganda. Readers get to know about resistance organisations, their history, and their heroes from an entirely different angle in contrast to the distorted accounts of events in circulation.

*My Father Was a Freedom Fighter: Gaza's Untold Story* offers a comprehensive picture of the involvement of the West in the formation and further nurturing of Israel. The various political plots by the superpowers in favour of the Jewish nation destroying the Arab civilisation are immaculately recounted in the narrative. Political moves and calculations are described in great detail, tearing away the seemingly masks of the so-called humanitarian and egalitarian leaders of the world. At the same time, Baroud opts for a very straightforward style to tell his tale, favouring none and with malice to none. He does not overstate or conceal any details when it comes to expounding the incompetence of the Arab nations or the strategic failures of Palestinian leaders. No undue favour is shown to any faction of Palestinian politics. Open criticism as well as praise is showered on them whenever necessary. Baroud has greatly succeeded, as claimed in the acknowledgment of the book, in conveying “a Palestinian narrative—not tainted by politics, not crowded with factionalism and not compromised for any reason ...” (Baroud, 2010, p. x). He further

criticises the Arabs vehemently for their inaction and expresses his strong resentment against the disunity among Palestinian leaders.

### **Conclusion**

Recollecting the tales of tears, endurance, perseverance, toil and resistance of his grandfather, father, and the rest of the family, Ramzy Baroud is apprising the tumults and turbulences in the unpredictable lives of the Palestinian refugees in the camps of Gaza, thus taking ahead the legacy of resistance to further heights. The memoir is highly emotional as well as informative. The painful saga of the Baroud family which is essentially the tale of every Palestinian family under occupation affects the readers deeply and causes a change in their perception. Baroud's words evoke a sense of nostalgia and a willingness for action in the Palestinian readers while unsettling the readers elsewhere, evoking in them a sense of guilt for their indifference to the Palestinian struggle. Bringing to focus the grim reality of the blood congealing life situations of the Palestinians in a compelling and gripping narrative, Baroud effectively wages his battle of resistance for his beloved homeland and further coerces the world to re-examine their presumptions and notions.



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