

## Reading Tahrir Hamdi's *Imagining Palestine* into Al-Aqsa Flood

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**Abstract:** This interview with Tahrir Hamdi, author of *Imagining Palestine: Cultures of Exile and National Identity* (2023), undertakes a retrospective and prospective interrogation of the book's central theses, considering the seismic reverberations of 7<sup>th</sup> October 2023. It probes the conceptual architecture of Hamdi's titular formulation, synthesising Anderson's "imagined communities" and Hirsch's "postmemory" to theorize the ongoing reconstitution of Palestinian national identity across the exilic, diasporic, and occupied Palestinian geographies. It traverses several interconnected axes: the metaphors of marginality; the expressive modalities of dispossessed communities; the indispensability of the oppositional intellectual in sustaining cultures of resistance and counterhegemonic consciousness; the dialectical relationship between armed struggle and aesthetic-intellectual praxis; and the performativity of literature and art as instruments of decolonial mobilization. Hamdi's responses critically reappraise the Palestinian Authority's capitulation through the Oslo Accords, recuperate Fanon's theorization of decolonial violence, and underscore the prescience of the book's engagement with the UNRWA-right of return nexus and the instrumentalization of anti-Semitism. The interview concludes with Hamdi's prospective vision for Palestine, asserting the dismantlement of the Zionist project and the inevitability of return and liberation. This exchange contributes to the burgeoning scholarship on Palestinian cultural production and resistance literature in contexts of ongoing settler colonialism and genocide.

**Keywords:** *Imagining Palestine*, oppositional intellectuals, (post)colonialism, resistance literature

### 1. Introduction

The 2023 Palestine Book Awards-winning *Imagining Palestine: Cultures of Exile and National Identity* is timely and thought-provoking. Having opted for 'and' (in "timely and thought-provoking"), I still would have each reader read the book firsthand and choose an appropriate connector for themselves: *and, therefore, since*, etc. Nonetheless, this interview elucidates that my opting for 'timely' and 'thought-provoking' as well as their ordering are neither mere nor random blurbs.

The titular 'Imagining Palestine' which, otherwise, insinuates an imaginary conceptualization of an abstract entity called 'Palestine' is rather delusive. Hamdi's conceptual 'Imagining Palestine' merges Benedict Anderson's 'imagined communities' (Hamdi 2023:5-6) and Marianne Hirsch's (post)memory (Hamdi 2023: 10) to astutely connote assembling the vestiges/(post)memories indexing a pre-Nakba Palestine into new constellations that are informed by the imperatives of the pending nakbas facing Palestinians (apartheid, occupation, siege, exile (Hamdi

2023: 10, 13, 14)). Furthermore, adapting Patrick Williams's terminology, Hamdi (2023) designates 'Imagining Palestine' as an "anticipatory endeavour" (4) i.e., giving a fillip to "beginning – again" (2). In fine, Hamdi (2023) contends that "imagining ... [and] realizing an actual Palestine" are interactive and inseparable (4). Over and above, being informed by the aforementioned volatile imperatives, it is an "ongoing" process (Hamdi 2023:5) as reflected in its 're'-prefixed synonyms in the book: "re-presenting ... re-constructing ... reconfiguration ... reformulation" (Hamdi 2023:9); "reconfigurations ... reformulations ... recollecting" (Hamdi 2023:10); "reconstruction ... reimaginings" (Hamdi 2023: 14), "imagine/reimagine" (Hamdi 2023: 11).

Hamdi's book adumbrates the guises 'Imagining Palestine' takes, namely theorizing (Chapter 1), poeticizing (Chapter 2), narrativizing (Chapter 3). Chapter 4 examines "Writing [Palestine] on the Wall," particularly: "writings and drawings on the wall ... refugee camp walls ... broken down and peeling walls" (Hamdi 2023: 24).

I had the unique experience of reading the book pre- and post- 7<sup>th</sup> October 2023. Reading Hamdi's book into 'Al-Aqsa Flood' and its seismic reverberations infuses it with relevance and currency – almost prophetic. I contend Hamdi little thought that her passing nod (Hamdi 2023: x) and subsequent references (Hamdi 2023:201, 204, 208) to (now, 'late') Alareer would ever recall his poignant lines: "If I must die, | you must live | to tell my story"; perhaps making him/his tale part of the "continuing conversation" (Hamdi 2023: x) between Hamdi and her dying father – who indeed figures as a storyteller (Hamdi 2023: 11-12). Little did she think that the 1948-uprooted Palestinians 'imagined' preparation "for their return" (Hamdi 2023: 1) would be rehearsed in the early hours of 7<sup>th</sup> October 2023. In this context, Hamdi's: "The ghosts of Palestine have already been weaned ... have by now reached adulthood" (ibid) and Darwish's, otherwise *rhetorical* flight, "Airplanes pursue the ghost in the air. Tanks ... on land. Submarines ... in the sea. The ghost grows up and occupies the killer's consciousness" acquire a stunning prescience. Has Israeli media recently (Gambrell and Debre 2023) found a more appropriate phrase than Ariel Bernstein's (dating 2014): "Like Fighting Ghosts" to portray the *literal* challenge facing IDF in dismantling Hamas's intricate tunnel network? Would Hamdi's theses on the (ab)use of "the label of anti-Semitism" (Hamdi 2023: 17), the UNRWA-Return right correlation (Hamdi 2023: 21), the symbolic value of Israel's winning the 2018 Eurovision (Hamdi 2023: 36) have ever sounded more perceptive than now? How else do we understand, for example, the protests elicited by the (Malmo, Sweden) 2024 Eurovision's admitting the Israeli contester, Eden Golan.

Concurrently and retrospectively, Al-Aqsa Flood behooves an Althusserian symptomatic reading of the book. Indeed, my retrospective review of some of the book's postulations occasioned this interview. I visited Prof. Tahrir Hamdi, the President of Arab Open University in Jordan, in her office on 12<sup>th</sup> November 2024 (though some parts have been added prior to the final editing round before publication such as the reference to Trump's comments), and this is the interview that transpired:

## 2. Interview

**Asma Hussein (hereinafter, A. H.):** I will begin right from the end, namely, the last chapter “Writings on the Wall.” Unlike the first triptych of chapters, Chapter 4 does not read true to its titular suggestiveness. The first part of the chapter is about cartoonist Naji al-Ali and muralist Vince Seven (VIN7). Then this chapter goes on to outline the marriage between the Palestinian and the Afro-American struggles (elaborated earlier in the book (Hamdi 2023: 75-83)), biochemist Hamdi Khalil Hamdi’s patenting Oleuropein, a compound extracted from olive leaves, and the iconic photo featuring Mahfoutha Shtaya embracing her olive tree. The chapter’s last third traces ‘Imagining Palestine’ in popular culture: dancing (dabke(h)), singing (ahazij, ataaba, mawwal, mijana) and dressing (thob). What do olive trees, thobs’ and walls have in common?

**Tahrir Hamdi (hereinafter, T. H.):** Ok. Thank you very much, Asma. The idea behind ‘writings on the wall’ is not simply literal. It is not literal writings on the wall, though it could be. Take Naji al-Ali, for example – his drawings on the wall. Other people would actually write on the wall. But what I thought about is the following: what do all these people—the artists, scientists, singers, or, let’s say, the different fields that you mentioned – what do they all have in common, if you think about it? What they have in common is they are not the dominant, hegemonic voice. When you think of refugee camps, refugee camps are on the margins of society. These are people who live very poor lives. They live in poverty. In the same way, if you think about it, when Naji al-Ali started drawing on the wall, where was he? He was in Ain Elhelweh. What is Ain Elhelweh? It is a refugee camp in Lebanon. His drawings of Handala and the other cartoons came to life on the broken walls of refugee camps. They were not given support –no financial support, no media support, no corporate support, no art school support, nothing. Al-Ali was a marginalized refugee; Palestinians are a displaced, homeless people—dispossessed and expelled from their indigenous ancestral homeland in historic Palestine. They are not a people supported by the dominant, hegemonic center. Many Palestinians continue to live on the margins of societies.

Similarly, when my brother Hamdi Khalil Hamdi began his work on the olive leaf—the olive leaf he drew from Palestinian heritage and from the *Holy Quran*—he said, I am going to study that. I am going to study the effect of this compound in the olive leaf, and I want to see what it could do for cancer. Hamdi was able to extract the compound oleuropein from the olive leaf. He purified it in a makeshift laboratory he put together with a partner, a tumor cell biologist named Raquel Castellon. Her specialization in tumor cell biology and Hamdi’s in biochemistry allowed them to study the effect of oleuropein on cancer cells. They had no support and no funding of any kind. He is Palestinian; she is Nicaraguan. At the university where they worked in the United States, the Zionist presence was very strong, and they struggled to obtain the support they needed for their research. Despite this, they set up their own laboratory and tested oleuropein, a compound found in the olive leaf. The olive tree, of course, is central to Palestinian life, tradition, history, and heritage, and it is mentioned in the *Holy Quran*. Hamdi achieved remarkable results. This compound worked on every kind of cancer, especially solid tumors.

He patented his compound in the United States, in Europe, and elsewhere, tested it on people, and cured patients. But, once again, Hamdi, like Edward Said, lived in exile. He was never fully supported in the United States, where he grew up. He did not receive the support that a true scientist like Hamdi should have had, especially given the creativity and intelligence he possessed. I think of Edward Said's memoir *Out of Place*. Hamdi was always out of place.

So, I think everyone that I talked about in Chapter 4 has this in common, this kind of marginalization, this kind of makeshift existence, exilic existence, being on the sidelines of, or, on the margins of society, not being supported. Hamdi died in a small hotel room even without medical care or medical attention. This kind of existence – of not being in place, of living in exile, of living out of place, of living in refugee camps ...

**A. H.:** Transitional existence, in this case of the hotel room.

**T. H.:** Yes. Some people belong to power. But people on the margins of society are not really supported. Naji [al-Ali], for example. We know Ghassan [Kanafani] discovered Naji when Naji was drawing on refugee camp walls. He was not in fancy art schools with people who taught him how to draw. It is just his creativity and talent that came bursting through. Being Palestinian, being forced into an existence of marginality—and this idea of living a makeshift life, existing here and there, but not really belonging anywhere – it fuels creativity because out of suffering, I do believe, you get creativity and imagination; but then again, they are marginalized, they are living in out-of-placeness. When I interviewed the great Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti, he told me we live in exile: now I am exiled from my apartment in Amman, but I am also exiled from my home ... we live in an exile within an exile within an exile ... you do not feel like you really belong. In *Representations of the Intellectual* by Edward Said, he says the intellectual lives on the margins of society because the genuine intellectual cannot feel comfort. If you're at the center of power, feeling comfortable and supported by the dominant system, you won't stand with the oppressed. An intellectual has to lead a restless life. What drove Hamdi to create was his discomfort. He kept thinking. The same goes for Naji. The same goes for the refugees. When you feel like you have to work ten times harder just to get a little bit in this life...

**A. H.:** You mean what others get at minimum work ...

**T. H.:** Yes, because they are close to the center of power. This is really what I meant by writings on the wall, and this is what brings all of them together. Take Mahfoutha Shtaya, hugging her olive tree. If you see an old woman hugging an olive tree, you will not understand why she is doing that. It is her history, or to use Edward Soja's concept of historicity, sociality and spatiality. This is what makes her do it – her lack of belonging, her dispossession, her uprootedness, her displacement, and now genocide. Look at what we are living through now ...

**A. H.:** Yes, you mean in Gaza. We will come to this, indeed. But if I may sum up what you have said, hopefully, I got you right: 'wall,' in Chapter 4, is a metaphor, indexing the expressive venue that is available to those marginalized voices whose only capital is love of Palestine, the living/lived memory of Palestine, and the hope of restoring that prelapsarian existence ...

**T. H.:** Not a return to the past but living in the present and hoping for a better future, which involves struggle, the very depth and difficulty of struggle, struggling for your freedom, liberation and return to the homeland. The symbology of walls is also attached to suffering. I do believe that out of suffering and pain, creativity is born, as I said earlier. If you think of the African American writers, I think their suffering has a lot to do with that creativity.

**A. H.:** It is clear. Let's move on, though still in Chapter 4, namely the chapter's examination of "stories from below" (Hamdi 2023: 177). This examination refracts back on the "Introduction" where you rightly assert that 'Imagining Palestine' is a unifying experience of the Palestinian community/communion comprised of the "intellectual, activist, student, farmer" (Hamdi 2023: 22) echelons. The book, however, revisits the (conventionally) thoroughly represented imaginings of towering intellectuals (intelligentsia and literati) and activists (of Naji al-Ali's caliber). The imaginings of the 'students' and 'farmers' figure nominally in the "Introduction" and in your well-placed trust of the Palestinian cause to the youth of your immediate family circle and the wider students one (Hamdi 2023: xi). You also discussed Bassel al-Araj (Hamdi 2023: 199) in your book. Considering the leading role that students and grassroots played in the recent demonstrations against the Israeli offensive against Gaza, do you think that youth should have been given more attention than elites in your book?

**T. H.:** The so-called elites you mention—like Naji. We were talking about Naji in the previous question. Where is Naji from?

**A. H.:** By dubbing Naji 'a towering intellectual,' I mean given the fact that he was eventually discovered and achieved that popularity. He is not strictly a marginalized voice.

**T. H.:** Ok. But still, I go back, and I say, where is Naji from? Naji is not from the upper classes or even the middle classes or even the lower classes. Naji is from a refugee camp, from the most impoverished background, the dispossessed, the displaced. He is representative. Look, any revolution - this is what I truly believe – any revolution will have to have its intellectuals. You need an intellectual of the revolution. Of course, my book was before October 7<sup>th</sup>, right? But I really do believe that even those protests on university campuses that you are referring to did have intellectual heads because if you go back and search, you will find that these student protests started at Ivy League universities (most of them) Columbia and others. This means that without intellectual awareness, these students would not have moved or been moved. Behind them, you will find the movers and shakers and most likely the movers and shakers are going to be the intellectuals.

We can say things like Mahmoud Darwish is elite and he does not have a role to play. Actually, when I write, I always go back to Mahmoud Darwish. I used a quotation from him, and I keep repeating it. It is to the effect that you have to be a Palestinian in heart in order to understand your true moral worth. Put differently, if you say that you are moral and ethical, you have to be with the Palestinian cause, or better, you have to be a Palestinian - not in blood but in heart. We always have to go back to our intellectuals. I will tell you why, and I am going to give you a very good example. Anywhere, people without intellectual heads can easily turn into

mobs. What do I mean by that? If they are not guided, they can be used by hegemonic/colonialist powers.

**A. H.:** Or misused, indeed.

**T. H.:** Or misused. Take the Sunni-Shia divide. The West played on that. Not only that. Arab regimes played on this because the Arab regimes are controlled by the West, and you see what is happening now, right? The imperialist West is interested in dividing societies in our region—of course, the imperialist tactic is to divide and conquer. When you divide societies, you weaken them. This is what happened in Iraq and Syria, and the US had a lot to do with this. Also, they will always try to create problems for nations that have supported the Palestinian resistance. Iran is an example. The West imposed sanctions on Iran since the 1979 revolution, precisely because Iran supported the Palestinian resistance and any resistance against the colonialist and Zionist presence in our region.

Intellectuals are well-read, they can think, they can plan. The French Revolution had its intellectuals. All revolutions need their intellectuals. Intellectuals are people like you, like me, poets like Darwish – even though Darwish was not radical enough for my taste – like Kanafani who makes one think because he writes about what is happening on the ground and gives one an outlook on life, on the state of things. Kanafani is clear—one cannot negotiate with his colonizer; what kind of conversation can there be between the sword and the neck? If people were to move without being led, without being made aware, they can turn into mobs and eventually be misused or even abused. In this sense, Bassel al-Araj was an oppositional intellectual though, by profession, a pharmacist. He founded the so-called underground university where he would gather people – mainly students – and talk to them and make them aware. That's why I teach my students Kanafani. This is crucial. Students are the nation's future. Hence, my book concentrates on this kind of idea i.e., to be able to imagine Palestine, you need to strengthen the culture of resistance, to raise consciousness. Surprisingly, many of my students would confuse landmark dates and events in Palestinian history. Students and the younger generations at large are intentionally made ignorant through curriculum or whatever apparatus. They are unaware of the truth.

**A. H.:** They are systematically alienated from the Palestinian cause, that is.

**T. H.:** Yes, alienated. Conversely, some students from American universities are pretty aware, and I would even say they are probably more aware than our university students – in many ways. We must teach our students to become active in a struggle that is of great relevance to them—the Palestinian struggle for liberation. I think that the whole world now understands the absolute justness of this cause. You do not have to be Palestinian or an Arab. You simply have to be human.

Ghassan Kanafani wrote a short story titled “Letter from Gaza” where the protagonist emphatically urges his friend Mustafa to come back to the ruins of Gaza and let that small feeling that he felt when he left Gaza for Sacramento, California grow into a giant deep within him and to learn from it. What did Ghassan mean? What did he want us to learn from Gaza and its ruins? He is addressing our humanity: learn from the rubble, learn from the ruins of Gaza, and learn from

Nadia's leg amputated from the top of the thigh. How many amputations do we have now in Gaza? Indeed, people are not only amputated, not only dismembered, but they are also evaporated. The bombs that were used in Gaza are so powerful, they turned the human body not only into pieces that you can put in plastic bags and bury, *rather they become smoke*, vapor. Two thousand-pound bombs, the so-called MK-84 are being reported by people like Dr. Ghassan Abu Sittah.

So, this lack of awareness, this lack of care, this lack of humanity is appalling. What is the difference between those people [in Gaza] and us? Us, i.e., Palestinians, Jordanians, Muslims, Christians and whatever labels? This is what we lack. We lack this awareness and this imagination that we can act and have agency and can change the world. One of the speakers in yesterday's Academic Action Network for Palestine (ActforPal) webinar was Robin D. G. Kelly, a professor at UCLA. He wrote a book titled *Freedom Dreams*, and he talked about imagining revolution i.e., one has to be able to imagine that s/he has the power to change and not to accept the status quo. This idea is similar to Fanon's ideas. Fanon was a psychiatrist and knows the kind of change that needs to happen in one's imagination, mindset, or mental being. He posits that in order for the oppressed individual to move from a place of dehumanization to a place of rehumanization, s/he must use violence – must spill the blood of the colonizer.

**A. H.:** This is why Fanon is taught with much reservation in academia.

**T. H.:** Sure. The underlying assumption of Fanon's proposition is that when the colonized sees they can kill the colonizer, they become empowered. To concretize, in many of my recent presentations, I cited October 7<sup>th</sup> as an instance of empowerment of the Palestinian individual. Not only did they kill some Israeli soldiers (it is now asserted that a significant number of casualties among civilians are attributed to the Israeli Hannibal directive), but also, they flew with their hang gliders into occupied Palestine. Imagine the thrill, the euphoria, the agency, the empowerment they felt while looking down on their occupied Palestine and then coming down armed with nothing more than an AK-47. This is what Fanon is talking about. The dehumanized are rehumanized. How do we theorize that moment? We find answers in Fanon. Again, you really do need an intellectual to understand it. We are not talking about ivory towers and elitism. The intellectual is somebody who metaphorically (sometimes physically) lives on the margin. Their hearts are with the oppressed; they live with the oppressed, they speak on behalf of the oppressed. This is what it means to be an intellectual. An intellectual who does not act this way is not an intellectual. S/he could be an expert. Experts live in ivory towers. They live in the center of power (the hegemonic power). These mouthpieces of power are not intellectuals, in the Saidian or Gramscian sense.

**A. H.:** A follow-up question – compelled, too, by Al-Aqsa Flood and the shocking waves it sent the world over. In the book, you cited Darwish's poetographic lines objurgating the defeatist PLO revolutionaries of 1982: "Sabra – covering her naked breasts with a | farewell song" (qtd. in Hamdi 2023:66) and seconded him rhetorically: "What good is a revolution if not in or near occupied Palestine?" (Hamdi 2023:67). However, it is read, your rhetorical animadversion

applies equally to the defeatist PLO revolutionaries, to distant Darwish (fleeing, coincidentally, to Tunis (*ibid*) before settling later in Paris (Hamdi 2023:69)) and to his distanced/rarified poetry. What had Darwish offered the massacred Sabra other than the eponymous short poem/song with which it cannot cover “her ... breasts”? Would not the poem and the song be supplemented, as well, with “all the talk” (Hamdi 2023:73) of Darwish (in “A State of Siege”) as well as Barghouti’s “Midnight”: “army of metaphors?” (Hamdi 2023: 105).

**T. H.:** You mentioned the PLO revolutionaries. To start with, I do not call revolutionaries defeatist because, by definition, a revolutionary believes in revolution, in fighting, in agency. So, I think it is misleading to say PLO ‘revolutionaries.’ Fidayeen are not defeated or defeatist. No revolutionary is defeatist or defeated. The defeated and the defeatist in my book is the Palestinian Authority (PA) in Ramallah. They are defeatist because they signed the Oslo Accords whereby they acknowledged armed struggle is dead. Armed struggle is no longer a path. Really? Has there ever been a real revolution against occupation, indeed, settler colonialism via peaceful negotiations. With whom? With your enemy? The PA not only disavowed armed struggle, but they also have security arrangements with the enemy. What is the difference between the PA and Israel? No difference. They are even worse because they are selling their own people out. Israel is the enemy, and we expect it from the enemy. We expect more from the enemy. This is what I mean by ‘defeatist thinking.’ To me, anybody who signed the Oslo accords and sanctioned the security arrangements, indeed, I call them agreements of surrender, not peace agreements. It is worse than surrendering. It is being complicit with the enemy and doing the job of the enemy. They are defeated and defeatist and even traitors.

The Fidayeen had nothing to do with what happened in Beirut in 1982. They were forced out, carried on ships and sent away from the borders of occupied Palestine. This was sad since it is very important to keep the pressure on the enemy through physical presence. People like you, me, us, intellectuals, poets and writers can write from afar but not keeping the physical pressure on the settler colonial entity weakens your cause. They should not have left Beirut. It is all Yasser Arafat’s fault. They trusted the United Nations’ false promise: if you leave, we will protect the refugee camps. The United Nations lied. Israel, assisted by Alkateb, slaughtered the refugees. Israel armed and was lighting the way to and over the camps; Alkateb massacred the remaining refugees. They would split open a woman’s womb, take out the embryo and cut it up. Israel facilitated the massacre with ‘logistics.’ This is what they did in 1982. It is important for the Palestinian resistance fighters to stay near the borders – at the borders. Why does Israel fear the Lebanese resistance? Because Israel does not want any resistance to its expansionist settler colonial project, not in South Lebanon i.e., North Palestine or anywhere else. Just look at the current pressure being put on the Lebanese resistance. They do not want them to be close. It’s the same with the Palestinian resistance; Israel and its allies want to put an end to all forms of resistance. Thus, this physical, on-the-ground resistance is of the utmost importance; that is physical pressure on the front, from the battlefield. Here comes the role of the intellectual, Kanafani, Naji al-Ali,

Darwish and company. Raising awareness is as important as staying near Palestine.

**A. H.:** Are you saying that the fighter's role is to stay in and near Palestine while the role of the intellectual is to let Palestine stay in minds and hearts? They are parallels.

**T. H.:** Indeed, awareness is more important than the gun because the gun sometimes can be used to shoot the wrong person. With awareness, you cannot go wrong. You need Kanafani. You need Darwish. You need Barghouti. You need Midnight. Why 'midnight'? Midnight is the end of one day. But it is the beginning of another. There will be defeat [midnight as end] but what keeps one going is the knowledge of a new and better round [midnight as beginning]. When I asked Mourid Barghouti if he believed in a one-state solution, he replied with one word "Aoudah ['return']. Don't say one state without saying return." I told him, "You mean the return of the refugees." He said "of every living Palestinian outside of occupied Palestine. They must all return." Barghouti was with the PLO – an ambassador – but broke with them in the same way that Darwish broke with Yasser Arafat because of Oslo. Same thing with Barghouti. He kept on saying "Arafat is a liar. Arafat is a liar." He was very angry. So, the work of these intellectuals is important. Their poetry is important. Their stories are important. Edward Said states, in *Politics of Dispossession*, that if you do not write down the story, it will simply disappear. Write it down in the way that you know. If it is history, write it down like Nur Masalha or Ilan Pappé – though there is this one thing that I would advise Pappé—that he shouldn't refer to himself as an "Israeli" historian. He believes the end of Israel is coming and that Zionism must be dismantled. Nur Masalha has also contributed greatly with a series of books on Palestine, such as *Palestine: A Four Thousand Year History*.

**A. H.:** A formidable work, indeed.

**T. H.:** Indeed. He is documenting a 4000-year history of Palestine. The point is if you do not write it down, it will simply disappear. Write it down poetically. Write it down narratively: in short stories, in novels, in history books. And *archive* it. The more, the better. Unfortunately, we do not have intellectuals like Pappé and Masalha at our universities in the Arab world.

**A. H.:** Original thinkers, you mean?

**T. H.:** Yes, Original thinkers. Or who, at least, those who care about the cause and are not afraid to speak truth to power. Take, for example, the English department at any Arab university. Why are they not interested? I wonder why Palestinian and Arabic literature is not integrated into the literature curriculum at our English departments in the Arab world. It could go under colonial literature, postcolonial literature, resistance literature, decolonial studies. It is not like we are writing about something that does not exist. It is our reality, isn't it? Did Trump not – even before winning the last elections – complain that it is pitiful to look up at the map and see how small Israel is? What are the implications of this? How is he going to expand Israel? Is it not the longstanding dream of Greater Israel? The turn of other Arab countries is coming. Shouldn't we be made aware? Shouldn't we make the younger generations aware? Why sit and wait? Wait for what? Your own death and destruction.

**A. H.:** Let me make sure that I got you right. To combine the answers to the previous two questions, you agree with me that intellectuals (oppositional intellectuals) are inaccessible to the grassroots just like the great (oppositional) writers and poets. Yet they are instrumental in raising the awareness of grassroots. Indirectly, instrumental. Intellectuals decode the project by great writers and then give them back to the grassroots in a language they understand. They are mediators, that is.

**T. H.:** Absolutely. Let me reuse the example of Kanafani's "Letter from Gaza." It was written in 1956. This is a 68-year-old story. Rereading that story helps us understand what is going on in Gaza now. The parallels and coincidences are unbelievable. A passage from the story goes:

No, my friend I won't come to Sacramento and I have no regrets. No and nor will I finish what we began together in childhood. This obscure feeling that you had as you left Gaza. This small feeling must grow into a giant deep within you. It must expand; you must seek it in order to find yourself here among the ugly debris of defeat.

Somehow, I always felt Kanafani's narrator in this short story is not only speaking to his friend Mustafa who is in Sacramento, California, but to all of us and to all of humanity about what it is that we must allow to grow into a giant deep and what that should teach us. Just a few lines down before Kanafani ends his now 68–69-year-old story, the narrator closes his letter from Gaza with words that ring even more true today: "I won't come to you but you return to us, come back to learn from Nadia's leg, amputated from the top of the thigh what life is and what existence is worth." This is what we should teach our students. The Nakba has not ended. The Nakba is not only ongoing. The Nakba is getting worse. It is getting more horrifying. This is what our students need to understand: life cannot go on as it is. It simply cannot.

**A. H.:** In the same vein of the performativity of art, but from another perspective, in his review of *Imagining Palestine*, Ilan Pappé (2023) draws a clear line between "an actual liberation struggle ... [and] an act of abstraction" and a corresponding line between "freedom fighters ... [and] intellectuals". Pappé, however, retracts saying that abstraction that mounts to theorization is rooted somehow in experience (epitomized in Said) and contrasts it with what he called "overtheorizing." Pappé singled Kanafani out as "a theorist of liberation and at the same time a freedom fighter" which refracts back at your answer to the previous question. What is your take on Pappé's position on the performativity of art as reflected in his distinction between 'theorization' and 'overtheorization'?

**T. H.:** Look, let me just say what Pappé meant and what I wrote about in *Imagining Palestine*. Said's theorization and my theorization in *Imagining Palestine* is a theorization rooted in life/reality, not in abstraction. Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak were once at a conference together. Said was criticizing theorists who theorize in a very abstract way and are not rooted in the now and in what is on the ground, in the real world or based on real events. He was saying that without mentioning Gayatri Spivak (they were colleagues at Columbia University). Spivak told the story in an essay she published. When they were on the plane, they were

sitting next to each other, she said: “Edward, why were you talking about me?” He denied it. She insisted: “You were talking about those who overtheorize and love abstraction.” Said replied: “because that’s how you are, Gayatri. You don’t base your theory on life, on lived reality, on the event.” He had a point. When you read Spivak, she is too complex, abstract—whereas even when Said is difficult, he always gets to the point. What you dub ‘elitist projects’ are, in my view, not quite elitist. I grouped these Palestinian writers and other writers who write about Palestine – thinkers who are activists. I would not label them ‘elitists.’

**A. H.:** Let me explain. I used ‘elitist’ in the sense of being inaccessible to the grassroots. I cannot imagine my grandmother, for example, reading and understanding Darwish or Barghouti, let alone being mobilized by what they say.

**T. H.:** Indeed, I used to sit with my grandmother and read to her from these writers’ works. She used to love it.

**A. H.:** Without you explaining things to her?

**T. H.:** I read a bit and explained it.

**A. H.:** This is what I meant by being inaccessible to the grassroots. Your grandmother still needed the mediation of an intellectual (you) to get the gist of these writings.

**T. H.:** But the grassroots are not necessarily illiterate people. Take for example university students at Ivy League universities in the US, like Columbia; they are well-informed. Those who staged the recent encampments know exactly what they are talking about. Intellectuals can help analyse the situation. Remember the definition of the oppositional intellectual: one who stands with the oppressed. If we do not have the thinkers to lead, the situation can remain vague. This is where the imperialist comes in. The West is good at doing this, i.e., at using insiders, locals, natives to cause divisions inside a country. We need a counter discourse. A revolution needs intellectuals to keep it on the right track. This is why Israel is killing people who enable thinking and awareness like Naji, Ghassan and Refaat Alareer.

**A. H.:** But the implication of your answer necessitates the flip question: why did they let Darwish live? I do not mean that his sin is staying alive.

**T. H.:** Darwish paid a price. He was imprisoned many times. He was exiled for almost his whole life. He did not pay for it with his life like the others. This is because he was not part of a movement or an armed struggle. Ghassan was.

To your question on the performativity of art and literature, did stories and poems get people out on the street protesting? No. What gets people out on the street are events that happen in front of them.

**A. H.:** Still on performativity, Benay Blend (2023) underscores the book’s performative dimension. In her words,

[Hamdi’s] book belongs on the shelf of everyone who is participating in the solidarity movement, partly because she thoroughly explains what it means to act in solidarity but also because her prose counters defeatist attitudes with a blueprint for victory.

My question: how much of the semantics of your name (Tahrir means ‘liberation’ in Arabic) have materialized into performative actuality throughout

your academic and intellectual career? What forms did it take? What forms is it assuming nowadays – in the post- 7<sup>th</sup> October context, that is?

**T. H.:** Actually, of course I was named Tahrir for an obvious reason. My father, Khalil Hamdi was one of the founders of the Arab Nationalist Movement in the 1950s, and he never stopped talking about Palestine. I grew up with Palestine. I never saw myself separated from it even when I was in Chicago, growing up. I was always interested in anti-colonial struggle, of course based on my father's experience and what he told us. I kept on reading on my own – different writers and thinkers. Even when I started publishing, there was always the anti-colonial struggle and Palestine. It was just part of my DNA. I do not think outside of it. It is my reason for being. It affects my whole academic career. Ok, story time. Here it goes. The Arab Open University is partnered with the Open University in the UK. I was teaching a UKOU course, and the British partners may look at our students' papers after we mark them. One of the stories that I had to teach was about the Holocaust. I never taught it. I told my students we are going to read Kanafani instead – *Returning to Haifa*. They objected saying “what if the scheduled story comes on the final exam?” I said: “I'll change the question, and you'll answer about Kanafani.” When we got to the final exam, the first question was about the Holocaust story, and they all looked at me. I wrote the question about Kanafani on the board and said answer it. I took the risk. They answered it. When it went to Kuwait, the Tunisian professor in charge called me: “what did you do, Tahrir? What are the Open University going to say?” I said: “whatever!” When the British external examiner saw it, she just smiled and said: “interesting.” Nothing really happened. What I am saying is it became part of who I am – not just my academic career. You can never separate yourself as a thinker from the suffering of your people – the genocide, the dispossession, the settler colonialism. Even if these are not your people, they are people. They are humans. I cannot have a good time while genocide is going on. I cannot teach if Palestine is not part of it. I will change the curriculum, and I did. The poetry curriculum that we got from Britain included only William Butler Yeats. I was not going to just teach Yeats. I changed it and made it comparative: Yeats and Darwish.

**A. H.:** Talking about including and excluding, different reviewers of the book highlighted excluded 'Imagining' projects they wished the book had included. Pappé (2023) missed Palestinian historians. Lindsey Moore (2023), on the other hand, missed featuring Adania Shibli? I assume you are aware of the abrupt postponement of awarding Shibli with LiBeraturpreis at a ceremony at the 2023 (mid-October) Frankfurt book fair. The email disinvitation sent to Shibli cited the ongoing war on Gaza. The 'scandalous' disinvitation (Delius 2023) and the protest letter featuring 1500 signatories including Annie Ernaux, Abdulrazak Gurnah, Olga Tokarczuk, to name a few criticized this association. A quick answer to these objections on inclusion/exclusion might read: selections must eventually be made. How would a qualified answer read?

**T. H.:** In terms of people like Adania Shibli, Adania does not really have many works, maybe one or two novels. I did not think adding her would really change what I said, and you need to be selective. As for Pappé's point, no Arab

historian really wrote about ethnic cleansing in the way Pappé did because he had the privilege i.e., an access to Israeli military archives. Similarly, Nur Masalha had access to the British archives. Arab and Palestinian historians' writings are based on what they know but they did not really have archives. I only included Rashid al-Khaldi at the very end, not at the end of the book, but after I finished writing it. One referee suggested including him. What I did not like about Rashid is when he came to the Columbia institute in Jordan a few years ago, he only talked about the two-state solution, the post 1967 territories. He advocated this position saying whether you like it or not this is the only solution. Otherwise, it is cleansing. No, it is not. The only solution is *one* state. If the Jewish population wants to stay or some of them want to stay, they can. They will have their democratic rights. It will not be a Zionist state. It will not be Israel. Rashid accepts Israel and when I heard him talk at the Columbia Institute, I just got up and left. Israel does not want a Palestinian population. They literally want to kill or expel every Palestinian. So, I was selective, but I think the selected names were representative and adding more perspectives in the same direction would not have added to my argument.

**A. H.:** This interview commenced with a retrospective reading of the book back from October 7<sup>th</sup>, I would like to terminate it with a prospective (perhaps, hypothetical) question: if you are to re-write the book through the October 7<sup>th</sup> lens, what would be left out? Revised? Added? These telegraphic (sub-, follow-up, perhaps) questions are, indeed, elicited by a poignant answer you gave in an interview conducted by Louis Brehony (2023) where you differentiated between “Late Style resistance of the young” versus “resistance and defiance of the old and dying” whereby, you asserted, the former’s “lives are their education.”

**T. H.:** Post October 7<sup>th</sup>, I have a hopeful vision. I believe in hope. I believe in the outlines of a better world. I believe that oppression of this nature cannot, will not, and must not remain. Simply, the people will not accept it. Palestinians living in occupied Palestine know that they cannot live on under this brutish siege, dehumanization, occupation, colonization, being killed every couple of years, and now an ongoing genocide. They will resist to the last drop of blood. What do you want more than a mother holding a plastic bag of body parts of her child and saying: “Alhamdulillah [‘Thanks be to God’], and we will never stop, we will never surrender.” I think if I were in their situation, I would probably do the same. I do not think they fear anything anymore.

Do I believe there will be a Palestine? Yes. A Palestine that stretches from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea. And will Israel remain? No. Israel is a Zionist project that has to be dismantled – and it will be dismantled. More and more people around the world are waking up to that reality.

Change is coming because people won’t tolerate oppression from Zionist settler colonialism. Revolution is on the way. Liberation is coming. And the return? It’s just a breath away.

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