

Al-Awda: the Theme of Return in Contemporary Arabic Literature: a Case-Study of Samira 'Azam.

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The Palestinian Question and its political and cultural consequences concern intellectuals, politicians and creative writers all over the Arab world, both in surrounding and faraway countries. This makes the Palestinian cause a prominent theme in contemporary Arabic literature.

Although many previous studies have focused on issues related to the Palestinian experience, discussing such themes as heroism, humanism, woman's role in the conflict, the uprising ("Al-Intifada") or the peace process, no previous study has dealt with the important and recurring theme of the "Return" (Al-Awada). My aim in this paper is to show how Arabic fiction has dealt with this national experience, how it depicted those who live the dream of "Return" and those who physically returned to Palestine either after the 1967 war or after the Oslo Accords.

The concept of "Return" throughout this literature manifests itself in various ways including the spiritual return (as manifested in dreams and aspirations); the literal, physical return; an individual's return (a "Return" on the basis of family reunions); the "Return" as a result of the occupation of Gaza and the West Bank after the war of 1967; and the "Return" as a result of the peace process after the "Oslo Accords." I have limited myself in this paper to the study of the pattern of return in Samira Azzams short stories, hoping to shed some light on this neglected motif in Arab literature.

Whether exile happens voluntarily or under oppressive circumstances, the dream of returning home stays alive in the mind of the exiled person. It flares or fades from person to person and from one circumstance to another; however, the concept of "return" ceases to be about its basic meaning, but comes to be seen as a means of resistance and challenging oppression. Throughout the centuries we have seen many literary works reflect the theme of Return; Odysseus fought and challenged gods for the sake of returning back home. He had chosen homeland over the glory of the divine. In his poem "The Return of Sodom" Khalil Hawi criticises traditions and backward

social values, by depicting the returning character of Sodom as raising the city to the ground using the fire that burns and purifies that he begat at the mountain of vision. Adonis in his poem “Falcon Transformations” uses the motif of Return by telling the story of the Falcon who returns from exile to Damascus and who then transforms into a god capable of granting life and spreading wisdom and knowledge.. We also see many exile and return stories in the religious rhetoric of yearning for the promised land that was employed to serve the establishment of the Israeli state.

To first and second generation diaspora Palestinians the dream of “Return” (Al-Awda) is deeply implanted in their collective memory. It is rooted in the Palestinian conscience like a faith that could not be denied, because denying it would mean uprooting the lynchpin upon which modern Palestinian history and identity depends. As Fawaz Turki asserts, the right and dream of Return is the rock upon which our nation was established and the social balance that unites the nation in this wretched world.¹ With this dream in mind refugees in camps were capable of resisting all the allure of merging and domestication and keep seeing their situation as temporary. In the West where most of Palestinians are naturalized, they are still in connection with their people in other exiles, and they still celebrate their national holidays. For many of those who did not emigrate and became Israeli citizens many continue to refer to the counties and places by the names they had prior to Israeli colonisation.. Even after the Oslo Accords, where Palestinians agreed to recognize Israel, many continued to feel that the whole country was theirs and that their agreement came from a perception that Palestine is the mother of the child (Israel). Danny Rubenstein, an Israeli writer, expressed his amazement towards the insistence of the Palestinians to stay attached to their long erased homes, and how that the country to them is not just Palestine but the exact village from whence each came (not any other village, even if it were to be only two kilometres away). In relation to this strong attachment he observed that “Every people in the world live in a place, except Palestinians, the place lives in them.”²

¹ Turki, Fawaz. *Exile's Return: The Making of the Palestinian American*, New York: Free Press, Toronto: Maxwell Macmillan, Canada, New York: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1994, p: 33)

² Danny Rubenstein. *The People of Nowhere: The Palestinian Vision of Home*, translated by Ina Friedman, New York ,Times Books, 1991, p: 7, 90 and 120

Concept of “Return” in Samira ‘Azzam literature ...

To start with, Samira ‘Azzam was born in Akka 1926 to a middle class family. She began writing at an early age under the pen name Fatat Al-Sahel. She worked as a senior teacher in Akka before Al-Naqba. In exile she worked as a broadcaster, translator and an editor in Iraq, Lebanon and Cyprus. In 1959 she was deported from Iraq and settled in Beirut for the rest of her short life. She played an influential role in the Palestinian political movement. In the sixties, Azzam together with Shafiq el-Hout established secret cells known as Jabhat Tahrir Falastine Tariq al-Awda (Palestinian Liberation Front, Road to Return) at a time when it was extremely dangerous to work in Palestinian politics. She died of a coronary arrest a few weeks after the Arab Israeli war in 1967. She died in her car, on her way to Jordan to readapt the cells of her organization which were confused and distraught after the swift Arab defeat in the ‘67 war. Those who know Samira well (the speaker is one of them), know that she didn’t die of illness, but of the heavy burden that the June war left in her soul.

Samira ‘Azzam left behind her five collections of short stories:

- *Tiny Matters* "اشياء صغيرة" (1954)
- *The Great Shadow* "الظل الكبير" (1956)
- ... *And Other Stories* "وقصص أخرى" (1960)
- *Time and Man* "الساعة والانسان" (1963)
- *Joy Comes from the West Window* "العيد من النافذة العربية" (1971).

In addition to several other short stories which had appeared independently of her anthologies in reputable Arabic magazines

Though few researchers have written about Samira Azzam, two distinct disciplines of interpretation of her work have appeared. The first sees Azzam as a purely Palestinian revolutionary writer; her writing in its entirety revolved around, was informed and inspired by the people around her and their common as well as their individual tragedies. The others saw that Azzam was incapable of feeling and expressing the suffering of Palestinian refugees because she was not living under economic constraints. She was an editor and a broadcaster in The Middle East radio

station and as such she was perceived to be living an easy life and her concerns were seen as feminist and hence marginal to the Palestinian struggle.

Azzam's literature is never more riddled with bitterness and disappointment than in her early writing. Since the Palestinian problem in its greater part is a humanitarian tragedy we can easily detect the effect of real events on Azzam's literature as she draws on the struggle for survival in both the real and literary worlds. Nevertheless, Azzam's literature was never uniformly melancholy and despairing, for in the later years, a new spirit was beginning to emerge in her work, derived from the passion and hope instilled in her throughout the sixties, due to the emergence of an organized Palestinian liberation movement

In her last collection of short stories "*Al-Id min Al- Nafitha Al-Gharbiah*"³ *Joy Comes From the Western Window*" 'Azzam chose to write about "The Return." Al-Awda in 26 short texts named "Wijdaniyat Falastiniyah" "Palestinian compassions". In these texts she literarily documented the geographical and social map of Palestine: the spring with its blossoming orange trees, the olive season, the old traditional mosque, the church, the Easter candles, the daily life of people in the city, the symbolic key of return, the gate of Mandelbum, the swallows nests, the religious and social carnivals and others. All these textual landmarks are clearly related to the motif of Al-Awda, from the Olive trees to the Orange groves, the keys that symbolise the return to the lost homes and movement of people in the city all of these relate to a memory of social life that has been lost and that the Palestinian imagination seeks to preserve if not one day restore. Most of her stories in this collection end in a direct statement inciting the reader to undertake the endeavour of returning, or simply to prophesy its occurrence.

In contrast to what we experience in earlier writings, the ideology in her latter works is clear and self evident. Azzam may have realised the need for politically oriented literature after she attended a conference on the 15th of May 1965, organized by Palestinians intellectuals and activists in exile and which discussed the Palestinian cause and strategies for "Return". 'Azzam was among the 2400 members who

³ Samira 'Azam, *Al-Id min Al- Nafitha Al-Gharbiah*, 2nd edition, Beirut, Dar-Alawda, 1982

attended the conference and she was elected to be a representative of Palestinian women.

Away from the direct sentence that ends most of the texts, the texts are prolific, eloquent and fervent.

In the first text Palestine is recalled in a poetic style that inspires colours, motion and fragrance. It seeks to create in the reader the astonishment and the thrill which is inevitable in a good piece of poetry:

”You ask me how it was (our spring). And I say as it wasn’t in any other place...our spring comes to you carried on clouds of orange fragrance, white flints (buds) respire around the orchards...its fragrance penetrates to you through the sills of the windows, as if you are sleeping on a pillow of perfume...necklaces over the necks of girls and bracelets around their arms.... Don’t ask me how it was our spring but ask me which spring is comparable to ours....”

"تسألني كيف كان (ربيعنا) فأقول مثل ما لا يكون ربيع في مكان...ربيعنا يأتيك محمولاً
على غمامات من أرج البرتقال، قداح أبيض يتنفس في حنايا البيارات. . يتسرب اليك
عطره من خصائص النوافذ فكأنك تنام على مخدة من أرج. . عقود حول أعناق الصبايا،
اساور حول زنودهن. . لا تسليني كيف كان ربيعنا، بل سليني أي ربيع يطاول ربيع
البرتقال" (93)

The text continues in spontaneous flows of passion then moves to depict the rituals of the orange season: hands give to boxes, boxes carried to boats, hands give, hands take. It could be trade but with the involvement of oranges it becomes recreation for eye, heart and pocket. The text ends propagating the “Return”: “and for he who asks about our spring which was, and the spring that will be, the spring will return to the orchard and the orchard will return as summary of the seasons’ produce.”

In the text titled with number three we read a description of Akka and its historical mosque. A father proud of his city tells his son about the mosque and the stolen bowl of one of its basins. The narrator then becomes a grandfather and he tells his grandson the story of the lost bowl which was smuggled by one of Napoleon’s soldiers. When

the boy reacted towards the story by saying “I will smuggle and take another bowl,” the grandfather corrected him saying: “you don’t smuggle, you have the right and who owns the right doesn’t smuggle. No my son...but you must enter it with your companions by force....The country is yours and the water spring is for you and your mates to drink from its fresh water. So if you drink the healthy water, go and search for the basin which has no bowl and remember that I had told you a story that was worth telling”

يقول الاب وهو يمسح على رأس الصغير: "لا يا ابني . . . بل تدخلها ورفاقك عنوة. . .
فالبلدة بلدتك والسييل لك ولاخوانك ترتوون من نداوة مائه فإذا شربت ماء العافية،
فابحث عن الحوض ذي الطاسة الناقصة وتذكر انني حكيت لك حكاية تستحق ان تروى،
وأن تستعاد. . ." (98)

In the twelfth text we read through a picture hanged on the wall a description for a coastal city which implies Akka (the writer’s city): “His city from its eastern gate....the sweetest of cities when it had the originality of history and before the echo broke over its gate which is decorated with iron nails. The shore stretches with its white sands and parallel to it a black iron vein connects his city with neighbouring countries. Then the gate and behind it the roofed khan (open market) and on both sides stand the shops and the salesmen endeavouring to sell their products. And the market crowded by sellers and buyers together with their pack animals...their voices continue to murmur until this moment in his ears, from over the eastern gate, from over the stretched wall where the waves of history broke. There stands high Al-Jazzar minaret and smaller minarets and the tower of the church with the clock in the middle.

This photo stands as a substitute to the homeland. Its owner uses it to teach his children all the meanings that exile “ghurba” had hidden. The owner wanted it like a mascot “t’aweetha” to prevent his children from forgetting their country. His guest wanted it to act as a miniature homeland. Through it he sees his past illuminated. He wants to possess it, but the owner refuses to give it away. He hanged it in the tent, and after he had got a house he hanged it in the house.

“I will not sell it for the money of the earth ...(he said)...but I will give it to you as a present when we get back the land”

“when the land returns to us ...when everything moves in the picture and the dye transforms into real matter and the cells of the hunt...when miracle pours its spirit in the earth and the stones, and when the blood of his people passes in the veins of the trees and earn their meaning and humanity from the spark of truth not from fake dresses....

"لا ابيعها بمال الارض (قال). . . بل أهديكها حين تعود لنا الارض..
 "حين تعود لنا الارض. . . حين تتحرك كل الاشياء في الصورة ويتحول الصباغ الى مادة
 حقيقية وخلايا صيد. . . وتصب المعجزة روحها في الارض والحجر والشجر فتجري في
 شرايينها جميعاً دماء شعبه وتكتسب معناها وانسانيتها من ألق الحقيقة لا من ثوب
 الزيف. . ." (113)

Azzam uses symbolism and through it gives a human face to the Palestinian struggle and introduces her idea of the Return in innovative and figurative language that does not sacrifice the aesthetic for the sake of the political which is the main requirement of a successful short story.

We see in the fourth text that the tree feels what humans feel. The tree knows its real owner and refuses the stranger. She was stripped of her leaves when she could no longer see the children playing under her branches. She also refused to die. She stayed in an autumn state all around the circle of time. And when she was asked why she never flourished or died as is the case with normal trees, she said: “I pledged not to make a promise but for their eyes, those who were distanced by the will of time. I pledged not to feed but the hand which one day, had given me my life.”

أقسمت إلا ينعقد وعدي إلا لعيونهم، هؤلاء الذين باعدت بيني وبينهم أيام، فما أطعم إلا اليد
 التي جعلتني يوماً موصولة بأسباب الحياة. . ." (99)

But the promise came when the resistance intensified and the tree started to come back to life as if it was saying: “They will return, and I will be again a tree, and I will return as a tree possessing all the blessings of trees in the garden—the spring.”

"سيعودون، وسأعود شجرة لها كرامات الشجر في الحديقة الربيع" (99)

The story in the two texts 5 & 6 symbolize the three stages that the Palestinian cause passed through. They interpret the writer's political thoughts. The fisherman who was struck by waves and storms and thrown helpless on a faraway shore like dead sea birds, is a symbol of the Palestinian who emigrated from his/her country humble and humiliated. And he who recovered from his coma and fixed his drag-net and waited till the storm stopped, is the symbol of the Palestinians who started to organize themselves in political groups and work to revolutionize their Arabic surrounding in order to start a revolution and prove to the world that they are sincere and defiant. The wife and the children who await the return of the fisherman from his struggle symbolise the refugees who are waiting for a Palestinian resistance movement that can return Palestine to them. Such a movement will cast the crows out and bring them closer to fulfilling the promise of Return: "move these hovering crows away. The promise of return will come on a white wing... Will return, the fisherman will return. The wife and the children say: "Will return our man will return..." The shore says while drinking the swaying waves: "will return the fisherman will return... "because there are hearts on the shore and a boat connected with love to the shore knows well that the trip of water is ebb and flow. Ebb and flow, and with the flow the fisherman will come back and the shore will be happy and the wife and the children will be happy..."

التي ستعيد لهم فلسطينهم فتبعد الغربان وتأتيهم بالبشارة: "ابعدوا هذه الغربان المحومة. .
فبشرى الاوبة ستأتي على جناح أبيض، سيعود الصياد سيعود. . تقول الزوجة والاولاد
سيعود رجلنا سيعود. . يقول الشاطئ وهو يشرب الموج المترنج، سيعود الصياد
سيعود. . لأن قلوباً على الشاطئ، وزورقاً متصل الشوق بالشاطئ يعلم جيداً ان رحلة
المياه جزر ومد، جزر ومد، ومع المد سيعود الصياد ويفرح الشاطئ وتفرح الزوجة
والاطفال. . " (103)

Social life is depicted in many of her stories: one of these recalls a Christian Palestinian ritual where Muslims contribute in its ceremony: "Easter was the feast for everyone الكل and the blessings of the church mediator فيع fell like morning dew over both Muslims and Christians."

The memory raises through recalling an old house near the church contains candles hanged in different sizes decorated with gold-water and prepared for the children to carry them on Palm- Sunday. The poetic scenery broke out when the owner of that house moaned over the one thousand candles that she left behind after she had prepared them to be carried that Easter. But Al-Naqba happened and left the city without celebration or celebrators. When she was asked if she still thinking that her one thousand candles still waiting her return, she said that she is ready to do new ones and give them for free for prayers. The text ends in a reporting sentence assuring that the time of moaning and weeping has ended and the time of action, which will bring about 'The Return Al-'Awda' has started: "Wipe your tear my brother, it is of no value...before you is a country waiting. . .tears will not bring it back and words do not help even when they are sincere and beautiful. Palestine is yearning for your endeavour, for your struggle and your faith, Palestine yearns for your sacrifice and your giving . . . so work for her"

"امسح هذه الدمعة يا أخي فهي لم تعد تقيده. . . إن امامك بلداً ينتظرك. . . الدموع لن تعيده والكلام لا يفيدته لو انه احياناً صادق وجميل. فلسطين تحن الى عملك الى جهدي الى كفاحك وإيمانك، فلسطين تحن الى بَدَلِكْ وعطائك. . . فاعمل من أجلها." (96).

Similarly to this, another story depicts big processions from all neighbouring villages and cities to visit Jerusalem Al-Quds in order to visit the tomb of the prophet Moses, regardless of their religion: "With the beginning of the Spring. When earth finishes off a new labour. . . and every inch of it is red by windflower. . . Our people used to celebrate the visit to Prophet Moses in processions whose beginnings you could see, but whose eds seemed to go on forever."

مع بواكير الربيع. . . حين تنتهي الارض من مخاض جديد. . . فإذا كل شبر فيها أحمر بالشقائق. . . كان قومنا يحتفلون بزيارة قبر النبي موسى في مواكب ترى اولها ولا ترى آخرها. . .

Samira Azzam recurrently wrote about the theme of Return, Al-'Awda, without falling into repetition in spite of dealing with a limited subject. Even though she was dragged into romanticism due to the requirements of the subject such as yearning and nostalgic

feelings, her romanticism was of that kind which did not venture deeply into experimentalism and alienation. It was a Romanticism which was deeply connected to reality. Despite the pressure of the ideological, the texts continued to reflect an aesthetic value that did not degenerate into poor language or exaggerated melodrama. Instead, Azzam employed powerful narrative techniques and rhetorical strategies such as symbolism, humanitarianism and common folktales, الحكاية الشعبية where language is not only a conveyer of literal meaning but is also a living beautiful being.

These texts were loyal to their collective title. In them the writer revealed her own thoughts and reflections as well as the collective Palestinian consciousness in relation to Palestine. She revealed both a summary of old memories and feelings of a pre-Nakba Palestine as well as collective hopes and dreams experienced in her day. Her stories were loyal to their historical condition, revealing an era which saw the dawn of Palestinian resistance where the need to concentrate all energies (including creative writings) to revolutionize the Palestinian condition and energize it with the hope of Return was both urgent and imminent. If her writings from this collection appear optimistic and incommensurate with today's reality, that is because at the time of their writing the Palestinian plight had not yet experienced the bitter circumstances that depressed expectations such as the defeat of '67 war or the Israeli invasion of Beirut in 1982, or the reflections of the gulf war of 1991 or repercussions that followed the incidents of September 11, 2001.