Reincarnating Palestinian Literature: British Modernism and the Birth of Al-Hadatha’

This paper will look at the influence of the British mandate on Palestinian literature, arguing that the former helped establish modern Palestinian/Arabic literature. This was done through the introduction of European modernism to Arab writing, which led to the creation of a new literary school known as Al-Hadatha (nearest translation is renovation rather than modernism as commonly mistaken).

Palestinian literature did not take on its national and regional character until the twentieth century. Before that, it was subsumed within Arabic literature, which in turn experienced stages of decline from the sixteenth to the twentieth century. This is because the Ottoman government forced many writers, architects and artists to leave their countries of origin and live in Istanbul which was the capital of the Ottoman Empire. This led to a deficiency in the content of Arabic literature as it became a mechanism by which favours could be gained from the Sultan. Those writers who remained, usually middle class poets, struggled to achieve royal patronage. Their poetry became competitive in writing about the greatness of the Sultan in hope that they would also be favoured, and subsequently invited to move to his palace. Arab literature at that time consisted of eulogies in poetic form, or travel writing about the wealthy corners of the royal empire. An example of this writing is seen in Saleem Abu El-Eqbal’s (1850-1914) poetry (from Abdel Rahman Yaghi’s Life of Modern Palestinian Literature Until the Crisis. Dar El Salam Press, Cairo 1978)

In the reign of Abdol Hameed, king of kings
The land is more generous with crops.
It is a reign of knowledge,
Making the mob happier
During this period Palestine did not have political autonomy, sovereignty or any kind of self-government. Turkish was the formal language, and most governors, official administrators, and military generals were either of Turkish origin or loyal to Turkish rule. Towards the final stages of the Ottoman Empire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Arab world continued to be mainly feudal. The Turkish government imposed heavy taxes on farmers, weakening the economy and causing poverty. As a result, the education system declined, particularly amongst the middle classes. The Turkish government made little effort to build schools or other educational institutions. Education became restricted to small religious schools (Kuttab) in large mosques such as Al-Azhar mosque in Cairo, and Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem.

The state of literature in Palestine was as bad as its economics and politics during the unstable nineteenth century. In fact, the poor economic and political situation led to a dearth in writers’ general knowledge of the world as many of them could not afford books to read or obtain other experience through travelling or otherwise. Literature suffered a period of deterioration in both content and style, especially in poetry. Arab writers identified with and aspired to be part of a long-gone but glorious Arabic heritage of poetry and prose writing, trying to imitate their ancestors in both style and content. Imitation led to an impoverishment of technique due to writers’ obsession with standard form and style, without paying sufficient attention to the artistry and inventive originality.

British occupation, which came as a result of the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement between France and Britain, inspired a renaissance in Palestinian literature. This is because anti British sentiments increased after the Belfour declaration in 1917 which promised a country for European Jews in Palestine. Once the waves of Jewish immigrants started arriving, Palestinians were treated as second class citizens to keep them under control.
People rebelled against this oppressive regime by paying greater attention to education, culture and art in an attempt to emphasize their cultural identity. They demanded the British mandate to build more schools and improve the education system for Palestinians. In his unfinished book, *The 1936-39 Revolt*, the prominent Palestinian writer, Ghass Kanafani (1936-1972), explains:

In 1930, after thirteen years of British occupation of Palestine, the Director of Education admitted in his report that "Since the beginning of the occupation, the government has never undertaken to provide sufficient funds for the building of a single school in the country," and in 1935, the government turned down 41% of the applications by Palestinian Arabs for places in schools. In the 800 villages in Palestine there were only fifteen schools for girls and 269 for boys and only fifteen village girls got as far as the seventh elementary grade. There were 517 Palestinian Arab villages which had neither boys' nor girls' schools and there was not one secondary school in the villages. Moreover, the government "censored books and objected to all cultural links with the Arab world, and did nothing to raise the educational level of the peasants..." Thus in 1931 among Palestinian Muslims 251 per thousand males and 33 per thousand females had attended school, and among the Palestinian Christians 715 per thousand males and 441 per thousand females (for Jews the figures were 943 per thousand males and 787 per thousand females).

Literature was of particular importance because of the power of the Arabic language to reinforce cultural identity. The Quran, for example, has always been part of this celebration of the Arabic language. Palestinians felt that they were not only losing their culture, but also their land. Their sense of identity as Palestinians who belonged to a long history of Arabic glory fuelled their sense of nationalism and their desire to
preserve their culture through resistance. Their method of expressing this nationalistic zeal was to incorporate their traditions in their struggle against the new invaders. This approach became known as the neo-romanticism and lasted until 1948. However, many felt that celebrating the past poetry heritage was not the best method to represent cultural identity for two main reasons. Firstly, it focused on the aesthetics of literature rather than the subject matter. Rhyme and meters that founders of classical Arabic poetry cherished became more important to the new romantics in the mid-twentieth century. This method was not able to satisfy readers with the modern issues that concerned them particularly the loss of identity after 1948. Secondly, this approach was too exclusive to the Muslim sector of the Arab society which is composed of different religions and factions – Christianity is a main religion in the Arab world. Non sectarian Arabs felt that this approach could lead to the dominance of one group over the other.

Slowly, the attitude towards writing began to change as the departure from the old was intensified with the return of many educated Palestinian writers such as Isaaq Nashashibi and Khalil Sakakini. Those writers and poets had received education abroad, and whose background was therefore not restricted to a purely religious education. The poetry of these two writers achieved a unique status amongst their fellow poets because they had had access to Western culture due to their ability to speak both English and French. In other words they had more access to the development of literature and the rise of new literary schools elsewhere in Europe. They did not restrict their education to the conservative traditional frame which was common at the time.

After the Nakba (or catastrophe) of 1948 and the loss of Palestine, writers believed that literature should concentrate on writing about the self because of the personal loss to people, whether it was the loss of land, family or identity. They felt that the style of the traditional poetry was too restricting in describing what the individual
was going through. It is noticeable here that the political changes which took place towards the middle of the twentieth century in the Arab world were similar to those that took place in Europe in the beginning of the twentieth century. After WWI and the break of many empires and the establishment of new nation states, writers began to use a more self focused way of writing, in an attempt to define the individual within a rapid changing society. People like T.S. Eliot, James Joyce and Ezra Pound wrote in an avant-garde method that did not restrict itself to any rules. This movement was then referred to as modernism.

What also helped modernism spread in Palestine was the direct contact between the Palestinian and the new European Jewish communities who brought with them many new words which didn’t exist in the Arabic dictionary before. Words like radio, telvisyoun (television), motsegel (motorbike) were all Arabised rather than translated given that they didn’t have any equivalent in the Arabic language. By the time Arab linguists managed to find accurate translations to such words, they had already become popular in the colloquial language. This made it difficult for writers to continue writing in the same measured and rhymed way especially that there were letters imported in these words that didn’t exist in the Arabic alphabets before like the letter “G” when pronounced as in the word “great” or “grip”. The equivalent in Arabic is the letter “J” only.

However, while writers wanted to find a modern way of representing their individuality, they did not want to alienate themselves from their readers who were overloaded with concerns about their identity. They began to simplify the language and choose topics that people knew and related to. The loss of Palestine was the most popular theme during that period because Arabs had sympathy to what was happening in Palestine and related to the problem. Writers also started using colloquial language
and talked about landmarks that people knew, such as Al-Aqsa mosque. Slowly, a new revolutionary movement in literature was being born in the Arab world. This modern movement chose a style that opposed traditions, but it was not modernism. The post-1948 literary movement was different from European modernism mainly in the techniques it used. Simplicity and self-representation were the new characteristics of Palestinian literature in the years following 1948, opposite to European modernism which relied heavily on complex language.

Also, during this period Russian Marxist literature was promoted in the Arab world given that the USSR presented itself as an ally to the Arab world. Marxist ideology penetrated the minds of Arab intelligentsia given that it offered some of the values which people needed after the loss of Palestine in 1948. The notion of the group being more supreme than the notion of the individual was one that Marxists cherished and modernists refused. Also, many Arab governments adopted Marxist ideology, such as in Iraq and Syria. Another reason why Marxist writings spread easily was because books were cheaper to import from Russia than Europe. Therefore the Arab book market was full with books from Russia.

This contradiction of notions and principles between modernism and marxism confused Arab writers who were divided between either marxist or modernist. Being exposed to two different approaches, Arab writers managed to absorb both of them and created a new literary school. The new school was not a unified movement, but a collection of different works by several Arab writers who set out a goal to renovate Arab literature and free it from the handcuffs of traditions. The new school believed that a writer should use an easy and accessible form and content of writing so the public can relate to literature more. The success of Al-Hadatha came from its writers ability to speak from an individual voice using the group’s concerns. Issues relating to the interest
of the group were more narrated as a personal and individual experience. Literature sometimes became more specific and referred to a particular village or street name with a story that only the writer experienced.

With the rise of Palestinian poets, such as Mahmoud Darwish (1942-2008), Al-Hadatha spread across to the Arab world when many writers admired the style of using the free verse while addressing the national concerns. Darwish is renowned for creating the literature of resistance, which is considered to be the foundation of Al-Hadatha. The literature of resistance is that which addresses the issues of race and identity and opposes any attempt to romanticize the past, with its glory or traditions. Commitment to the current affair and resistance to any attempt to deny the Palestinian identity are main features in the literature of resistance. Due to time limit, I won’t elaborate more on this subject, but I would like to read one of Darwish’s resistance poems, called “Between the Fleeting Words” first published in his anthology *A Lover from Palestine*, 1972

O those who pass between fleeting words
Carry your names, and be gone
Rid our time of your hours, and be gone
Take what pictures you will, so that you understand
That which you never will:
How a stone from our land builds the ceiling of the sky.
O those who pass between fleeting words
From you the sword—from us the blood
From you steel and fire—from us our flesh
From you yet another tank—from us stones
From you tear gas-from us rain
O those who pass between fleeting words
Pile your illusions in a deserted pit, and be gone
Return the hand of time to the revolver’s music
Or to the time of the law of the golden calf!
We have the present, the present and the future
So leave our country
Our land, our sea
Our wheat, our salt,
our wounds
Everything, and leave
The memories of memor

Finally, British mandate in Palestine and other Arab countries is often referred to negatively because of the defragmentation of the Arab world and the creation of Israeli. However, it is because of British occupation that Palestinian literature was re-incarnated in the middle of the Twentieth century because of the need for a literary movement that would be able to compete with the political changes as well as speak the Arab voice in the international literary arena.

Al-Hadatha continued to flourish in other literary forms, such as fiction. It also started using different techniques, such as magical realism as seen in Emile Habei’s novel *The Pessoptimist*, 1972. With the continuous wars of 1967, 1973 and others, Al-Hadatha came to represent the Arab identity through deconstructing European modernism to both highlight the pan-Arab identity and to globalise the Arab Israeli conflict.