

Ink and Resistance

Ayah Altahouni¹

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Introduction

Ayah Altahouni's piece explores the role of writing for communities in exile. She imagines a fictional conversation between an exiled Palestinian student and the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish. Set in Paris in 1988, this text examines how writers and poets can preserve cultures and identities facing diaspora and war. This piece was written in WRS 101 for an assignment that asked students to imagine a conversation with a famous writer.

Keywords: exile, Mahmoud Darwish, Palestine, writing as resistance



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¹ Ayah Altahouni is a third-year B.Ed. Elementary Education student at the University of Alberta.

² *Writing across the University of Alberta* (WAUA) publishes undergraduate student writing from writing studies courses and courses focused on writing studies practices and scholarship at the University of Alberta. You can find WAUA online at <https://writingacrossuofa.ca/>.

May 16, 1988 | Place de la Concorde

Diana walked through the square with her pastry in hand looking for a place to take a seat. *It's a beautiful day*, she thought. The rain had finally stopped, and there was some sun. The smell of rain still lingered in the air, but at least it was accompanied by that of blooming flowers.

She decided to enjoy this nice weather, despite the continuous rejections she received from her supposed friends to join her. Their attitude towards her shifted with recent events. She felt alone and targeted.

She had sent letters to her mother, hoping to hear what she had to say on the Intifada. Her mother told her not to take the media seriously, but Diana was afraid she already had. The letters were very vague. *Focus on your studies*, her mother insisted.

She sighed and took a seat beside an old man writing in what looked like a journal. As she was sitting down, she couldn't help but notice it was Arabic.

"Oh! Bitkalem Arabi?" *You speak Arabic?*

He looked up at her and raised his eyebrow.

"Sorry Amo. I meant Asalam wa Alaikum, may I sit here?"

"Wa alaikum asalam. Yes, you can sit here, and yes, ana bitkalem arabi." He smiled at her and moved to make some space for her.

"What's your name? Sho ismik?" The man asked.

"My name is Diana, and I'm a university student at Sorbonne Université." She was so happy to meet someone who could speak her mother tongue. "I rarely meet people here who speak Arabic that I can understand; usually I meet people from the Maghreb and their Arabic is different, but you sound familiar?"

"Because we are both Palestinian, my dear. I'm Mahmoud Darwish. What do you study at Sorbonne?"

"Mahmoud Darwish! What an honour! I'm a political science student, and I'm minoring in writing studies as well."

"Ouh, a political student at such a political time, good for you, my dear! But I see you recognize who I am?"

"Yes! Ya Allah, what an honour! I can't believe I am meeting you! I've read your poems, and back in London me and my cousins would sing *I Long For My Mother's Bread*. My

mother would read your poems and tell me to keep hoping to return., I never imagined this day would come when I would be sitting beside such a genius! A big part of my appreciation for poetry came from you!”

Mahmoud Darwish laughed. He was always glad to meet such enthusiastic youth because they held a light in them that reminded him of the light he once felt when he was Diana’s age.

“You need to tell me everything, Amo Mahmoud! Oh, I wish I brought a pen with me. Then I could write down everything you say!”

“You say London, my dear. Were you born there or in the *bilad*?”

“No, I was born in Jordan, not in Palestine. I’ve never been there. My parents were refugees back in 1960. They fled from our village to Jordan but had to leave in 1967 when the big war happened. I moved to London when I was 4. I have an older brother who stayed behind and joined the Jordanian Forces, but he died.”

Diana didn’t tell anyone about her brother. But she knew she could tell Amo Mahmoud. He wrote about their struggle, after all. He knew the cost of resistance, more than anyone could ever understand.

“I see. Glory to our martyrs.”

Diana nodded. “Amo Mahmoud, do you know anything about the Intifada?” It was her chance to hear the opinion she needed.

“Hmm...this is what I think, my dear. The Intifada is a backlash against laziness and reliance upon the leadership. A backlash against a long slumber. What the television is showing is true, my dear. There is a lot of violence, but when the people took matters into their own hands, it began as a children’s game, with a simple and symbolic weapon, and when they saw it on television—the first time television did anything positive—it urged them on and it became a way of life. They started a job that can’t simply end.”

“Wow! You’re right. But seeing them and hearing all the talk, I feel like I have to hide here. I know what they are doing is what has long been needed, but I’m so sick of the media calling them *terrorists*.”

A heavy silence hung in the air.

“You know, Amo, I feel useless. I feel like a traitor. I know it wasn’t my choice to leave our homeland, but I’m here enjoying my life while our people are there suffering under occupation. I don’t know what to do. I look up to you and your work in giving our people a

voice and writing about our collective identity. I want to do the same because maybe it will make me feel like I am doing something instead of nothing. What do you think? I can't fight anyone, and we both know we aren't allowed back. We are exiles."

"You know, my dear, I love how many Palestinians see my writing as a call for hope and resilience. But if I am to be honest, I never intended it to be. I write because it helps me manage our status as exiles. It allows me to bridge my journey between cultures, people, cities, and languages."

"What do you mean, as a bridge?"

"Well, I am from Al Birwa. It was destroyed. Currently, I am in Paris. But I was in Moscow and Lebanon, then Egypt. I was a communist! I mean, I was never a stationary person. What do you think constant moving around does to a person? For my sanity, I decided to write. Find connections, and make meaning of all the places I've been. Who am I in all of these places? This is important. You're a student, you're from London, you are in Paris as well. But you're still Palestinian. What does this mean to you?"

We've been under occupation for so long that the modern Palestinian identity isn't easily separated by our status as exiles. It's something to be embraced at this point, and to form our mind around. I don't say we should accept ourselves as exiles, but our distance allows us to observe ourselves and our relationship to our situation.

If you want to contribute to our story, then I urge you to start by observing yourself. Who are you, and ask yourself why? Then, answer these questions in your writing in whatever form it takes. Poetry formed the medium to answer my questions. You need to find your own. We can't all join the active resistance, but we can amplify the voices of our struggle and educate the masses either through concrete facts or through emotional gravitas.

We aren't stateless, my dear. We need to affirm this fact, in the way civilizations always have, through records. Creative folk like you and I need to make sure we write our history, our present, and our future. The day we stop is the day of our surrender. Your village was destroyed as was mine. But are we gone? Are we silent? No! So we write, my dear."

Diana was perplexed. She nodded and looked out into the square, observing all the different lives present, spending the day in the sunshine like she planned to do herself.

"Amo, what are you writing in your notebook? Can I see?"

Mohamed Darwish nodded and handed her his journal.