**Indescribable pain**

Nabil Echchaibi

Friday, Dec 08, 2023

As an Arab, I do not need to write for Palestinians. Palestinians have written to all of us for years with their words, lyrics, prose, verse, silence, blood and limbs. But their narration, no matter how eloquent, mild, angry, or distressing, remains impossible.

As the bombs rain on Gaza today, killing and maiming thousands of civilians and displacing more than a million, how does one write of Palestinian pain, Palestinian tears? What burden of believability must the Palestinians endure for their grief to meet the decency of recognition? In what language will their suffering be understood? What medium will ever carry their agony to safety?

In Arabic, the Palestinian pain needs no translation. It is visceral and piercing. Consider this scene from the live coverage of Palestine TV channel when reporter Salman al-Bashir broke down live as he delivered the news of the passing of his colleague Mohammed Abu Hatab and his entire family in a bombing in Gaza.

Al-Bashir, speaking outside a hospital and in tears, removed his protective gear in a sign of utter despair as he delivered a harrowing account of his friend’s murder amid the blaring sounds of ambulances. “The only difference between us and those who died already is just a question of time,” he said.

“We are hunted down one after the other. Nobody looks out for us or realises the severity of this tragedy in Gaza. No international protection at all. These jackets and these helmets don’t shield us from anything. They are mere slogans we wear for nothing. We are pure victims live on air. We are just waiting for our time.”

I wish everyone understood Arabic to feel the sonic vibration of pain in this reporter’s words and connect with the sorrow in the voice of the studio anchor as she sobs in the background. In this tongue, there is no distrust, no test of sincerity, and no heartless expectation of proof of humanity.

In English, al-Bashir’s torment was greeted with questions, suspicion or eviscerating calls of self-condemnation, while this narration found a tender chorus in Arabic. In English, it registered for many as mere information to be endlessly verified despite an appalling heap of evidence of thousands of children deliberately killed, dozens of journalists targeted, hospitals and schools bombed, and countless homes destroyed.

Through screams and moans, through unbearable scenes of children trembling with fear, through the wailing of mothers and fathers holding dead babies in their arms, and through the anguish of the elderly forced to experience the dread of the Nakba twice in their lifetime, why does this Palestinian suffering feel like an endless performance with no resolution? Why does their pain need countless statements and signatures? Who are we to require another human being to audition for their humanity?

Why is Palestinian testimony forbidden? Palestinians have had to deal with conditions of deletion and erasure since 1948, the year the occupation of their lands began. At the heart of their experience is a colonial project that pursues the expulsion and removal of a population from its land and simultaneously maintains that the land was empty and without a people.

For 75 years, Palestinians have had to resist a systematic campaign of occupation that has maligned their history and rendered them invisible. At every escalation of violence since then, the history of this occupation has been rendered a predictable loop of fragmented facts, misinformation and testimonies continuously discredited.

During these terrifying episodes of violence – like the one we are bearing witness to today – Palestinians must always defend their narrative against a series of unacknowledged negations and stage their pain to the world with a cruel optimism that maybe this time, the world would finally believe them.

Can the Palestinian ever be believed?

Instead, and despite unprecedented street support in capitals across the world, Palestinian suffering feels imperfect in English, illicit, and contingent. Worse, it sounds like this: “Human animals; flatten Gaza; finish them; bounce the rubble; their kids keep Mein Kampf by their bedside; their mothers raise monsters; they hide terrorists in their hospitals and schools; they are all barbarians.”

Rules of engagement, the Geneva Conventions and international law do not mean anything here. Kill them all, dehumanise them, and tell the world the occupier is the ultimate victim while the unspeakable unfolds on our screens.

Nobody captures the impossibility of Palestinian narration as writer Adania Shibli does in her 2017 masterpiece Minor Detail, a fascinating tale in Arabic that defies the occupier’s insistence on suppressing the account of the marginalised and effacing their right to narrate their own story.

Shibli digs out a horrifying and well-documented “detail” from the archives about a young Bedouin girl who was raped repeatedly and killed in 1949 by a group of 17 Israeli soldiers. Through the narration of a Ramallah woman who is obsessed with finding the grave of the young girl and retelling the story of this “unworthy life”, the novel resorts to an imperfect archive, erased maps and fragile memories to restage the pain of Palestinian absence since the traumatising experience of the 1948 Nakba.

Shibli’s painstaking attempt to piece together fragments of an incident covered up in silence and distortion has been itself met with attempted erasure. Shortly after the October 7 attack, Litprom, a German literary association, withdrew an invitation to celebrate Minor Detail at the Frankfurt Book Fair, a prestigious event in the publishing world. An interview that was scheduled with the author, whose book was a finalist for the National Book Award in the United States in 2020, was postponed to a later time with a “less politically charged atmosphere”, according to the fair organisers.

Excerpted: ‘Narrating Gaza: Pain in

Arabic, information in English’.

Courtesy: Aljazeera.com