

Arab Prison Literature

Published 30. November 2008

East of the Mediterranean (1975), a novel about torture and abuse of political prisoners, is probably the most widely read prison novel in Arabic literature. It was the author's second novel. His first novel published 2 years earlier, *The Trees and the Assassination of Marzouq* (1973), was about a man who flees his country after imprisonment and torture. The author, Abdel Rahman Mounif (1933-2004) is one of the most important Arab novelists in the second half of the twentieth century. His pan-Arab experience is unique: he was born in Amman, Jordan to a Saudi father and an Iraqi mother. He went to primary school in Amman, to secondary school in Baghdad, to university in Cairo and regularly spent his summer vacations with his father's extended family in Saudi Arabia. In 1963 he was stripped of his Saudi nationality, later, his novels would be banned from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries. Eventually Mounif settled in Damascus, Syria where he spent the last three decades of his life. His novel about torture, significantly named *East of the Mediterranean*, refers to the experience of political imprisonment in most Arab countries.

In this lecture I will mainly address prison narratives: novels, autobiographies, and memoirs written by ex political detainees about their prison experience. I will not include poetry, which I think needs a separate lecture. Arabic poetry being the oldest richest and most established literary mode of expression needs to be treated in the context of two distinct traditions as well as their interrelation: classical Arabic poetry written in fusha (the site of absolutely exciting achievements over the last 1500 years) and poetry written in the vernacular, in the spoken language used in different Arab countries. We have two remarkable examples in the thirties: Ibrahim Touqan's , poem "Red Tuesday" memorizing the execution of three freedom fighters by the British mandate government in 1930 (a qasida in Fusha) and 'Awad's poem, in the vernacular, which was found engraved on the wall of his cell after he was hanged.

Prison narratives, a rich subgenre of modern Arabic literature, have been produced by both men and women; by liberals, communists and Islamists; by professional writers, by one-book authors and by ex- detainees who have recorded their prison experience in interviews, oral testimonies and fragments. The available material is so extensive that one runs the risk of tedious cataloguing.

For the purpose of this lecture I'll choose three cases: Writings from Egypt, because we have a more substantial body of narratives, scores of books and hundreds of recorded accounts by men and women; writings from Morocco, which provide us with accounts of the longest years of incarceration; and writings by Palestinian and Lebanese political prisoners, representative of thousands of political detainees in Israeli prisons. I hope that the choice of these three cases does not give the

impression that there are no political imprisonment and prison writings in Syria, Iraq, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, and Tunisia, to name but some Arab countries.

I

In 1966, Sonallah Ibrahim, a young man in his twenties who had recently been released from a 5 year - prison term, published his first novel *The Smell of It*. In his introduction to the book, Yussef Idris, an established Egyptian novelist and short story writer, recognized the talent of the young author and the novelty of the work, which he compared to “a slap on the face, a scream or an alarming groan which almost evokes our dread”. The novel’s central character, Idris said, was not the protagonist or the events it portrayed but “an overwhelming feeling... difficult to identify.” It was not “a sense of estrangement, revulsion, loss or rebellion or a need for love or life” It was something else which, Idriss wrote, he had failed to name. *The Smell of It* was obviously new; later it would be claimed that it was the first Arabic modernist novel: No story line; an unnamed protagonist aimlessly wandering in the streets of Cairo, or reclined in his bed, smoking. Nothing of particular significance happened in the novel except for the regular evening visit by a policeman, who had to check that the protagonist was in his place; a few flashbacks, a few connotative images; a style reminiscent of Hemingway’s understatement and short telegraphic sentences and a malaise echoing Camus’ *l’Etranger*.

Let me quote the first few lines of the novel and the concluding paragraph: “The officer said: What’s your address? I said: I have no address. He stared at me in surprise: where will you go? Where will you live? I said: I don’t know; I have nobody (to go to). The officer said: I can’t let you go. We have to know your place of residence to check every night if you’re there. The soldier will accompany you.”

At the end of the novel, the protagonist looks for his grandmother’s house, when he finds it, he visits her and listens to what she has to tell him about his mother’s death. The novel ends with the following lines: “I glanced at my watch. I stood up. I said I had to go... I went down the stairs. I left the building. I walked through the streets until I reached Ramses Square. From there I headed for the metro station.”

Though we can easily infer that the protagonist is back to “normal life” after years of absence in prison, there is almost no direct reference to the prison experience except for a few brief flashbacks.

In his five year prison term, Son’allah Ibrahim was beaten and humiliated and saw his comrades beaten and whipped to death. However, the way the experience was processed is definitely interesting. The novel does not record the details of that ordeal but rather their psychological after effect.

In 2004, Ibrahim revisits his prison experience” in *Al Wahaat Diaries*. The form is again new: A 45-page introduction about the author’s arrest and the conditions of life in prison, and 90 pages of endnotes (historical data, factual comments etc.).

Bracketed between the introduction and the endnotes, is the diary, 140 pages of prison notes which Ibrahim had secretly jotted down in minute handwriting on cigarette papers from 1962-1964, and which he managed to smuggle out of prison at his release. There is nothing about torture or degradation in the notes, which are mainly the reflections of a would-be artist, quotations from poems or books, comments on stories or novels, observations, views, literary plans...etc. The indirect and oblique relation between the introduction and the endnotes on the one hand, and the prison notes on the other, constitute part of the meaning of the novel.

I've started with Ibrahim's two novels not only because their author is established as one of the outstanding Arab novelists but also because of the time frame these two novels provide. In the period in between the publication of *The Smell of It* (1966) and *Al-Wahat Diaries* (2004), dozens of books have been published about the experience of political imprisonment in Egypt. Most of them were written by leftists, who mainly recount the 1959-1964 years of incarceration, first at a number of different prisons then at al-Wahat. Other accounts record the prison experience of the seventies and eighties. Much fewer accounts were produced by Islamists (such as Zeinab al Hudaybi and Ahmad Ra'if' respective books recording their experience of incarceration as Islamist political prisoners in the late fifties and early sixties).

Prison writings in Egypt are extensive, not only because Egypt's population constitutes one third of the population of all Arab countries, but also because a large number of oppositional intellectuals have been subjected to political imprisonment. The notorious 1959 campaign included hundreds of detainees. (A military decree issued on December 31st 1958, had ordered the arrest of 169 persons. It was followed in March by a second decree which ordered the arrest of 436 persons). Most of the detained were intellectuals: poets, novelists or would be novelists, playwrights, architects, journalists, academics, painters, cartoonists and actors. Their accounts of their prison experience were written after the event and with very few exceptions were not published before the mid seventies. Some of the details are repeated and comparatists might find it interesting to trace how different authors recounted the same episode (One of the notorious episodes related by several authors is the "Wasla episode": On being transferred from al-Azab prison in al Fayyoun to the Wahat Prison in the Western Desert, the prisoners had to change trains at al-Wasla, a small town in Upper Egypt; each thirty prisoners had been chained together by a 15 metre-long iron manacle with several handcuffs. As the prisoners were getting off the train, the train started to move, those who got off, chained to the rest of their comrades in the train, fell down, broke their arms or shoulders. It could have been much worse had it not been for a guard who fired his gun to alarm the train driver).

Most of the memoirs give a detailed description of the prison, the prisoner's daily life; highlight the torture and also the triumph of surviving the ordeal. The death of one of the inmates as a result of torture, Shuhdi Attiya, a journalist and a leader of the movement was a scandal with far reaching echoes outside Egypt. It led to stopping the torture. And the prisoners were relatively free to move in the prison: they set up

an open university where classes varied from literacy classes (where the students were mainly the prison guards) to cybernetics and pure math; they had exams, diplomas and graduation ceremonies; wall papers, a news agency, a farm, painting, sculpture and pottery workshops, pottery ovens, a mosque and a theatre.

I'll stop here to present in some detail Habashi's book *A Detainee for all Seasons* (2004). Habashi wrote his book at the age of eighty, which means he had the advantage of hindsight and some 20 books published in the 3 previous decades, about that experience. He was keen not to repeat what had been recorded by the others but rather to provide a kind of synthesis of previous reports + what he had to say about his own personal experience. Indeed, he's a man for all seasons of persecution. From 1948 to 1987, Habashi spent varied periods of his life in different detention centres in Egypt. His account is not limited to al-Wahat or to 59-64 imprisonment. In 1959, his wife, a political activist, was arrested (a few weeks before he was arrested) and spent 4 years in prison. The couple had a one year old baby girl, and 2 boys the oldest of whom was six years old. Apart from the daily beatings and violence to which all the detainees were subjected, Habashi was whipped so violently that he almost died. When the prisoners were transferred to Al Wahat the director of the prison refused to receive him. The man carried by his comrades on a blanket was almost dead. Eventually he was taken in and he survived not only the torture but also three other arrests and prison terms in 1975, 1979 and 1987. He survived them all and he sued the ministry of the Interior for torturing him (the traces of torture were still visible on his back two decades later). During his confinement at al -Wahaat Habashi, an architect by profession, designed a theatre and was the master mind behind building. Later in one of his shorter prison terms in the seventies, he designed a water fountain and managed to have it constructed in the jail's inner courtyard.

Recollecting the experience forty years later, Habashi writes: "Why should we build a theatre? Do we expect to spend the rest of our life here?' He goes on to say that "building a theatre would be a moral struggle against the desert, the sand and exile. Even if it materialized for one hour, had one play staged on it, we would always be proud that we could overcome tyranny with culture and art..."

Habashi recounts how he designed a semi circular Roman style theatre with stone benches. But the prison was located in the desert, sand would not do and there were no quarries

In *Diaries of a Political Detainee* (1994), al Sayyid Yusef explains how, after several failed attempts, they could obtain a suitable blend, cast it in molds and produce hundreds of thousands of bricks. The theatre they built was inaugurated on International Theatre Day in 1962. The repertoire was varied: *The Barber of Baghdad*, written by an inmate, was later to become one of the classics of modern Egyptian drama. *The News* by Salah Hafez, an outstanding journalist, *The Doghry Family* which was playing at the same time at the Egyptian National Theatre in Cairo,

Shakespeare's Macbeth, Ibsen's A Doll's House, a play by Bernard Shaw and a play by Jean Paul Sartre. Puppet shows and poetry recitals were also staged in that theatre.

In retrospect, Habashi reflects, building the theatre : "transformed us; we were naked, with bare feet, hungry, isolated... and besieged by guards, bars and thorns, but we managed to create a space of culture, education, and architecture, we managed to give an instance of the power of humans to grow a flower in the very midst of hell."

Thirteen years later, Habashi detained in Abu Za'bal, another prison, decided to construct a water fountain. He did the design and convinced the prison authorities not to obstruct the project. They turned a blind eye to his wife smuggling in needed material including cement and plaster. At the centre of the fountain was a clown blowing a trumpet; in the four corners were 4 little statues personifying beauty, happiness, revolution and knowledge. It was not the representation of revolution which caused the problem but that of knowledge: it was a book trodden by a military boot. The prison administration objected and Habashi had to give up the military boot. But once the fountain was finished the administration was alarmed. Who was the clown meant to represent? A special committee from the Interior Ministry came to inspect the fountain. Fortunately, the report was favourable, it stated that the clown did not look like the president!

II

Though sentenced to 3 years of prison, Rachdi Benaissa, a young sergeant in the Moroccan air force, had spent 11 years in confinement before he died. He made a sketch of his Tazmamarte cell and was proud of it. In *Lettres De Maroc* Christine Daure-Serfaty tells us that at his death bed, Benaissa whispered: "I want my sketch to go out of this prison and travel all over the world."

Benaissa's pencil sketch is a drawing of a small empty cell, walls, and ceiling; at the very centre, a dark closed door with a tiny aperture. To the left, a small jug of water on the ground and a stone bench which looks like a table (this stone bench, we know from different Tazmamarte accounts, was the cell's sole furniture; it served the inmates to sleep, sit and eat).

Benaissa died on June 29th 1983. His comrades were to remain in Tazmamarte for 8 more years. When they were released, they fulfilled the first half of their comrade's wish: they brought his sketch out of prison. Ten years later, one of his comrades, Ahmad Marzouki, fulfilled the second half; the sketch became the cover design of Marzouki's *Tazmamarte: Cellule 10*. (*Tazmamarte: Cell No 10*); Benaissa's sketch could travel all over the world.

Tazmamarte is a prison in the desert where two groups of detainees were incarcerated. They were all implicated in two failed coups against King Hassan II; the first at al-Sukhairat Palace in July 1971 and the second an attempt to down the

King's plane in 1972. Most of the prisoners were innocent, they were students at a military school and were made use of by their leaders who were executed right after the coup. For 2 years the accused were interrogated and tortured. Many of them were sentenced to 3, 5 and 10 years of imprisonment. In 1973, 58 accused were transferred to Tazmamarte where they were kept for 18 years under solitary confinement (1973-1991). Of the 58 detainees, only 28 survived. Some of those who died had lost their mind or turned paralyzed or were too sick to help themselves and spent years in appalling conditions in solitary cells, with no medical attention and no attention at all except for what the guards allowed: to ask one of the inmates to enter the cell of a sick comrade and help clean him because the stench had become unbearable.

In 2000, nine years after the release from Tazmamarte the first accounts were published: Ahmad Marzouki's book *Tazmamarte: Cell No 10* appeared and Mohamad al Rais' *From Skheirat to Tazmamarte : A Return Ticket to Hell* was serialized in a newspaper, and the book was published a year later. The two accounts were originally written in French. And also in French, Taher Ben Jalloun, established Francophone Moroccan writer who lives in Paris, wrote his novel *Cette Aveuglante Absence de Lumiere* (2001) (*This Blinding Absence of Light*- 2002), based on the experience of one of Tazmamarte survivors. Ben Jalloun's novel caused a controversy: it was questioned why Ben Jalloun had kept silent for 20 years about Tazmamarte and the other Moroccan detention centres. It was thought it was immoral to 'remember' Tazmamarte only now that its atrocities made the headlines.

In the same period two other accounts were released: Malika Oufkir's *La Prisonniere* (1999, *Stolen Lives Twenty Years in a Desert Jail*, 2001)) and Fatma Oufkir's (Malika's mother) *Les Jardins du Roi: Oufkir, Hassan II et moi*, (2000, Oufkir, Hassan II and I)

Ironically, General Oufkir, the King's right hand for decades, ex minister of the interior, ex minister of defense and ex head of the Moroccan armed forces, was implicated in a coup against the King. Oufkir was killed. His wife, six children, a relative who lived with the family and the family cook spent 10 years in prison and 8 years of house arrest, 4 years before being transferred to a desert prison and 4 more years after their release. (1973-1991). There was no trial, no accusation and no sentence. The Oufkir family, privileged when Oufkir was in power, had now to pay heavily for their father's disloyalty to the crown.

King Hassan II passed away in 1999, a ruthless despot, he had ruled Morocco for 38 years, which came to be known as "the lead years". In the few years which followed dozens of books were published about political imprisonment in Morocco; a visible, varied and rich body of literature which was recognized as a phenomenon to be explored. In August 2006, The Moroccan Writers' Union organized a seminar: "Readings in Prison Writings and Narratives". The organizers stated that the object of the seminar was not only to study the literary value of these works, their peculiar

rhetoric but also to attempt to listen to the voices of those ex detainees, to explore the psychology of both victim and victimizer and to keep the memory of that dark period of Moroccan history.” 15 papers were read in the seminar, each about one, two or more prison narratives (that might give you an idea of the number of books published in the previous six years). (Understandably, the Oufkirs books were not included probably because of the two authors’ silence about Oufkirs responsibility in the assassination, torture and kidnapping of a large number of civilians when he was in power).

Added to this written literature came thousands of oral testimonies given by the victims and their families in the Reconciliation sessions. The new king, Mohammad VI, had formed The Equity and Reconciliation Commission (2004) part of whose job was to listen to the atrocities committed in the previous four decades. The Official figures that the Commission listened to 22.000 testimonies.

In a review of a recent book about Tazmamarte, Mohamad Boudhan, a Moroccan Journalist, quotes a Moroccan popular saying: “If the devil hears it he will stop his ears”, meaning that the story told is so atrocious that even the devil will not bear to listen to it.

Now the devil had to listen to the story, hoping that the act of listening would achieve a reconciliation.

III

From 1948 to 2008 that is from the creation of the State of Israel to the present 800.000 Palestinians have experienced political imprisonment; this figure constitutes 25% of the overall population of Palestine. From the year 2000, 42 thousand Palestinians have been imprisoned, not including those arrested for interrogation, and detention in the settlements, police stations, military posts or check points. Currently, there are 11,000 Palestinian political prisoners in some 30 Israeli jails. The total number of prisoners whose incarceration has exceeded 10 years is 421 prisoners. Of the 11,000 detainees and political prisoners currently in Israeli jails, there are 356 children (under 18), 118 women, 4 ministers and 34 members of the Palestinian Legislative Council (Palestinian Parliament) including the Speaker of the Council. From the year 2000, 72 persons died in prison; 3 died of torture, 17 of lack of urgently needed medical attention.

Palestinian prison writings however, are not as substantial or varied as in other Arab countries. Why? Is it because the majority of those detainees are very young people, and at times semi literate? Is it because the pressures of occupation persist even after the prisoners’ release and make writing difficult? I have no definite answer. We have innumerable fragments, often poems, and short prose pieces, a novel by an amateur young writer, smuggled out of prison and published on the net. Published books about the experience of political incarceration are relatively few. Prominent among them is *Dreams of Freedom* (2004) by Aisha Auda who was arrested in

March 1969, she was 25 and spent 10 years in prison. During the interrogation, Aisha faced all imaginable forms of physical and verbal abuse; she was beaten, whipped, kicked, terrorized (we'll keep beating you until you turn blind, you'll be paralysed, you'll die, we'll blow up your mother's house, all your comrades have informed on you...etc). After each interrogation session she was dragged to her cell, half unconscious with inflamed face, arms and legs and could hardly bear the touch of a pillow or a blanket. In the last interrogation session she was stripped naked and raped.

It took Auda 32 years to write her prison experience. In a note at the end of the book's second edition, she writes about the great agony of writing, the burden of recreating the moments of suffering. Three years after the publication of the book 's first edition, she tells us, she was asked in a TV show about the torture she had experienced, "I realized I was not ready to answer. The following morning, I woke up at six in the morning, I was crying and for a whole hour I could not stop. I was still bleeding; the wound was still open 35 years after."

The arrest and the interrogation are the main focus of Auda's account, the 10 years which followed, the details of prison life, her relation to her comrades are summarized in one last short chapter.

in her book *Resistante* (2000), Soha Beshara, a Lebanese young woman, who also spent ten years in al-Khiam, uses a different strategy. Her treatment of her prison experience is basically a treatment in context. She gives a detailed description of the prison, its location, its history, its different buildings and its cells... etc. She also gives an account of the interrogation procedures, the torture, the daily routine, the meals, the clothes, the punishments...etc. and the innumerable forms of resistance which the inmates improvised. Beshara is keen to document the details of daily life in al-Khiam where there is "no justice ..., no trials, no judges, no lawyers. In al Khiam detention centre the prisoners are unacknowledged, invisible, simply non existent in the world of the living."

Beshara, who was incarcerated at 21, was not raped but she was beaten and tortured with electric prods and often confined to a solitary cell so narrow that she could walk only four steps from wall to wall. Part of her resistance was to be in good physical and mental shape; she would walk 4 kms everyday within this tiny place, and was of course cautious not to hit her head or her body in the thousands of rounds she did everyday of her tiny cell.

Beshara, was released in 1996, four years later al Khiam fell with the liberation of South Lebanon from Israeli occupation. The prison became an open museum where visitors could see the appalling conditions, in which the prisoners (men women and children) lived, the 1m x 1.80 m cells and the 90 x 90 cm boxes in which inmates were locked for days. Chomsky at visiting al-Khiam in May 2006 compared it to Guantanamo. Understandably, Israel in its last war on Lebanon July-August 2006,

targeted al-Khiam with hundreds of bombs. The place now has been totally destroyed. Only the rubble, stories and the memory remain.

Before I conclude I would like to make a short remark:

Foucault's brilliant argument in *Surveiller et Punir* (Discipline and Punish) that the body as major target of penal repression has been substituted by a new economy of punishment, does not really apply to our part of the world, (and to other parts as well after the American invasion of Iraq) where to quote from my latest novel "power is like a sly industrious old woman, reluctant to dispose of anything." She keeps the old instruments next to the new ones and uses them alternatively. The old punishment technology of inscribing punishment on the body is still the order of the day.

In December 1961, Pablo Picasso made a portrait of Jamila Boupasha, an Algerian freedom fighter who was imprisoned by the French occupation army, tortured and raped. Her lawyer, Gisele Halimi, wrote a book about her, Simone de Beauvoir wrote the introduction, and Picasso's sketch was used for the book cover.

No Picasso did a drawing of any Palestinian or Lebanese political detainee; no *Guernica* has yet been produced to commemorate the atrocities of al-Khiam, Tazmamarte or al-Wahat. However, the body of writings by political prisoners in the Arab world is, in a sense, a large canvas whose every detail has been paid for in sweat and blood, a *Guernica* of a sort produced not by an individual genius but by a collective who went through hell and came out, not with retaliatory feelings but with a sense of triumph, and the confidence, to quote Habashi, that humans can grow a flower even in the midst of hell.

Radwa Ashour

2008

<http://radwaashour.net/index.php/2-uncategorised/50->

radwaashour.net