



Fadwa and Ibrahim



By Al-Mutawakel Taha

The relationship between Fadwa Tuqan (1917–2003) and her older brother Ibrahim (1905–1941) was special. They were connected not only by familial bonds but also shared a love for poetry, friendship, and mutual respect for each other’s poetic talent.

While obtaining a degree in literature, Ibrahim lived in metropolitan Beirut, an environment that was much more open than his hometown Nablus. When at age thirteen his sister Fadwa was prevented from continuing her education, Ibrahim took it upon himself to further her education. He wrote letters of encouragement, gave her books to read, taught her the English language, corrected her errors, and

introduced her to prominent Arab poets and the art of prosody and poetic composition. But he was not only a source of inspiration to Fadwa, he also encouraged, even implored her to publish her work.

Ibrahim’s greatness stems from his poetic power and spirituality as well as his tolerance towards diversity. On the one hand, he encouraged Fadwa to buy a record with songs by Maurice Chevalier (the French actor, cabaret singer, and entertainer), on the other, he invited her to read the Holy Qur’an. Ibrahim reflected the traditional culture to which he belonged and which he was not willing to relinquish, but at the same time he was open to modernism. Their background was the bourgeois class that was witnessing transformation

and disintegration. When in 1936, a revolution erupted, initiated by Palestinian peasants, the Palestinian bourgeoisie had no choice but to also engage in the revolution and give up the political stance of accommodating and trying to cooperate with the British Mandate government, which it had adopted since the 1920s.

A Palestinian proverb says: “No two siblings are alike,” and this applies well to Ibrahim and Fadwa. Whereas they both were conscious, reflective, and articulate regarding the political and social developments of their time, Fadwa was long-suffering, patient, and meditative, while Ibrahim was sarcastic and ironic. Ibrahim was immersed in public concerns, while Fadwa was more introverted and restrained by social shackles. Ibrahim was in league with the public; Fadwa, with herself – at least in her early writings. Ibrahim’s poetry echoes the Palestinian national identity shaped by political reality, whereas Fadwa’s writings reveal an internal struggle and rebelliousness against her society. In other words, Ibrahim personified external form while Fadwa expressed her internal consciousness.

Ibrahim passed away before the political ambition for a Palestinian state was realized. Mourning the untimely death of her brother, and despite the prevailing social and political constraints, Fadwa was determined to master her skills and continued to write poetry, criticize the social forces, and encourage the creation of a better Palestinian society. Her work reflects various aspects of Palestinian life and conveys her own personal sentiments beginning with her early collections, including *My Brother Ibrahim* (1946) and *Alone with the Days* (1952). Tuqan studied English language and literature at Oxford University in the United Kingdom from 1962 to 1964, and later traveled across Europe.

The relationship between Ibrahim and Fadwa was symbolic. After the Nakba of 1948, the dominant powers collapsed and new forces – of which Fadwa was a part – emerged in their place. Her personal story merged into the public sense of loss and pain. In her poetry Fadwa voiced her suffering and the pain of the oppressed. Her voice was also the voice of large segments of her society that were injured by reality and restrained by their harsh living conditions. She managed to get out of her “female coop,” as she called it, and invited others to get out of the “coop” of lies, gossip, and hypocrisy, as well as of political, social, and economic marginalization. The poetic voice of Fadwa met head to head with the historical context, so that the suppressed woman became an internationally recognized poetess.

Fadwa remained a passionate and sensitive writer. She spent her life jobless and unmarried, living among the flowers of her poems that, like real flowers, both grew and prospered with little water and air.

Al-Mutawakel Taha was born in Qalqilya in 1958, and holds a master of arts degree. He served as president of the Palestinian Writers Union from 1987 to 1995, and as chairman of the general assembly of the Palestinian Higher Education Council from 1994 to 1998. He served as undersecretary of the Palestinian Ministry of Information from 1994 to 1998 and along with a number of Palestinian creators he founded the House of Poetry in Palestine in 1998. He was also elected secretary-general of the General Union of Palestinian Writers in 2005. He has published much of his poetry in Palestine and abroad, and a number of his writings have been translated into several languages.

The Israeli general Moshe Dayan compared reading one of Fadwa Tuqan's poems to facing 20 enemy commandos. Long cherished in Palestine, she gained international fame after her poems were translated into English. The following is a small selection.

Existence ⁱ

Loose translation by Michael R. Burch.

In solitary life, I was a lost question;
in the encompassing darkness,
my answer was concealed.

You were a bright new star
radiating light from the darkness of the unknown,
revealed by fate.

The other stars rotated around you
– once, twice –
until it came to me,
your unique radiance.

Then the bleak blackness broke
And in the matching tremors
of our two hands
I found my missing answer.

Oh you! Oh you intimate, yet distant!
Don't you remember the coalescence
Of your spirit in flames?
Of my universe with yours?
Of the two poets?
Despite our great distance,
Existence unites us.

Nothing Remains ⁱⁱ

Loose translation by Michael R. Burch.

Tonight, we're together,
but tomorrow you'll be hidden from me
thanks to life's cruelty.

The seas will separate us ...
Oh!—Oh!—If only I could see you!
But I'll never know ...
where your path led you,
which route you took,
or to what unknown destination
your feet compelled your steps.

You will depart and the thief of all beauty
will rob us of all that's dear to us,
will steal this happiness from us,
leaving our hands empty.



Tomorrow at sunrise you'll leave like a phantom,
dissipating into a delicate cloud
that dissolves quickly in the summer noon.

Your scent – your scent! – contains the essence of life,
filling my heart
as the earth absorbs the fragrant rain.

I will miss you like the fragrance of trees
when you leave tomorrow,
and nothing remains.

Just as everything beautiful and all that's dear to us
is lost – lost! – and nothing remains.

Labor Pains ⁱⁱⁱ

The wind blows the pollen in the night
through ruins of fields and homes.
Earth shivers with love,
with the pain of giving birth,
but the conqueror wants us to believe
stories of submission and surrender.
O Arab Aurora!

Tell the usurper of our land
that childbirth is a force unknown to him,
the pain of a mother's body,
that the scarred land
inaugurates life
at the moment of dawn
when the rose of blood
blooms on the wound.

A Moment

Translated by Tania Tamari Nasir for this issue of TWIP, 2017.

I long for silence, tranquility
Do not speak to me of what was or what is to be
Do not tell me of yesterday or of tomorrow
This moment, for me, has no before, no after
Time has no meaning for me anymore
Yesterday has faded into echoes and a shadow,
And the unknown tomorrow stretches far away, invisible
Maybe it is what our dreams have created,
Maybe it is what we have been yearning for
This moment, nothing else
A flower, which has blossomed in our hands



With no fruit, without roots
A flower of momentary splendor
Come, let us hold onto it my beloved, before the crossing.

Longing Inspired by the Law of Gravity ^{iv}

Time's out and I'm home alone with the shadow I cast
Gone is the law of the universe, scattered by frivolous fate
Nothing to hold down my things
Nothing to weigh them to the floor
My possessions have flown, they belong to others
My chair, my cupboard, the revolving stool

Alone with the shadow I cast
No father, no mother
No brothers, no sisters to swell
The house full with laughter
Nothing but loneliness and grief
And the rubble of months, the years
Bend my back, slow my steps, blind me to the horizon

I miss the smell of coffee, the scent in the air
Its absence an ecstasy where I drown morning and night

Time's out and I'm home alone
With the shadow I cast

I miss the company of books
Their consolation through trouble and joy

I miss, how I miss my mother's ancient clock, family photos framed on the wall
I miss my oud
For all its silent, severed strings

Time's out and I'm home alone
The curfew hurts
It hurts me, no it kills me, the killing of children near my home

I'm afraid of tomorrow
I'm afraid of the unknowable resources of fate
O God, don't let me be a burden, shunned by young and old
I wait to arrive where the land is silent, I'm waiting for death
Long has been my journey O God
Make the path short and the journey end

First published as Wahsha: Moustalhama min Qanoon al Jathibiya in Al Karmel, 72-73, 2002. By arrangement with the estate of Fadwa Touqan. Translation copyright 2006 by Tania Tamari Nasir and Christopher Millis. All rights reserved.

ⁱ <http://www.thehypertexts.com/Fadwa%20Tuqan%20Palestinian%20Poet%20Poetry%20Picture%20Bio.htm>.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.thehypertexts.com/Fadwa%20Tuqan%20Palestinian%20Poet%20Poetry%20Picture%20Bio.htm>.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://poemlist.com/?mode=poem&id=1084846>.

^{iv} <http://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/longing-inspired-by-the-law-of-gravity>.

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