

# Literature Is Manners

By Adania Shibli

I recently had a dream in which words appeared to grow out of the land but then started to dry up and die, like plants in a drought. I woke up in fear, to realize once more that the landscapes in my life are being sabotaged: Lands are confiscated, water supplies are cut, plants are sprayed with herbicide, crops are destroyed, libraries are looted, books are stolen, and words are forced into disappearance. In fact, books and words have been pillaged by the Israeli authorities since 1948, as manifest in the National Library of Israel's collection of books labeled with the letters "AP." Amongst the books whose loss is most felt are those inscribed with the name Khalil al-Sakakini.

Khalil al-Sakakini, a major Palestinian thinker, educator, and poet, was born in Jerusalem and lived and worked mainly in the city through the first half of the twentieth century. His writings ranged from addressing questions related to the then-

political reality and resistance methods to imperial rule, to proposals for the reformation of education systems. His ideas were very influential and were discussed in intellectual circles across the Arabic-speaking regions of the Eastern Mediterranean. Many consider him to be one of the most distinguished men of his generation in the Arab world. Al-Sakakini's thought was informed by his encounters and exchanges with people from the various regions he managed to travel to, but also by the extraordinary collection of books that he had in his own library.

In the aftermath of the Palestinian *Nakba*, and the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, al-Sakakini was forced to flee Jerusalem and seek refuge in Cairo, where he died several years later. He and his small family were among the very last to remain in the neighborhood of Qatamon, which was under heavy artillery attack by Zionist militias. Eventually, his house was raided, and one particular category of his possessions was targeted: books. Al-Sakakini's entire library was looted in an organized manner by the staff of what was then called the National Jewish Library, later renamed the National Library of Israel, who closely followed the armed militias that raided West Jerusalem neighborhoods.<sup>i</sup>

After 1948, the Jewish National Library put its hands on around 30,000 books that belonged to Palestinian private libraries, including that of al-Sakakini. The books included in these libraries were not average mass-produced popular fiction or cheap commercial publications. They were largely scholarly volumes, mostly in Arabic, many of which are today rare or out of print. As Hannah Mermelstein recounts:

*[A]ccording to testimonies from those involved in the project, [the Jewish National Library] began to catalog books by subject and often by owners' names. In the early 1960s, however, close to 6,000 of the books were revisited and labeled with the letters "AP" for "abandoned property."<sup>ii</sup>*

Al-Sakakini paid farewell to his library in a text he wrote during the summer of 1948 after he arrived in Cairo:

*Goodbye, my precious, valuable, well-chosen books! I say my books, meaning that I didn't inherit you from my parents or grandparents . . . And I didn't borrow you from other people either; you were brought together by this old man standing in front of you . . . Who would believe that doctors used to borrow medical books from me because they could only be found in my library? No linguistic problem ever arose in one of the government departments without those concerned consulting me, because they knew my library was the most likely place to find a solution to the problem, or because they thought I'd at least know where the solution could be found. [Now] I do not know what has become of you after our departure: Were you looted or burnt? Have you been honorably transferred to a public or private library? Or have you been carted over to grocery shops so that your pages could be used for wrapping onions?*

*Goodbye my books! You are too precious for me to be without you.*

*Goodbye, my books! I used to keep you company night and day, and rare was the visitor, by day or by night, who didn't find me poring over my books.<sup>iii</sup>*

The only books al-Sakakini was left with were his own notebooks. He used to write diary entries almost every day. Through them, one can trace how books – whether in terms of the knowledge they carried or the language



Books belonging to al-Sakakini family, with second to the right, AP 2462, having the name Sari al-Skakini written on it. Sari, a lawyer, was Khalil al-Sakakini's eldest son.

"The soldiers raiding these West Jerusalem neighborhoods were closely followed by teams of librarians from the Jewish National and University Library at Hebrew University (later referred to as National Jewish Library or simply the National Library). They gathered approximately 30,000 books from private Palestinian libraries and, according to testimonies from those involved in the project, began to catalog books by subject and often by owners' names. In the early 1960s, however, close to 6,000 of the books were revisited and labeled with the letters 'AP' for 'abandoned property.' The library catalog shows no information on provenance, or

former ownership. If that information had formerly been recorded, it seems to have been erased or at least carefully concealed.

[...]

These books are not the average mass-produced popular fiction or cheap commercial publications. They are largely scholarly volumes, mostly in Arabic, and many are rare or out of print today".

- Hannah Mermelstein, "Overdue Books: Returning Palestine's 'Abandoned Property' of 1948," Institute of Palestine Studies, 2011, Issue 47.

they were written in, namely Arabic – were the field in which al-Sakakini nurtured his thought and planted his actions. One particular entry in his diaries, dating back to one hundred years ago, is an essential guide to the power of words and literature:

*When I went to bed the evening of Tuesday, the 27th of November 1917, it was late and very cold, and cannons near Jerusalem were booming like thunder. Then there was a soft knock at the door, and I opened it to find a Jewish American standing before me like a frightened soul seeking refuge.*

*The government had announced that all Americans between the ages of 16 and 50 must turn themselves over within 24 hours, and that anyone who failed to do so would be considered a spy. It had also announced that anyone*

*who hid an American, knowingly or not, would likewise be considered a spy. Our friend here, Alter Levine, had not turned himself over to the government but had fled, and perhaps had knocked on many doors before reaching mine because no one would let him in.*

*And so I was faced with a dilemma: should I admit him, thus disobeying the orders of my government and making myself subject to its wrath and vengeance, particularly at a time when it had lost its sense? Or should I turn him away, thereby acting in a manner contrary to the spirit of Arabic literature and language, which I loved passionately since my childhood, and whose revival and invigoration has been the goal of my life? It is a literature that constantly urges us to give refuge and help to those seeking it, to comfort the frightened and respond to those who cry out for help. If I let him in, I would*

*betray my country, and if I sent him away I would betray my language. So which betrayal should I commit?*

*These thoughts passed through my mind at the speed of lightning, and in the end I did not hesitate to receive him.*

*The man sought refuge with me and I could do nothing other than welcome him in. I said to myself that he was not appealing simply to me for refuge. He was appealing to the literature expressed in my language before the emergence of Islam and after it. He was appealing to that Bedouin who sheltered a hyena fleeing from its pursuers and entering his tent. . . . He was appealing to the many historical characters who offered shelter to those seeking refuge, and helped those seeking aid, even if doing so meant putting themselves in danger. And here I can only say that he bestowed a great honour upon me by seeking refuge with me, because by doing so he deemed me fit to represent the spirit of our history and our literature.*

*I hope that my people would be pleased that a strange man did seek refuge with them through me. In fact the man did not seek refuge with Khalil al-Sakakini as one might think but rather with the Arab nation as represented by one of its members. I'm not one to relinquish this honourable position, or play havoc with the honour of my people and our literature, even if this meant placing myself in danger of execution by hanging or a firing squad.<sup>iv</sup>*

Al-Sakakini died as a refugee in Cairo, away from his books, on August 13, 1953. Neither he nor any other Palestinian would have full access to those books again, or to the field of words, morals, and ideas that inspired al-Sakakini and his generation of Palestinian thinkers to write and to act. Instead, these books, along with thousands of others belonging to Palestinians in Jerusalem and other cities, will be accessed by Israeli

scholars, mainly from the Eastern Department of the Hebrew University, to generate a totally different field of words, morals, and knowledge. In the hands of Israeli scholars, these books have become part of a wider task of mapping and understanding the East. They have become major players in the oppression of Palestinians and of Arabs in general, supported by Orientalism and Orientalist knowledge.<sup>v</sup> Indeed, most Israeli students of Arabic at Hebrew University are seeking a career in the Israeli intelligence services or the Israeli army.

In 1957, the Israeli authorities responsible for the property of Palestinians who were forced to leave their homes in the aftermath of the 1948 war decided that around 26,000 books, among the thousands looted from Palestinians across various cities, were "unsuitable for use, [because] some of them contained inciting materials against the State of Israel, and therefore their distribution or selling might cause damage to the State." These texts were sold as paper waste.<sup>vi</sup>

Recent years have seen the National Library of Israel start a digitization project: scanning hundreds of books and making them accessible on the World Wide Web. As the library explains:

*Every week more scanned books are added. The initial selection of titles ranges from 15<sup>th</sup> century incunabula to early 20<sup>th</sup> century works. The first stage of this project is to digitize rare and out-of-print monographs from its collection.<sup>vii</sup>*

In general, digitizing books can be seen as an act of generosity related to sharing "the fruits of knowledge." But in this specific case – realizing the major role that the National Library of Israel had in looting Palestinian books – can digitizing any of them be seen as an act of generosity, or does it simply multiply the act of theft, making every reader complicit in it?



A group of academic and political figures (from right to left) Khalil al-Sakakini, Bandali al-Jawzy, Adel Jaber, Mohammad Rafiq al-Husseini. Location unknown, 1920-1939. From the family album of Said Huss.

I wonder as well what al-Sakakini himself would say about the digitizing and sharing of his looted books by those who stole them.

At the same time, once digitized, the books that belonged to al-Sakakini and other Palestinian thinkers can be made accessible to Palestinians again. This is possibly a step toward halting the process of the intellectual dispossession that Palestinians have been subjected to since 1948. Now that they might have access to segments of an intellectual sphere, to a fertile landscape of words that preceded their expulsion and cultural destruction, new plants, paths, and possibilities for thought and action can be nurtured. Assuming that the looted books can now be read not only by Israeli Orientalists, Arabists, and future spies, but also by Palestinians, the set of ethics rooted in Arabic literature and language – according to which al-Sakakini acted one night, a hundred

years ago – may be allowed to grow again. This may allow the production of fruits of knowledge that have been neglected for decades, replaced with Orientalism and Arabism, which in their alliance with Israeli power elites came to assist in understanding and therefore better managing the “Arabs” within a process of oppression and coercion.

Access to al-Sakakini’s looted books, along with the tens of thousands of books belonging to Palestinians, would be the ultimate source for the invigoration of words threatened with the disappearance and extinction foretold by my dream.

*Adania Shibli has written novels, plays, short stories, and narrative essays, which were published in numerous anthologies, art books, and literary and cultural magazines in various languages. Apart from writing, she is engaged in academic teaching and research.*

<sup>i</sup> Hannah Mermelstein, “Overdue Books: Returning Palestine’s ‘Abandoned Property’ of 1948,” *Jerusalem Quarterly*, no. 47, (2011), available at [http://www.palestine-studies.org/sites/default/files/jq-articles/47-Over\\_Due\\_Books\\_1.pdf](http://www.palestine-studies.org/sites/default/files/jq-articles/47-Over_Due_Books_1.pdf).

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> In *Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature*, ed. Salma Khadra Jayyusi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.; and “Khalil Sakakini’s Ottoman Prison Diaries,” *Jerusalem Quarterly*, no. 20 (2004), available at [http://www.palestine-studies.org/sites/default/files/jq-articles/20\\_khalil\\_skakeni\\_2.pdf](http://www.palestine-studies.org/sites/default/files/jq-articles/20_khalil_skakeni_2.pdf).

<sup>v</sup> Gish Amit, “Ownerless Objects?” *Jerusalem Quarterly*, no. 33 (2008), available at [http://www.palestine-studies.org/sites/default/files/jq-articles/33\\_amit\\_0.pdf](http://www.palestine-studies.org/sites/default/files/jq-articles/33_amit_0.pdf).

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vii</sup> From the introduction to the National Library of Israel’s Digitized Book Repository, available at <http://web.nli.org.il>.

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