

Samira Azzam (1926-1967): Memory of the Lost Land.

By Nejme Khalil-Habib

Inspired by the normal, the daily and the ordinary, Samira Azzam built a world in which creativity thrived. Similarly to the dozens of literary masterpieces neglected in our Arabic culture, Azzam's work was not given the proper attention by the critics of her time. This prompted Azzam's publishing house to remark that "this creative woman is a pioneer in the short story realm. She was not valued as she deserved and her work was nearly neglected."¹

By the time of her death in 1967 Azzam had proffered five collections of short stories: *Tiny Matters* was published in 1954, followed by *The Great Shadow* (1956) and *And Other Stories* (1960); two other collections *Time and Man* and *Joy Comes from the West Window* do not have the earliest publishing dates; in addition to these, several other short stories appeared independently of her anthologies in reputable Arabic magazines.

Though very few researchers have written about Samira Azzam, two distinct disciplines of interpretation of her work have appeared. The first sees Azzam as a purely Palestinian revolutionary writer; her writing in its entirety revolved around, was informed and inspired by the people around her and their common as well as their individual tragedies. The others saw that Azzam was incapable of feeling and expressing the suffering of Palestinian refugees because she had found herself a social status that cast her above the common refugee. She was an editor and a broadcaster in The Middle East radio station, she lived (or was perceived to live) an easy life and her concerns were seen as *womanish*.

Azzam's literature is never more riddled with bitterness and disappointment than in her early writing. Since the Palestinian problem in its greater part is a humanitarian tragedy we can easily detect the effect of real events on Azzam's literature as she draws on the struggle for survival in both the real and literary worlds. Her fiction is heavily laden with parallels and allusions and I intend to uncover some of this delicate symbology of despair and loss here. But Azzam's literature was never uniformly despairing, in the later years a new spirit was beginning to emerge in her work, deriving from the passion and hope instilled in her throughout the sixties, due to the emergence of an organized Palestinian liberation movement.

Before we begin to tread her heavily allusive work it would be worthwhile to pay some attention to Azzam's political views. Azzam believed that the Palestinian people traversed a journey marked by distinct developments which led to the revolutionary uprising in the early sixties. For Azzam this begins with the period of loss, spanning from 1948 to the mid fifties where Palestinians were preoccupied with survival, food, shelter and clothes. In return they resorted to traditional politics, to the centralization of power among religious leaders. After some time, she asserted that the Palestinians saw the futility in these beliefs and turned from the hierarchical regime of the early fifties and turned to organizing their resistant in the form of official and secret parties, providing an ample supply of recruits to the left, right, extremist and fundamentalist groups. Eventually however the young grew older and realized that these parties treated the Palestinian cause as secondary to their own ambitions.² The National Arab Party for example, considered its prime cause to be the unification of all Arab nations, to become a world power that can influence and effect international

¹ Samira Azzam. 1982. *Time and Man*, second ed. Dar el-Aoudeh

² The writer made these declarations both publicly and privately; such beliefs were synonymous with the secret political organizations, to one of which she subscribed and helped establish

politics. What the Palestinians needed was a power strong enough to get them back their homeland, so it is not surprising that they began to reorganize themselves in specific groups. *The Revenge Organization*, for example, was a division within the National Arab Movement. Soon after, *Al-Assifa* was born, an organization that began the first armed resistance in Israel in the early 1960's. It developed into a highly recognized organization by the name of the PLO. Azzam's literature reflects these stages of development in the Palestinian struggle for rights. Sadly, she died before any dramatic changes took place but lived long enough to see the great humiliation and defeat of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.

Azzam was haunted by the Palestinian struggle both consciously and unconsciously. Most of her early writing depicts nothing Palestinian-specific, but is rather characteristic of socially oppressed, lost and confused individuals, as though the Palestinian identity was still in the process of formation. In her first collection *Tiny Matters*, Azzam depicts people searching for a place for shelter. They struggle for survival, play 'tricks' to provide sustenance but nearly always, the stories culminate into the failure, defeat and disappointment of the characters. *Her Story*³ is centred around the persecution of Azzam's protagonist, clearly drawing on the persecution of the Palestinian people, who share the same tragedy with the protagonist, both of whom, in solitude, face greater powers. Furthermore, the Palestinians were being blamed for losing Palestine in the same manner that the protagonist was being blamed for losing her virginity. Both feel bitterness toward the ill-treatment that they received from their own 'family' (the brother in the story and the other Arab nations in the real world.) The political events of 1952 (the year the story was published) are allegorized in *Her Story*. We notice that the inter-relating ties between the girl and her brother are similar to the ones between the Palestinians and their host Arab countries. The girl finds in her brother a shelter from an abusive employer, greedy people and even her own self-destructive feelings. He in turn feels her pain, despite the fact that he did not know the reason for her suffering and still sympathizes with her, even after he purchases a gun to kill her. In comparison, this acts as a foil for the relations between Palestinian refugees and the countries hosting them in the early 1950's. In addition, the girl is cast out, exiled from her own home when the landlord throws her out on the streets. "There in the village she learns to shed down [her] humanity for loathing...learned to hate...learned revenge."⁴ If we replace the 'village' with a camp, we will find a description of the Palestinian social struggle in those times. The disappointment however, we are told in the same collection of works, is only *For A Little While*.⁵

In spite of the socioeconomic themes in *For A Little While*, which is centred on the analysis of any morally-closed Arab society, the Palestinian spirit is emphatically dramatized through Souad, her brother and their world. The story reveals deep suffering and disappointment, explicated and exemplified in the unpredictable ending of the story. If the writer had been optimistic enough, the aunts' plans may have worked. There are good reasons that indicate that a 'happy ending' is not at all improbable in the story: the girl was from a respectable family, she was also beautiful and her suitor was not a disinterested stranger but an affectionate neighbour. However if this alternative was to be written, we might object to its theatricality and see it as a failure of delivering on a promise, or a failure of accurate disclosure of the misery, disappointment and bitterness felt by the Palestinian people. Such an ending would seem as "moral massage" of the truth, making the story more acceptable for entertainment rather than for reflection of the author's feelings and political insights. If this story was indeed a moral lesson as suggested by some critics about the futility of wayward ways, I cannot understand then why the 'failure' occurred immediately. Souad could still get married and then become unhappy. The written scenario however, is a more powerful portrait of Azzam's despair. The author hints at her own disposition when she condemns Souad for being submissive, for complying with the aunts' plans; the two aunts who failed to have their own

³ Samira Azzam. 1982. *Tiny Matters*, Dar el-Aoudeh, Beirut. 7-25

⁴ Ibid 25

⁵ Ibid 91-99

families. We can perhaps assume that this is a condemnation of the Palestinian people's acceptance of an ineffective leadership of the other Arab nations.

One might ask why did the writer ignore her protagonist's inner feelings, why did she choose two old unmarried aunts to play the role usually played by a doting mother? Why did she choose her main male character – the youth – to be a student, incapable of financial independence? Such socially and financially inept individuals allow Azzam to demonstrate the extent of paralysis and weakness which subsumed the Palestinian struggle at the time, much in the same way that Ghassan Kanafani's *Men in the Sun* demonstrated later.⁶ However, Azzam was capable of communicating what took Kanafani an entire novel to suggest. We learn in Kanafani's story that the leader of the journey from Al-Bassra to Kuwait was impotent, the two unmarried aunts in Azzam's story are spinsters, and their imposed sterility here is similar to substantiated impotence. The leader in Kanafani's novel was physically sterile, the aunts were socially so, and under both leaderships the end was *unfruitful*, expressing disappointment and bitterness. The smuggled men end up at the garbage tip and Azzam's girl returns to her same dull life. The only difference between the two stories is that in the novel the characters carry a Palestinian identity, their tragedy was of the same nature, however in *A Little While*, the story was an absolutely human one, without the identification of race. Azzam frees her characters from the labels of identity, place or time, but deep within her narrative Palestinian restlessness and despair are embedded.

Samira Azzam had to codify her revolutionary rhetoric simply because it emerged at the very time that the Palestinians were recovering from the shame and shock imposed by the Zionist occupation. In contrast Kanafani's novel appeared eight years later, when the Palestinians were beginning to take pride in the very identity that was officially denied them. In contrast, Azzam's betrayed maiden (in *Her Story*) carried a literary representation of the betrayed and fearful Palestinians who suddenly became homeless and, if one may use the term, *friendless*.

The battle for survival and continuity is emphatically exemplified in *A Cigarette Stump*, *The Paperboy* and *The Tyreman*. We must first consider that in societies the world over, the struggle to make a livelihood is never entirely resolved. Preoccupation with food and shelter is a universal issue, presented in literature of different nations; Dickens' *David Copperfield* comes to mind, and Hugo's *Les Miserables* is a similar example. In our world we have seen Mahfoouz write *The Thief and the Dogs* and in Russia Gorki wrote *The Mother* (only to name a few). Azzam's work is a ring in this chain. In *A Cigarette Stump* we are introduced to a woman giving birth in poverty-ridden surroundings, her husband sits beside her in humiliation and hopelessness. He had lost his job due to a disease that affects his eyesight. This situation is typical of thousands of Palestinian families and the writer establishes a metaphorical link between the loss of sight and the loss of land, both being means of livelihood. Mahmood's son along with several other children take to collecting cigarette stubs in order to exchange as many as they find for sweets. This is reminiscent of Hamid's behaviour in Kanafani's *Cake on the Sidewalk*, and situations in other stories, namely, *The Age of Struggle* and *The Child of the Slope*. The most significant difference between the two authors is that the latter chooses to racially brand his protagonists as Palestinians, while Azzam obviates any racial connection, leaving an abstract if not codified representation of the Palestinian struggle. When Mahmood is accosted by the police officer he reminds us that he was, in the past, a respectable and decent man. This is not dissimilar to the many Palestinians who found themselves in humiliating circumstances; after all, does not every refugee remember and reminisce about the time s/he was great, in the past, before being forced to leave her/his country?

In *The Paperboy* critics question the sardonic end, some felt that the author's overwhelmingly pessimistic mood translated into the story, others attributed the effect to her romantic notions, borrowed from that literary tradition that plagued the previous century. Abood (the paperboy) is a

⁶ Ghassan Kanafani. 1986. *Novels*, Third ed. Arab Research Centre, Beirut. 37-152

hard worker, vital and dedicated to his work. The positive atmosphere throughout the story (i.e. Abood's enjoyment of his work), is surprisingly destroyed when he is run-over by an inbound train. One wonders what the efficacy of this anti-climax may be, is it merely to tantalize the readers, to have them expect good things and to bitterly disappoint them without good cause? A deeper reading of the story could reveal an ulterior motivation to write thus, embedded in the author's disguised attitude. Theoretically, romantic creativity is seen to stem from the author's psychological perplexities, unlike 'ordinary' people, authors re-work their emotional and psychological complexities into literature. The romantic author sensitively absorbs the events and emotions that surround him/her and produces a mixture of these different aspects of their personality in their literary work. It is my belief that Azzam did just the same. *The Paper Boy* ends so tragically simply because Azzam's involvement in her people's cause was too difficult to extricate from her literature, nor could she want to exclude her own depression from her work because it provided an outlet for therapeutic catharsis. A story about a simple paperboy who dies needlessly becomes a story about Azzam's bitter disappointments and failures in life and also about the collective tragedy of the Palestinian people. The events of forty-eight are exemplified in *The Paperboy*. The hidden hands, the simple transaction of selling a newspaper, the second train coming from around the corner, represent the hidden conspiracy against the Palestinians, who at the time were preoccupied with everyday exchanges, who lovingly embraced life until their shocking and unexpected impact with international politics. I am remembered of a similar example of this in Kanafani's *The Green and the Red*. He writes that "he was aiming for a wife and children, for walls of blood and flesh and love, one glance of death was waiting there at the corner, ready to pierce with its blades" and more importantly "he did not know it was there."⁷ Azzam's story expresses the same idea, using a simpler, indirect and more artistic manner.

Palestinian Concerns in Azzam's Literature

I have stated above that Azzam's early work shunned the Palestinian face, she hid it under a general social mask, and this strategy was abandoned in her later work. Azzam began to represent the Palestinian struggle less ambiguously, through more colourful characters. She began to introduce the obstacles facing a people without a nation more clearly and to portray those people as patriotic, heroic and determined. Occasionally she appears to be nostalgic, expressing love and great passion for a country violated by the Israelis. In addition she began to incorporate her own political values with less or no concealment, sometimes compromising the artistic value of her work for the sake of ideological prerogatives. Good evidence of this is to be found in *Palestinian, Because He Loves Them* and *In Another Year*.

In *Palestinian*⁸ Azzam reveals an important truth affecting Palestinians, particularly those who took refuge in Lebanon. For political reasons Palestinians in Lebanon were considered foreigners and were deprived of their basic rights of residence. Legally a Palestinian could not work without a permit and moving to another country proves difficult when bureaucratic complications arise during attempts to gain a passport. Not to mention, of course, the ill treatment they received at the hands of some Lebanese communities and their respective militias. This difficult situation is centred on the protagonist's desire to assimilate by acquiring a Lebanese passport, after realizing that the papers were a fraud he is infuriated. Although it would be impossible to detect the counterfeit papers, he realizes that they are nevertheless fake and destroys that identity that in effect would have liberated him. Azzam, a woman with a Lebanese citizenship herself, presents us with self-examination and reprimand, the only solution for recovery from persecution is to reclaim Palestine or at least to return to it, or so she seems to suggest. Technically the requirements of a short story are fulfilled; there is a unity of space, place and time. It successfully portrays the character's inner feelings; one phrase however threatens the artistic value of this work. Azzam bluntly embarks on a

⁷ Ghassan Kanafani 1986. *Short Stories*, Arab Research Centre, Beirut. 354

⁸ Samira Azzam. 1982. *Time and Man*. Dar el-Aoudeh, Beirut 83-92

political rhetoric when she writes: “you will stay empty on the inside unless you become able to fulfill yourself in something other than deceit and forgery.”⁹

In *Because He Loves Them* the writer exposes the humiliation of Palestinians in circumstances beyond their control and shows that some have been pushed to a life of crime, theft, deceit and prostitution. Azzam appears to be attributing Wasfy’s declining morality (when she brands him as a thief) to his economic situation, which is exacerbated, if not solely created, by his political one. She explains: “He was passionate, conscientious, he was about to beat the doctor for refusing to give a needy woman a recommendation to admit her to hospital...he is not a thief...his widowed aunt and his unemployed cousin are his first priority after each month’s salary.” Haji Fayad’s disposition is similar as he loses his integrity with the loss of his land. The character of the prostitute is indicative of the Palestinians’ desperation and poverty. After this sequence of tragic portraits Wasfy concludes that the best way to serve his people would be to burn the UNRWA warehouse for Palestinian refugees. He feels that they are responsible for the undercurrent of Palestinian complacency: that with the proper administration of charity the Palestinians would not be discontented enough to incite a rebellion and at the same time be kept very busy with survival.

Artistically the story begins quite strongly, but the voice of the omniscient narrator is overtaken by Azzam’s own political recitals. The writer’s ideological intrusions become artificial and consequently the plot becomes affected. Azzam writes: “Look here! I am spoiling your flour with my shoes, crushing your broad beans with my feet. I am teaching you how to suffer hunger so that you rebel against despair, and never to be humiliated by a loaf of bread.”¹⁰ Azzam was perhaps defending her people from the negative media attention given to them in her time. Newspaper and television reports concentrated with significant bias on news about petty criminal activity involving Palestinian refugee perpetrators, in the same style that Africa- American men were being demonized on American crime television and news. Azzam perhaps attempted to counteract the propaganda that incriminated all Palestinian people and which represented them as a mass of immoral criminals without individuality, identity or the harsh background which may have brought some of them to criminal activity. It is interesting to note that Azzam’s creative work is more successful when it is not contained by the brand of race, we may wonder why this is so. I find that Adonis answers the dilemma most eloquently when he writes: “Khalida [my wife] is so close to my soul, so I can’t write anything about her. I can’t keep a distance between me and her that would enable me to see her as a subject.”¹¹ For Azzam Palestine was not in her heart, it *was* her heart and consequently she could not be objective or at least more artistically inclined when it came to the issue of liberation and Palestine.

In *For Another Year* Azzam depicts the excitement of a mother on her way to meet her daughter after being separated from her after the 1948 occupation. In order to understand the story we should understand the social and political context in which it was written. This was a time when the Palestinian family unit was dismembered; this is exemplified in Um Abood’s predicament. The Israeli government had also given permission to Christian Palestinians to visit the holy places in west Jerusalem once a year. Many refugees saw this as an opportunity to visit their estranged relatives. The story follows Um Abood’s journey from Lebanon to Jordan, a journey that ends (not surprisingly) in despair and disappointment. The ill husband who requires attention keeps the daughter from meeting her mother. The mother’s disappointment is amplified when she declares: “If I live another year I will come crawling, if I die I will be deprived of Mary and a kiss on her cheek.”¹²

⁹ Ibid 92

¹⁰ Ibid 25

¹¹ *An-Nahar*, Australia: 7/1/97 13.

¹² Samira Azzam. 1982. *The Great Shadow*. Dar el-Aoudeh, Beirut 69.

This story, in contrast with the other two I have discussed earlier, is more artistically narrated. Azzam appears to have moved away from the machinery of propaganda and political rhetoric and instead unfolds a natural turn of events. Hashem Yaghi's summation of this story is most appropriate: "The story is full of life, the writer was keen on filling the atmosphere with vitality when talking in the old woman's voice. She was amazingly accurate, she left the old woman to talk and talk, reviving the places and their inspiration fluently, without intrusion."¹³

Azzam bases *The Bread of the Saviour* on a historical foundation but manipulates her characters around real events for artistic expression. Azzam employs a poetic style, the absence of heroism, cynicism and shallow compassion help create a natural and realistic milieu leading to the tragic end. Azzam also stages a comparison between the organized militant strength of the Zionist army and the farmers who are armed with primitive weapons. Azzam is perhaps the first to expose the woman's active role in the Palestinian struggle, showing her for the first time as an independently patriotic character, unaffected by external persuasion to be otherwise. Souad refuses to move to Lebanon despite pressure on her from her older brother. She claims that she wants to be the last to leave their village and not because of her lover but because of her own loyalty to land. Azzam presents this without over-drawing on the themes of patriotism and sacrifice; her own reticence is most commendable as she speedily establishes Souad as a sincere, realistic and loving woman: "No, it is not because of [our love]...it's true that I love you, but you aren't everything."¹⁴

Another aspect that makes the story a success is found in the meaningful thoughts that transpire in Ramez's mind. Should he allow his comrade to eat the bread that was soaked with his lover's blood? In his thoughts we notice something of a parody of the Christian ritual of the Eucharist. Ramez says, very much in the fashion of a priest, "eat this, it is my body...and this is my bloody drink."¹⁵ It is clear that this metaphor relates the Palestinian sacrifice to that made by Jesus.

On the Way To Sulaiman Lakes

On the Way to Sulaiman Lakes is a story which shares many similarities with the abovementioned narrative, in that it also deals with the preliminary resistance set up by Palestinians in 1948. This story reveals the hardships and oppressing circumstances surrounding Palestinian fighters. Extravagantly Azzam depicts the hopeless state that leads her hero to the desertion of the battlefield. She again stresses the unbalanced nature of the Israeli-Palestinian war, emphasizing that since the oppression is much more powerful, that fighters do not become martyrs but are, rather, sent on guaranteed suicide missions. "He knew that this was a lost battle, an unbalanced one, his bullets would do no harm to the enemy, on the contrary they would make them more alert...In spite of everything he kept on fighting...his wife was at his side, encouraging though hiding her terror."¹⁶ The atmosphere of hopelessness penetrates Azzam's pages: "Batter" – the village – is thrown on the valley shoulder, weak and isolated, its streets empty, houses quiet as an ancient cemetery, where Hassan couldn't "say any prayer [because] he was muted by hatred."¹⁷ Such gloomy scenes are proleptic of the tragic end, namely, the infant's death and the wife being lost in the crowd of escapees to Sulaiman Lakes.

Hashem Yaghi was unimpressed in his study of this story; he wonders what her motivation may have been behind the infant's unorthodox death, his father's secret burial and the (perhaps perpetual) separation of Hassan from his wife. Yaghi sees these events as unrealistic, mad and inexplicable. He fails to give Azzam theatrical credit for what she has constructed. The writer may be reflecting on the chaos that 'hit' Palestine in 1948, that of course was inexplicable, mad, tragic

¹³ Hashem Yaghi. 1982. *Short Story in Palestine and Jordan*. Arab Research Centre, Beirut. 282

¹⁴ Samira Azzam. 1982. *And Other Stories*. Dar el-Aoudeh, Beirut. 85.

¹⁵ Ibid 92

¹⁶ Ibid 26

¹⁷ Ibid 32

and unrealistic. Furthermore, Yaghi asks why is it that the infant is the one to die in the bombing and not his father or his mother? What makes his father keep his son's death a secret? Yaghi provides the following answer to his own question: "I believe that exaggeration and the pressure of ideology led to the technical failure of the story."¹⁸ and yet are these elements of Azzam's story merely sensational exaggerations, inciting the emotions of the reader without purpose, motivation or resemblance to the emotions and catastrophes experienced by the people that the story depicts?

Samira Azzam the Freedom Fighter

Azzam was never one to gain recognition for her work as a writer and certainly not as a revolutionary. Her influence remains even today one of subtlety and precision. She was a pioneer in the political world, establishing a secret resistance organization (The Liberation Front for Palestine) spreading from Lebanon to Jordan. Azzam helped educate Palestinian adolescents about their cause and gave many of them a meaningful direction. She was a "deep Arab woman, persistent in her decisions, smooth and warm in her nature. She was valued in our history as she is among the first to help us build a respectable, strong Palestinian organization."¹⁹

Furthermore, Azzam was not one to follow blindly in foot with tradition or stereotypes. She ardently resisted the prevalent belief among some people that Palestine could only be liberated by the hands of Palestinians. She maintained that the struggle against Israel was cultural, a responsibility that should have been shared and upheld by all the nations of the Arab world. In her writing and even in her day-to-day dealings with people, she called for rationality, tactfulness and secrecy in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Her organization condemned the armed struggle that began in the early sixties, she preferred to give priority to building loyal political regimes in all the Arab countries neighboring Israel.

Samira Azzam was deeply shocked after the Arab defeat in 1967. In the following weeks she attempted to mask her feelings of great disappointment and continued to profess optimism until her death several weeks later. Azzam died from a heart attack on her way to Jordan where she was expected to readapt the cells of her organization to this sudden and seemingly finalizing change. One of her publishers wrote: "Azzam's death was not due to a chronic disease but due to the shock she was beaten by. She died because she was heartily Arabic, because she bore in her heart all the pain and frustration of her nation. Her personal dream was to see her people victorious and to see unity among them, to see all human beings free of suffering and have that thick cloud of despair disappear from our hearts and heads."²⁰

Azzam as Seen By Others

Despite being omitted from many literary studies Azzam is still considered a pioneer in the development of the Arabic short story. Suheil Idris, a prominent writer and a literary critic, commented on Azzam's *Tiny Matters*: "in this collection Azzam shows great talent, her writing can create an inspiring sociological atmosphere, she has the potential of becoming a great writer, her style of writing is vital, bright, solid, musical and temperamental." While Hashem Yaghi wrote that "*The Great Shadow* clearly shows that Azzam is highly professional in her art. She is well aware of the artistic criteria of her occupation, she reveals an outstanding achievement, more advanced than what we have seen in her first collection, *Tiny Matters*."²¹

¹⁸ Hashem Yaghi 192

¹⁹ Samira Azzam. *Tiny Matters*. Back Cover

²⁰ Refer to footnote 1.

²¹ Suheil Idris. 1982. *Literary Matters*, Dar Al-Adaab, Beirut. 102

The Poet Abu Salma wrote: "I doubt that there will ever be an Arabic short story writer to equal Samira Azzam in her creativity, bright style, highly valued vision and her clear and pretty phrases with their warmth and conscientiousness."²² Meanwhile Raja an-Nakash saw that Azzam was, above all, a social advocator and promoter of Palestinian nationalism as can be elicited from her writing. "She expressed this both directly and indirectly....Azzam's literature is revolutionary."²³ In my opinion Samira Azzam's writing *was* a revolution in itself.

²² Abu Salma, *Al Adaab Magazine*, January 1968. 43.

²³ *Ibid* 36