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Expressions of Resistance and Resilience

The Gendered Experience of Captivity in Palestine and Creative Liberation in Fadwa Tuqan's

Poetry and Malak Mattar's Art

"It needs to be completely horrific," Malak Mattar said about her painting titled *No Words*, "otherwise it will not accurately reflect the genocide" (from the *About* section of her website). In the midst of personal, political, and cultural horrors, Mattar exemplifies resistance through creativity. Her paintings, characterized by bold colors and resilient women, work to expose the trauma caused by Israeli occupation and societal conflict. Similarly, poet Fadwa Tuqan writes about her deeply personal struggles with "the harsh conditions of her home life" and "societal repression" (*Interactive Encyclopedia*), demonstrating her trauma through a lens of resistance. While they represent different time periods, Tuqan and Mattar both explore similar ideas in their work and emphasize the power of resistance through their creative expressions. Comparing Tuqan's 20th century poetry to Mattar's 21st century art reveals how resistance occurs in different forms, but their resistance remains rooted in shared experiences of gendered struggle, national conflict, and survival through creativity. Fadwa Tuqan's poetry and Malak Mattar's art express resilience in the face of the Palestinian liberation struggle, working to reclaim power by representing the turmoil of being a woman in Palestine.

In her article "Transformative incrementalism: Palestinian women's strategies of resistance and resilience amid gendered insecurity and neoliberal co-optation," Kayali describes

the role of women in Palestinian resistance movements, highlighting how these women take part in acts of “transformative incrementalism:” small-scale, daily acts of resistance which challenge both Israeli occupation and patriarchal systems. These acts reframe resistance by disagreeing with the idea that it only occurs through large-scale, militarized actions, and expand resistance by illustrating the role of more “quiet” acts, such as care, survival, and expression, in the lasting battle for liberation (Kayali). Through their poetry and art, Tuqan and Mattar exemplify transformative incrementalism by demonstrating a sustained effort of resistance. By expressing both their struggles and strength in their work, they assert political agency to tell stories from a feminist perspective.

While Kayali demonstrates the various forms of women’s resistance, El Saadawi explores the liberating acts of writing and creating, focusing on how expression allows individuals to defy confinement through creative survival. El Saadawi’s “Writing and Freedom” provides an insightful lens through which to view Tuqan’s poetry and Mattar’s art. El Saadawi discusses how writing and creativity offers a pathway out of the patriarchal system which confines and represses women. By expressing oneself, El Saadawi argues, the creator attempts to defy death as their work may remain even after they are gone, which is an idea Tuqan and Mattar explore. El Saadawi also illustrates how expression serves as a way out of captivity, writing that “My books are now read everywhere in the world. This is how I escaped local confines” (136). Similarly, the works by Tuqan and Mattar use expression as a way to reach audiences beyond their captive environments, demonstrating the transcendent power of their creativity.

To understand Tuqan’s poetry and Mattar’s art, it is helpful to investigate the backgrounds shaping and inspiring them. Fadwa Tuqan was born in Nablus, Palestine in 1917. She attended elementary school for less than five years until her brother Yusuf forced her to stay

home for “social reasons.” After graduating from the American University of Beirut, her brother Ibrahim returned to Palestine and became her guardian. Tuqan moved to Jerusalem with Ibrahim, somewhat freeing her from the harsh conditions of her home life. Ibrahim helped her resume education, teaching her to write poetry. According to the Interactive Encyclopedia of the Palestine Question, “She had contemplated suicide more than once, and the move to Jerusalem might have removed that thought from her mind for good.” Tuqan took private lessons in English and sent her work to literary magazines in Cairo and Beirut under pseudonyms. After the deaths of her father and Ibrahim in 1941 and the Nakba in 1948, she started to participate in politics (*Interactive Encyclopedia*). The Nakba, or the catastrophe, a “mass displacement and dispossession of Palestinians” occurred during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war and led to the displacement of over half of Palestine’s population (United Nations). Later that year, “the UN General Assembly called for refugee return, property restitution and compensation,” but the United Nations noted that currently “the rights of the Palestinians continue to be denied.”

In 1956, Tuqan attended a peace conference organized by the World Peace Council. That same year she joined the Cultural Club in Nablus, and through this, she met influential poets and leaders. In the 1960s, Tuqan studied English in Oxford, England, and when she returned to Nablus, she “decided to remove herself from family and people” until the disaster of 1967 (*Interactive Encyclopedia*). During the Naksa, or the setback, of 1967, Israeli forces displaced around 400,000 Palestinians, adding to the number of refugees displaced in 1948 (WAFA Agency). The Naksa led Tuqan to “once again take part in the public life of Nablus, now under occupation” by publishing a series of poetic and journalistic arguments on Israel. Tuqan began writing about resistance rather than just personal topics. As she continued to write, she received numerous awards, including an honorary doctorate by al-Najah University. Tuqan died in 2003,

and when the Palestinian Authority announced her death, they described her as, “the great poetess of Palestine, an innovative and original talent, a daughter of Nablus, the mountain of fire; daughter of Palestine, educator, fighter for justice, cultural icon, exceptional literary figure, winner of the Palestine medal: the poetess Fadwa Tuqan” (*Interactive Encyclopedia*).

Six years before Tuqan’s death, Malak Mattar was born in the Gaza Strip (Malak Mattar). Her mother is a UN Relief and Works Agency English teacher and her father previously worked in the Palestinian foreign service. Mattar has lived through multiple wars, and though she does not currently live in Palestine, her art focuses on her experiences there. Growing up under Israeli bombardment, Mattar turned to art as a way to “discharge negative energy” (Saber). Soon she began to sell her work and exhibit internationally. Mattar studied political science at the university Istanbul Aydin and fine art at Central Saint Martin’s in London. As the artist-in-residence at *An Effort* in London, she created art depicting the genocide in Palestine, later turning these works into her prominent painting, *No Words*, which serves as a testimony of the horrors endured by Palestinians. Mattar also wrote *Sitti’s Bird*, a bestselling children’s book. She has lectured and had solo exhibitions across the world, and her art has been displayed in many group shows (Malak Mattar). Understanding the lives of Mattar and Tuqan provides important background knowledge, helping viewers and readers to grasp their portrayals of loss, hardship, and the persistent act of resistance.

Tuqan, in the title of her poem “My freedom,” does not capitalize “freedom” in order to demonstrate the reduction of her freedom. She continues this idea throughout the poem, repeating “Freedom/my freedom,” and using line breaks to separate her freedom from the capitalized “Freedom.” By separating these words, capitalizing “Freedom,” and not capitalizing “freedom” in “My freedom,” Tuqan emphasizes the difference between true freedom and the

captivity she has endured. In the lines “words I re-echo through a mouth/ thickened with rage,” Tuqan demonstrates that she feels intense anger because of this constant, fruitless battle to achieve freedom. The space before “thickened with rage” reveals the time that has passed, showing that she has strengthened and stiffened over time. The following lines, “under the rain of bullets/amidst the fire’s flame,” illustrate the turbulent environment she is in. Here she evokes water and fire, showing that what should be water is replaced by bullets, creating a lack of harmony where there should be balance. In the next few lines, stating “despite the weight of my chains/and the night/I persist,” Tuqan reveals her resilience in the face of extreme hardship. Describing the “ebbs of wrath,” Tuqan evokes the constant movement of fury. In the lines “I shall carve the words/in the earth” Tuqan reveals the power of writing to transcend death and leave a lasting effect. She then lists more examples of how she will leave her mark in various places, including “every door in the Levant,” “in the Virgin’s Temple/upon her holy altar,” “into the furrows of the fields” “below the slope at every street corner,” “inside the prison/within the torture chamber,” and “into the wood of my gallows.” By listing all these places, she underscores her determination to fight for her freedom. With each of these examples, she uses various synonyms of carve, which shows all the different ways in which she will spread the same message. Next, she repeats the word “despite,” adding that she will carve, chisel, or engrave “despite my handcuffs/the blasting of our homes.” By repeating the idea of acting despite immense hardship, Tuqan illuminates her strength, resilience, and determination while also calling attention to the onslaughts taking place in Palestine. Tuqan then writes “I repeat:/Freedom/My freedom” in order to underline that she has not yet reached true freedom. Tuqan creates a sense of action by writing “let the words be a spark outspreading/covering every inch in/my homeland/even the graves.” By referencing the graves, and the gallows earlier in the

poem, Tuqan demonstrates that fighting for freedom is a lifelong process for her and expresses hope for Palestine's freedom in the future, even if it occurs after she is gone. In the final lines, "that I may see/Red Freedom/knocking at every door/and lightning in this darkness/razing the shafts of fog," Tuqan reinforces the idea of hope for the future and shares her wish to see freedom for everyone in her country. The last line ends with a period, illustrating Tuqan's desire for the turmoil and repression to be completely destroyed.

Mattar's collection of paintings titled *Seeking Peace | Wanting Freedom* expresses imagery and motifs similar to Tuqan's "My freedom." The first painting of the collection, titled *Finding Peace*, depicts a figure in front of a large red box. The red box evokes the Red Freedom Tuqan discussed, especially since the side of the box directly behind the figure is decorated with white birds, a symbol of hope and freedom. Outside the box, the background is dark, similar to the night Tuqan describes. Though the box symbolizes hope for freedom, it also evokes a sense of confinement, referencing the Israeli occupation of Palestine. The figure's facial expression is complex; it is subtly and simultaneously hopeful, sorrowful, and resilient. The second painting in the collection, titled *Childhood*, depicts a female child standing and placing her hands on a barrier separating her from two figures: a man and a male child. The man and male child are portrayed through rectangular brushstrokes which blur them. Similarly to the box in *Finding Peace*, the separation between the girl and the other two figures creates a feeling of being trapped, or blocked from the outside world. Just as Tuqan depicts a lifetime of captivity, Mattar, in *Childhood*, shows that captivity for her is a lifetime sentence beginning in childhood. The third painting of Mattar's collection, *We Shall Live in Peace One Day*, expresses the same sense of fighting for freedom as Tuqan's poem, depicting a resilient woman with a bird. The bird holds a branch, making it a symbol of resilience and freedom. *Life is a Battle* demonstrates the

hardship of living under occupation, similar to the “ebbs of wrath” Tuqan writes about. Finally, Mattar’s *Our Souls have Wings* is reminiscent of Tuqan’s references to death, expressing the impossibility of true freedom until death and the peace found when the soul ascends from a life of captivity. Throughout *Seeking Peace | Wanting Freedom* Mattar features birds, symbolizing hope for freedom in the midst of captivity and devastation.

Both Tuqan and Mattar explore relationships with their mothers in the context of occupation and resistance. In “Behind Bars,” Tuqan expresses the hope her mother provided, writing, “My mother’s phantom hovers here/her forehead shines before my eyes/like the light of stars.” Both Tuqan and Mattar describe hope as light in the midst of darkness. This can be seen in Mattar’s *My Mother* from her *To Be A Mother | To Lose A Child* collection. In *My Mother*, Mattar depicts a mother (presumably hers) protecting four figures. Only the faces of the four figures can be seen, as they are hidden beneath the mother’s clothing and arms. Tuqan notes the absence of this kind of embrace, completing her poem with the line “yearning for her arms and the face of day.”

The background in *My Mother* is reminiscent of the lines “under the rain of bullets/amidst the fire’s flame” from Tuqan’s “My freedom,” as it illustrates the chaos and danger of the environment they live in. Both *My Mother* and “Behind Bars” express a feeling of sorrow resulting from captivity and lack of liberation, emphasizing the sadness mothers feel. The mother figure in *My Mother* has an expression of deep sadness. In “Behind Bars,” Tuqan writes, “I see her/on her face silence and loneliness now,” demonstrating the sadness her mother would feel if she saw Tuqan in her captive state. While Tuqan and Mattar illustrate the sadness mothers feel, they also depict the strength of mothers. In *My Mother*, the mother is large, bold, and protective. In “Behind Bars,” Tuqan references being forbidden from going to school by describing her

“school uniform/on the hanger,” then writes that she sees her mother’s “hand reaching out/brushing the dust from it.” These lines show how Tuqan’s imagining of her mother brings her empowerment and hope. The mother figure embodies the burden of protecting children in wartime, a comfort Mattar portrays and Tuqan longs for.

Tuqan’s poetry and Mattar’s art offer testimony, memory, and a call to action. By expressing their experiences of both confinement and resilience, they defy the forces telling them to be silent. Their work illuminates how survival, memory, and resistance are depicted in both visual and literary art and narrates the sustained effort of resistance they keep alive through creativity. Their work challenges colonial and patriarchal systems by serving as representations of the gendered and captive experience in occupied Palestine. The works of Tuqan and Mattar reveal the darkness of repression, but also the light of hope.

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