
Liberation, Reconciliation and Peace: Reading Samih-al-Qasim as a Palestinian Resistance Poet

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Abstract

This paper aims to study Samih al-Qasim as a Palestinian resistance poet and to analyze his act of resistance against the Zionist agenda, his poetic imagination about Palestine, and the impact of colonization over the land. The paper also discusses Al-Qasim's optimistic thoughts about the future of Palestine and the possible solutions for the Palestinian historical issue. A critical analysis of Samih al-Qasim's resistance poetry is presented, focusing on his response to the Israeli narrative regarding Palestine. Through his poems, al-Qasim asserts and justifies the Palestinian cause. His poetry is counter-narrative, embodying considerable resilience and emitting rays of hope.

Keywords

Resistance, Occupation, Liberation, Reconciliation and Peace, Zionist Agenda.

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Introduction

Resistance, conventionally, is a stand against any kind of unjust development, a reaction of subjugation, violence, and inequality. It questions the imposed social, cultural, and political ideologies. It is an act of refusal and an expression of disagreement of any social, political, and cultural ideology. Carla Rice argues that “resistance can be open and confrontational, or quietly subversive (177). More importantly, resistance can take many forms; “it can be humorous and playful or serious and painful; it can be individually motivational or socially organized in group action” (Rice 177).

Most of the resistance literature is written by the colonized people as a reaction for persecution and as an appeal for liberation. For instance, a large corpus of Palestinian literature is categorized resistance literature. Most of the relevant elements of resistance are found in Palestinian literature in because they used their work as a weapon to resist the Israeli occupation. Sulafa Hijawi in his book *Poetry of Resistance in occupied Palestine* (1968) defines Palestinian resistance as:

Resistance was not an easy choice; it was rather a daily battle with a ferocious enemy who considered it a question of life and death. And as the measures of persecution became fiercer, resistance consolidated contrary to the poetry of exile, the poetry of resistance emerged with an astonishingly revolutionary spirit completely free from the sad and tearful trend. Strangely enough, it quickly reverberated with all the political upheavals of Arab countries. (Hijawi 6)

In 1948 Jews established ‘Israel’ as an Independent state. The birth of Israel in 1948 signalled the end of the Jewish diaspora, but it simultaneously marked the beginning of the Palestinian dispersion (Alghaberi 1). Israelis killed Palestinians, destroyed their home, and expelled them from their state. Consequently, there emerged

certain intifadas (Uprisings) against the Israelis oppressions and dispossession. Many intellectuals like, Gassan Kanafani, Mahmood Darwish, Samih-al Qasim, and Toufiq-al-Zayad emerged in the Palestinian's literary history, raised their voice against the illegal settlement of Israel, and used their pen as the tool to resist the occupation. They wrote about the role and impact of occupiers of the land and the dispossessed people.

This research paper aims to study the Palestinian Poet, Samih-al-Qasim, as a resistance poet and his poetic imagination about Palestine and his dream for the future of his land. It offers a thematic, interpretative, and explorative critical analysis of Qasim's poetic collection; *Sadder than Water* (2006) and *All Faces But Mine* (1984). His works mirror the country's troubled history wherein he tried to sketch the disastrous life of the oppressed Palestinian and their struggle for liberating their land. By his writing, he questioned Palestinians' lost identity and raised his voice for political and social equality. He expressed his pain over the loss of his homeland and its culture. Through his writing, he portrayed the helplessness of Palestinians who were living under occupation and were deprived of their social and political right on their land and their struggle for liberating their land from the Israeli growing settlements.

Selecting Samih al-Qasim for this analysis is based on his role in raising the voice of the dispossessed. His poetry puts forward the voices of the Palestinian people, and through his poem, he explores the pain of being subjugated, exiled with the loss of their identities. His works are a window to Palestinian culture, context and human sufferings. The purpose of this paper is to explore the condition of hopeless, powerless, and helpless Palestinian people when they were under Siege during the Israeli invasion. It will exclusively talk about the theory of writing the resistance and will be exploring the Palestinian Conflict in the Poetry of Samih-Al-Qasim. The primary sources will be refined and solidified by secondary sources i. e. contextual history and resistance theory. The purpose of our research is to explore the conflict between colonizer and colonized people and their pain for losing their land and identity in the poetry of resistance.

Samih al Qasim as Resistance Poet

Samih-al-Qasim, known as one of the best Palestinian Resistance poets of the 20th century, was born in 1939 in Transjordan city of Zarqa. He belongs to a Druze family, and he started writing poetry at a very early age. His works were translated into various languages, such as Hebrew, French, Greek, Italian, Russian, German, Turkish, Vietnamese, Japanese, Persian, Czech, etc. He published his first poetic collection in 1958, under the title *Procession of the Sun* (1958).

Al-Qasim did many jobs. Because of continuously writing and reciting poems against the Israeli occupation, he was fired off from his job many times. He started his career by teaching and later contributed to many journals, such as *Al-Ghad*, *Al-Jadid*, and *Al-Ittihad*, where he also got the opportunity to work with Mahmood Darwish. He also joined the communist party, because he felt it is the only Party where he could freely express his point of view against Israeli authority. Qasim had also good relations with President Yasir Arafat and his companions. Therefore, he also became the Spokesman of

the National Reconciliation Committee.

Qasim was very rebellious and revolutionary from his childhood. He became the first Druze to challenge the Israeli authority by rejecting the proposal of serving in the army. While being a member of the Druze family, he should have served his country, but still, he “wrote a letter directly to Prime minister David Ben-Gurion, declaring that he would not fight against his people, and he was born for poetry and not for a gun” (*Sadder than Water* XVII). He also called himself “I am God’s chosen poet” (*Just an Ashtray* 351), and wholeheartedly devoted himself to be a poet of his land. Consequently, he was known as the best ‘Palestinian resistance poet’ of the 20th century. Due to cancer, Qasim died on August 19, 2014, and was buried in Rameh on August 21, 2014.

Qasim is known as the resistance poet of Palestine, as Shawqi Kassis describes him as:

The poet of Palestinian Resistance, of Arab nationalism, of the struggle, and of revolutionary rage. He was also called the colossal poet. The prescient nature of much of his poetry won him the sobriquet ‘Poet of prophecies’ and one of Lebanese critic described Samih-al-Qasim as having an aura of ‘Prophethood’. (Kassis 49).

Al-Qasim considers his poems as ‘missiles’ which can destroy the power of occupiers. When a journalist asked him, why the Israeli military always arrest him at the time of poetic festival or after reciting any poem, he replied: “because they were afraid that I would use my missiles against their powers” (*Just an Ashtary* 171). Some of his poetic collections were banned by Israeli authorities because his revolutionary poems were coercing the Palestinians to resist the occupation. Some of his poems were also considered as an anthem or national poems of Palestine and were selected as songs in the movies based on Palestine. In terms of themes, “Samih-al-Qasim’s poetry was marked by the major themes of pride in Arab identity attachment to the land of Palestine, religious tolerance, the relationship between the personal and collective ego, as well as bias toward scientific socialism in the way he presented and analyzed issues and events” (Kassis 48). Qasim, therefore, raised the issue of injustice and inequality exercised on his land, as he always argued that “people are equal like the comb teeth” (al-Qasim 6). He tried to raise his voice for equality, drawing the image of domination over the Palestinians and their struggle for freedom. His writings represent his love for his land, depicting the suffering of his people living under Israeli occupation. His philosophy of poetry is reflected in this statement: “Poetry will not have a real aesthetic value unless it is charged with the spirit of liberation and free lively creation” (*Just an Ashtray* 194).

Resistance against Unlawful Occupation, Oppression, and Injustices

As in 1948, the Israeli seized and destroyed Palestinian land. Consequently, some Palestinian took shelter in the refugee camp and some went to exile, but Qasim “like a solitary sword” (sweileh) remained in Palestine and decided to resist the Israeli colonization. He used his poetic imaginations as a weapon to resist the Zionist ideology

and raised social and political issues of Palestinians by discussing the disastrous condition of Palestine. He writes that: “my singing is my weeping. / How can I sing? But I shall sing. / I will sing for my sweetheart” (193-4). Sulafa Hijjawi explains the aim of Palestinian resistance poetry as:

“Resistance poetry is a challenge to all Zionist beliefs. It deals with them all and discards them one after the other. It is closely welded literature based on reasoning and not on sheer emotion”.(Hijjawi 8)

Through his poetic imaginations, Qasim seems to encourage his audience towards resistance and tries to convince them for staying at their land, by quoting his grandfather’s words: “Death at home is better than life abroad” (*Just an Ashtray*57). He knew the aim of Zionism is to establish a Jewish state with a Jewish population. Zionists already with the support of the United Nation has occupied Palestine but in the presence of indigenous Palestinian people, they could not complete their aim. Therefore, they started killing and expelling the indigenous Palestinians. For the father of Zionism, Theodrel Herzl, “the dream of a Jewish homeland in Palestine would necessitate the expulsion of the indigenous population” (Chomsky et al., 76). He further said, “having occupied the land and expropriated the private property we shall endeavor to expel the poor population across the border unnoticed” (Chomsky et al., 70). Qasim, therefore, seems to convince his people to not migrate from Palestine to another land, rather he urges them that:

Real nationalism is to hold on to the homeland, not to leave it to the newcomers. If you leave your country, then your land which you inherited from your forefathers will be confiscated by the settlers coming from all corners of the world to control this land. (*Just an Ashtray*169)

Morris remarks about oppression on Palestinians in the following manner: “almost everything was tried: shooting to kill, shooting to injure, beatings, mass arrests, torture, trials, administrative detention and economic sanctions” (587). Therefore, resistance was the only weapon left for Palestinians, which could save them from the Israeli persecution and could liberate their land from the occupation.

In the poem “Address from the Unemployment Bureau” Qasim draws the images of the courageous Palestinians who were resisting the powerful occupation by avoiding every traumatic consequence of resistance and were ready to work at any post, high or low:

I may lose whatever you like, my living-
And offer my clothes and bed for sale,
May work as a stone-cutter,
Porter,
Street sweeper,
Or serve in factory yards-

But O Enemy of Sun!
I'll resist
To the final pulse in my Vain! (*Sadder Than Water*7)

The stanzas above explore the Palestinian's resistance and their devotion to liberating their land. Qasim used the image 'Enemy of Sun' to depict the justification of the Palestinian cause, which is as clear as the sun. In addition, Qasim employs this image to denote the far-fetchedness of eclipsing the Palestinian sun. He also used the first person 'I', which is usually employed to denote people. Qasim here uses 'I' to represent the Palestinians and their collective resistance.

Edward Said remarks that "occupation with tanks, soldiers, checkpoints and settlement is violence, and it is much greater than anything Palestinian has done by the way of resistance" (qtd. in Sherlock and el Alami 262). Hence, resistance is natural when an individual's or people's lives are under threat. What Palestinians attempt to achieve through their resistance is to assert their belonging to the land and reject Israel's aggression. Poetry has long been a medium to communicate and evokes a sense of collectivity. Al-Qasim raised the issue of Palestinian identity and its history by re-writing the ancient history of Palestine. His attempt is to institute a counter-narrative to the Israeli ideology of erasure. Since the creation of Israel, Zionists have been trying to erase any traces of Palestinian history, so that they could claim their belonging with the land. In This case, Sulafa Hijjawi remarks:

As the Zionist occupants closed their military ring, they started to impose their oppressive measures; the atmosphere was convenient for them. Their chief purpose was to eradicate every trace of Arab personality and to implant the seeds of new trends which might grow and integrate within the Zionist political and literary life".
(Hijjawi 3)

Qasim tries to claim Palestinian's belonging by representing Palestine's ancestral history from the Canaanites. For instance, in the poem, "In the Beginning was Ariha", he represents Canaanites as his ancestral father, by saying that: "I am Canaan's Son, of Ya'rub Pedigree. / I spoke out the Island in poetry, / And formulate Arabism in a language / Of palm tree and roses" (*All Faces but Mine* 233). Samih Farsoun, a well-known Palestinian sociologist, also describes the ancestry of Palestinians as:

Descendants of extensive mixing of local and regional peoples, including the Canaanites, Philistines, Hebrews, Samaritans, Hellenic Greeks, Romans, Nabatean Arabs, Tribal nomadic Arabs, some Europeans from crusaders, some Turks, and other Minorities; after the Islamic conquests of the seventh century, however, they became overwhelmingly, Arabs. Thus, this mixed stock of People has developed on Arab-Islamic culture for at least fourteen

Through his poetic imagination, Qasim asserts Palestinian's belonging which can never be erased. For instance, in the poem "The Clock on the Wall", he projects Palestinian's belonging, by giving the image of devastation in which everything has been demolished but the clock on the wall looks intact:

My city collapsed,
But the clock on the wall remained.
Our neighborhood collapsed,
But the clock on the wall remained.
And the street collapsed,
But the clock on the wall remained.
And the yard collapsed,
But the clock on the wall remained.
And my house collapsed,
But the clock on the wall remained.
And the wall collapsed,
But the clock
On the wall... remained...(Sadder Than Water3)

In the aforementioned lines, the image of 'clock' symbolizes the past, present, and future of Palestine. Therefore, by representing the intact image of the clock on the wall, Qasim claims that any kind of war or conflict cannot affect Palestinian's identity and their belonging because it is rooted within the land and their past cannot be changed. The Palestinian poet Fadwa Tuqan in her poem "Ever Alive" describes the same ideology: "My beloved homeland / No matter how long the milestone / Of pain and agony churns you / in the wilderness of tyranny, / they will never be able / to pluck your eyes / or kill your hopes and dreams" (Hijawi 21). Qasim did not only use his poems as the weapon to resist the colonization, but he also used his poems to encourage his readers to raise voice against the powerful occupation. For instance, in a poem "Slit Lips" Qasim tries to encourage his audience towards revolution and resistance against the Israeli authority by describing his helplessness when Israeli imprisoned him and put him under the house arrest and the tragic incident of Palestinians who lost their lives in the struggle of liberation.

Samih-al-Qasim's Palestine in his Poetic imagination

Samih al-Qasim portrays the disastrous image of 1948 when Jews illegally established Israel as an independent state. He writes that "The first images I remember are the image of the events of 1948" (*Sadder than Water* XIII). Qasim describes the images of Palestine, its beauty, culture and the impact of Israeli settlement over the land. He reinstates "I am in love with my homeland's wildflowers I can't write about them ignoring the settlement shovel which uproots the rocks and flower from the roots of the

roots to build a new settlement in my personal land”(Just An Ashtray193). His poetic verse represents the land of Palestine and its transformation. The land of Palestine was known for its culture and the cultivation of fig and olive trees. He writes: “Our land is fertile, / and blessed / with palm trees, oil, and figs” (*All Faces But Mine*259), but Israeli occupation and everyday’s bombardment over the land transformed its fertility into ‘an arid land’. In a poem “Story of a City”, Qasim portrays the image of Palestine which was known as the ‘blue city’ for its beauty and culture and its transformation into ‘a black city’:

There was a blue city
That dreamt of foreigners wandering
Around and spending their money
day after day.
But it became a black city
Despising strangers
With their rifles’ muzzles
Making the round of its cafes...(Sadder than Water55)

Qasim presented the transitional journey of Palestine from being the dreamland till becoming a terrible land. Palestine was known all over the world for its beauty, culture, and religious diversity. It was always considered as the dreamland by the foreigners and travellers who visited it or read about it. Nonetheless, because of Israeli occupation, this land was transformed into a terrible land. Shibly Telham describes occupation as “an open scar that is a reminder of a painful period in Arab history” (Bunton XVII). Every day they used to attack by throwing bombs and tear gas on the land, to raise fear in the indigenous Palestinians and to erase their culture and the source of their belonging. “It fired the gas bomb / at the house / the almond tree / and the rose” (*All Faces But Mine*47). Consequently, Palestine the ‘blue city’ turned into a ‘black city’. Just like Qasim, a Pakistani female poet Adha Ja-fri also observed the transformation of Palestine and writes about it in one of her poems entitled “Al-Aqsa Mosque”: “Friend! Never before was there a darkness such as this, / though we too have seen the lamplights tremble” (Ahmad 34).

Qasim describes the impact of Israeli colonization and fall of Palestine and its culture in his poem “They Fell...”. He writes: “The people’s childhood, a country, a culture. / They were / And turned, / And became something shameful” (*Sadder than Water*61). Here he describes the impact of Israeli colonization over the Palestinian land and explained that the land where Palestinians spent their childhood has been divided and their culture which was their pride has been a change. In Hamdi’s view, with each passing day, what remains of Palestinian land is quickly diminishing with Israel’s periodic announcements of thousands of new Jewish settlements, aggressively and defiantly eating away at Palestinian topography, and literally erasing the Palestinian presence from the map (24).

Qasim also represented the devastated image of Palestine and the situation of Palestinians; who were slaughtered, detained, and expelled from their land and the people who lost their hope after losing power over the land. In his poetic collection *Elusive Land*, he captures the image of dead bodies, lying on the land: "Blood is wandering about its secret / Bodies lie in the fields. / A land is with no hope" (*All Faces but Mine*68). Rashid Hussain a Palestinian poet also remarks about the victims of Israeli occupation: "In Jerusalem, the hour was: Someone killed/ someone wounded, / a child's legs/ stolen from him by napalm" (Jayyusi 272).

Future of Palestine in his Poems: Liberation, Reconciliation and Peace

Samih al-Qasim was an optimistic poet. His poetic verse embodies the hope of liberation. In an interview with Liam Brown, Qasim remarks; "If I am not optimistic, I will not write one single word. The change will not be tomorrow morning: we change it not today but after tomorrow" (9). Sweileh also observed Qasim's poetic creativity harbors "a huge opus of hope in reborn land, untarnished by boots of enemy and a regenerated deeply rooted identity, untainted by the mournful sentiments of nostalgia in exile" (3). In his poetry, Qasim weaves rays of hope that one day will shine over his homeland. His dream of a land free from the grip of Israeli occupation is conveyed in his poem "Oasis". In this poem, he encourages Palestinians to re-assert their belonging and culture so that Israelis cannot erase it. He writes: "Behind this dune we have an oasis. /Sustain your belonging with dates and water,/Without despair." (*Sadder than Water* 81). 'Date' symbolizes belonging and steadfastness in Arab culture. By using this image, Qasim, tried to convince his people that they can liberate their land from the clutch of Israeli by following their own culture. He believes that "for every stage must have an end, / And every rope must have an end" (*All Faces but Mine*56).

Thus, Qasim raises hope of reconciliation and peace in the Palestinian's mind and tries to convince them to resist patiently without wasting their time in thinking about the reward and benefit of their actions: "The rain is not asked / what did its waters irrigate. / the trees are not asked / who gathered their fruits. / So learn, learn, / My human brothers" (254). Qasim in an interview with Liam Brown also draws a metaphor to understand them the power of resistance and said: "I used to use the Basalt stone. If there is a single drop of water dropping on the basalt stone then not today, not next month, not next year but there will be a small hole by this drop of water" (Brown 9).

Qasim's aim in writing poems is to create a peaceful land. Edward Said writes that "So long as there is a military occupation of Palestine by Israel, there can never be peace" (qtd.in sherbok and el. Alami 262). Therefore, through his poetic imagination Qasim resists the colonization, and with the hope of reconciliation and peace. He does not only raise conscience in Palestinians to live with peace, but also tries to raise conscience in Israelis. He believed that "Not every Jew has a tank" (*Just an Ashtray* 151), and also said about them that: "I imagine that your conscience is alive, / And that it warned you / of my violated pain" (*All Faces But Mine*188). Qasim also writes about the time of Jew's persecution so that they could feel the pain of being persecuted. In the

poem “Buchenwald”, he reminds them of the time of Nazi concentration camps, so that they could realize their actions that they are treating Palestinians in the same manner as they were treated. By invoking these historical events, Qasim reminds Jews to feel their pain and stop killing and oppressing Palestinians. It might be possible, Qasim firmly believes, that everyone could start living together with love and peace and without any kind of conflict. He reminds the Israelis in the following lines:

Do you remember your panic-
At the reign of death, in the nightmare of time-
That the whole world
Would become a Buchenwald?
Whether you are forgotten or not,
The dead’s image linger
Among the wreaths of flower ...(*Sadder than Water*65).

Qasim believes that “as an Arab, I am a supporter of Arab unity in the Arab world, of the Arab nation, which should be united one way or another” (Brown). He dreamt for a peaceful land, where no one fights over the piece of the land and everyone could live together with love and peace, as in a poem “The Captive”, he writes that: “do not go out at night. / the children murderer, also, my love, / And fear you may be harmed by night, Do not go out alone, my love” (*All Faces but Mine* 23). By explaining the terrible situation of Palestine, where the indigenous people have been imprisoned in their land, he wishes to liberate his land and the indigenous people from the clutch of powerful occupation, so that, people can fearlessly get out from the home, anytime and their parents will also not be afraid to send their children alone.

Qasim shares his dream, in one of his Poem “The Psalm of Isaiah’s Grand Children”, he tries to invoke the conscience of the Christians, he says that we are the Grandchildren of Isa’a, which means we belong to the same family, and asks their help in resisting the Zionist Agenda because he believes, if we resist together against the oppression, we will find Justice and our children will live with peace:

O brave Isaiah!
Rise up now so that
Palestinian’s Children will be able to play
Without fearing the vipers’ fangs,
So two lambs might feel safe
In the lions’ jungle
Hallelujah!
Then Justice will reign among the nations (*Sadder than Water*43).

Devid Vital in his book *The Origin of Zionism* writes about Jews: “regulated restricted, or even totally denied were the Jews” (24), as Israeli was struggling for their shelter for a very long time, Qasim, therefore, reminds them of their time by asking: “Do

you remember? A thousand years ago, you lost your direction” at that time whole nation was against you and did not want to live with you but we (Palestinian) gave you space for living and shared food with you, as he further adds: “when you were tired, you found rest in my home lap” (199). Qasim dreams for a nation where everyone lives peacefully without fighting over the piece of land, as he shares his dream in an interview with Liam Brown that: “It should be united by the Arabic language. One nation, one culture, one language, one history” (Brown).

Conclusion

Qasim’s poetic works have every quality to be called a true resistance poetry of Palestine. He spent his whole life writing poetry and raising his voice against the illegal settlements of Israel. Through his poetic imagination, he represents his helplessness and regrets for not being able to do anything for those who were killed on their land while fighting for liberating the land from the powerful occupation. His aim of writing poetry is to depict the awful condition that Palestinians are subjected to. In addition, his aim is to draw the attention of the whole world to the Palestinian issue. For the peaceful future of Palestine, Qasim also tries to raise conscience in Israelis by reminding them of their time of suffering during the Nazi assaults on Jews. Qasim urges them to reflect on their historical persecution in Europe so that they can recognize their unjust behavior against Palestinian.

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