E. Habiby

The Odd End Woman

Anthology of MODERN PALESTINIAN LITERATURE

Edited and introduced by Salma Khadra Jayyusi

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Emile Habiby (b. 1921)

A novelist, short story writer, dramatist, and journalist, Habiby is one of the most illustrious Arab authors in Israel; he is highly regarded all over the Arab world both for his creative work and for his political activity. Born in the Galilee, he joined the Palestine Communist Party in 1945, becoming editor-in-chief of its weekly organ, the Al-Ittihad. After the fall of his part of Palestine (Nazareth and Haifa) to the Israelis in 1948, he joined Rakah, the Israeli Communist Party, which he represented for nineteen years in the Knesset. He published his collection of short stories, Six Stories for the Six Day War, in 1968, and in 1974 published one of modern Arabic fiction’s best works, his novel The Secret Life of Israel, the Ill-Fated Passport. The novel deals with the conditions of Palestinians living in Israel and mingles comedy and tragedy to bring out all the painful contradictions of Palestinian life under siege. The novel has run into many Arabic editions and has been translated into Hebrew; so far two editions of PROTA’s English translation have appeared, (1983 and 1984). In 1983 Habiby published his play Luka’ the Son of Luka’; in 1985 his novella Ikhybib (Pity!) appeared in Al-Karmel review and afterwards in book form. This novella aroused critical interest by its author’s characteristic originality of approach, his success in introducing humor into serious or even tragic situations, and his skillful, mythical use of time through a sense of constant connectedness with Arab history and culture. In 1991 Habiby started a publishing house, “Arabesque.”

The Odds-and-Ends Woman

Why did what I said surprise you? Didn’t I tell you that a separation of twenty years makes a man forget even himself. And is that a light thing? The poems inside are all the rage now, and the poems outside are basking in the warmth of their resistance and linking themselves with them—you know “these are our standard-bearers,” and all that sort of thing.1 But what kind of reception did they give them before the disaster of 5 June 1967, when our poet recited the Ode of Return:

Ah my country! If only I could see the havens of sanctuary and the cradle of my youth!

“What’s that got to do with you, you loafers?” they yelled in our faces. “Didn’t you refuse to make the emigration to Yathrib? when we did?”

And you, why do you keep muttering now about the odds-and-ends woman in al-Wadi Street in Haifa? Why won’t you believe her when she tells you she buys all the pieces of pilfered bedding from the Heights, and every cupboard and chest, in the hope of finding the treasure she’s looking for? Totally illogical, you say!

Well, is that the only illogical thing that’s going on in this country of ours?

You disapprove of her buying all the sfas from Qunaitra, do you? So why did you keep quiet when the authorities let a contractor with lots of money or influence win the auction on Qunaitra, Qunaitra with all its furniture and coffee cups and Kubbat mortars and toothbrushes and insect sprays and books by al-Farabi and toilet rolls! You even let them provide him with a vacant site alongside the police building, with a warehouse where he could display his goods. How could you do all that?

Would the whole thing be more logical if they’d cleared a space for him by the Middle East Showroom, up there in the heart of Tel Aviv?

I realize no one actually decided to boycott this “smugglers’ hoard,” but it’s also a fact that no one ever goes near it, Arab or Jew; the first out of piety and the second out of fear. While yet another group, the women, claim the style’s old-fashioned. Meanwhile the contractor himself solemnly swears in all the languages of the Mediterranean basin from Syria to Tetuan in Morocco, that his business is ruined—he doesn’t care about the ruined families on the Heights! The only person who didn’t boycott his goods, he said, was the odds-and-ends woman.

That’s her nickname now, “the odds-and-ends woman.” You’ve started muttering, among yourselves, that she’s an old hand at pilfering. In 1948, you say, she plundered all the rags from Abbas Street and moved into the mansion abandoned by Abu Matar, who owned the “Ten a Penny” store in the Syrian Market in Haifa in the old days.

1The poems inside are those who remained on Palestinian soil after 1948 and became Israeli citizens. Those on the outside are the Palestinian poets in the diaspora. The Arab

2Yathrib is Medina in Hijaz (part of Saudi Arabia) where, the prophet emigrated in A.H. 622 (the first year of the Islamic calendar) when his persecution by his own tribe, Qurayish, presented grave danger to him and to his calling. Habiby is speaking symbolically here.
Have you ever seen any "mansions" in Wadi al-Nassar? The ruins there are lucky enough to be in a valley which protects them from the salty sea air. Have you ever visited the mansions in Old Acre and heard music pounding against the walls, walls which not even the wall of Ahmad al-Jazzar could protect? Aren't you ashamed?

In the old days you'd snatch at the slightest excuse, find any sort of reason to go knocking on her door, and she'd give you coffee and a sweet smile. Among yourselves you called her the uncrowned queen of the valley. Since then she's been looking for treasure in sofas. You never used to see anything wrong with that, so why are you muttering about her now that the treasure chest's opened up for her again? I know her much better than you do.

When her husband went off with one of her sons, she insisted on staying behind with her crippled mother, that was at the time of the first exoduses. Then, when her mother died five years later, we heard that her husband wouldn't even acknowledge her and didn't want her back. And you didn't believe her when she told you she didn't want to leave her house in any case. You kept making insinuations and saying there must be some love affair behind it all; that, you said, was the only possible reason she'd want to stay behind. Well, perhaps you'd be so good as to tell me why it was so reasonable for all of you to stay behind? I know her much better than you do.

She used to sell the rugs and chairs and mirrors she got hold of, and she'd open up the sofas and look for hidden treasures, then put them back together again and sell them too. Occasionally, she might find something. One day I visited her and found her squatting on the floor with the stuffing from a sofa scattered all round her. She was reading a letter she had in her hand, and sobbing. When I asked her about it, she said it made her think of her children.

"What's this letter?" I asked.

"It's one of a whole pile a young man seems to have been sending to his girlfriend," she replied. "She kept them hidden inside a tear she made in the sofa." She wiped away her tears. "My treasures, my treasures!" she cried.

She used to live on whatever money she made from selling furniture. She'd offer you coffee and refuse all your gifts.

The famous wall of Acre, built around the ancient city to ward off attacks by the Crusaders.

The first exodus of the Palestinians took place in 1948 when the Zionists were trying to establish, that taken by the Zionists in 1948 to get rid of as many Palestinians as possible.
You don’t know, for example, that she found out of her sons jailed in Ramla prison on a charge of distributing pamphlets in Old Jerusalem. And you don’t know, either, that her husband came across the bridge from Lebanon to talk to her about how she might be able to help get them released. The son is a dedicated doctor, but when she’s talking about his dedication, she’s even keener about it than he is, as if she wants to say: “These are my children!” How do you measure up to her? She always talks about her husband with love and admiration; after all, he brought up their son, the dedicated young doctor. She talks admiringly about herself as well, and says she’s reached an understanding with the bankrupt contractor who owns the “smugglers’ board”—she can take all the stuff she wants on a fifty-fifty basis. She tells it, she says, and then uses the proceeds to feed herself and visit her son in jail; she’s even paid for the services of a lawyer with connections. She visits her son, takes him cigarettes and washes his shirts for him, “just as I used to wash yours too.”

Then she asked shyly, her eyes lowered: “Have you met the roving spirits?”

“Roving spirits?”

“Men and women, from the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, Amman, even as far as Kuwait. They cross the bridge, then they walk through our alleys without saying anything, staring up at the balconies and windows. Some of them knock on doors and ask politely, if they can come in, look around and have a drink of water. Then they go away without a word. The places they asked to go into were their homes. Some of the people living in the houses greet them with a sympathetic smile, but with others the smile’s a wry one. Some people let them come inside the house, while others simply won’t open the door. Then there are those who don’t knock on doors, but keep looking around for a passeney with a dark complexion. When they find one, they stop him and ask him whether there used to be a house made of dark-tinned stone standing on that particular spot. Sometimes the passerby will stop to try and remember, then start reminiscing; sometimes he’ll say: “I was born after the disaster, Uncle.”

“Those roving spirits don’t come to my house. They haven’t heard about my treasures. Why haven’t you written something about my treasures in your newspaper?”

*An Arab, as contrasted to the numerous Ashkenazi Jewish living in the area.*