

City Square and Country Bricks

Ala Hlehel*

Culture needs an audience, and—usually—that audience gathers in cities. This is the most simplistic equation that one can use to trace the impact of the coherent dialectical relationship between cities and cultural acts. When the city becomes absent, alternatives spring up: films were projected onto walls in Palestinian villages after the Nakba and many small theatre clubs operated as part of Western religious missions or schools. The theatre is one of the most prominent cultural spaces normally associated with cities: daily or weekly shows rely on packed audiences, just as book-sellers depend on a large book-buying readership. Similarly, cinemas, art galleries, musical performances, and other spaces and events, all depend on their audiences, and all enable city squares to flourish as cultural centers.

But is the city still a requisite for an audience of admirers and consumers of culture? Do theatres and book fairs not travel between cities and villages? Has the role of the historical center changed in relation to the provinces? It most likely has already changed, or is at the peak of the process of transition. These shifts in the Palestinian landscape acquire a singular nature through the Nakba and the vanishing of Palestinian cities as cultural centers. However, along with the rest of the world, we are now under the influence of cyberspace and the internet has made the majority of our actions virtual and digital. Today, one does not have to be standing in a city



square to hear the ‘buzz’ and to be part of it; all one needs is an internet connection and a Facebook account.

Several Palestinian cities emerged in modern Palestinian history—Jaffa, Acre, Haifa, Lydda, and Ramle—and acquired great existential symbolism after the Nakba, being regarded as the most reliable witnesses to the destruction and devastation. Accordingly, the cities exist in the lives of Palestinians today primarily within the public imagination and in cherished memories. As with any memory or piece of nostalgia, however, one must always be mindful to avoid exaggerations and overplaying past virtues. Today, it is the ‘imagined Palestinian city’ above all that has nurtured the current generation of Palestinian intellectuals. Similarly, Palestinian playwrights and filmmakers always seek to evoke the lost cultural center, be it at the level of production or imagination.

When Acre-native Ghassan Kanafani wrote about returning to Haifa, he effectively penned a lament to a Palestinian city that had been forced to open its arms to the new invaders. His sentiments mirrored those of Taha Muhammad Ali, who wrote, “Treacherous land/unamiable land/land that can’t be trusted/The land is a whore/who runs a dance hall/on the pier/laughing in every tongue/and serves up her waist to all comers.” There is no place left for the lover who fled the land, and when the lover returns to look upon it, he comes face-to-face with an Israeli rifle and his own conscripted son. Tawfiq Fayyad’s book, *Group 778*, also summons up Acre as a bewitching landscape for Fawzi Nimer’s group, which could not accept the loss of the city or the control that the Israeli police and Shin Bet assumed of it. In his excellent movie “The Time That Remains,” Elia Suleiman evokes the history of Nazareth from the moment it surrendered and fell to Israeli forces in 1948 to the present day. Hani Abu As’ad similarly illuminates this history in the form of an epitaph for Nazareth that employs the darkest of comedy in his film “Nazareth 2000”. In these cities, it is the remaining time and the time that remains, time that we have no control over; we have lost hold of its reins and its veil. We became a decoration for it, not it a decoration for us. When the city is killed, imagination



essentially perishes with it. The city, which feeds on alienation and individualism, is the greatest stimulus for the imagination, and is capable of transforming imagination into a living text that inspires yet more imagination.

The absence of the city in 1948 Palestine destroyed one of the most important pillars of cultural creativity and its consumption: the city square, brimming and effervescent with productions, writings, performances, controversies, and debate. The square, ringed by cafes, restaurants, and institutions is a prerequisite for the creation of an urban state capable of fostering culture. Why do we need this urban state? The answer is that the countryside is far too intimate. Worthwhile cultural acts must necessarily be deconstructive, provocative, and fluid. The city square can accommodate all this, and is therefore critical.

This is not to say that the countryside is not in many cases a better stage for those seeking seclusion and a place to write. The countryside has its own special rhythm and routine. It is full of tempting advantages, but it cannot provide a center for people to congregate in. Such a center must be liberated of daily routine and the monotony of the quiet life. The cultural act comprises far more than 'quieting the mind'; hence, it is the city square that revolts against these assumptions, and thus, for example, it must sacrifice much in the way of values and customs in order to liberate itself from itself and from 'fixed truths' or principles. The true cultural city is one in which there are no such truths, and we—as a people that has been living according to them since the dawn of the 20th century—must rethink the Palestinian cities that blossomed up until the Nakba. Did our cities genuinely allow for the emergence of a city square that is free of any governing principles other than the one principle inherent in creative contexts: inquisitiveness?

Because our cities of today are not real cities in any shape or form, so our countryside is in no way a true countryside. We live in a disfigured, utterly grotesque geographical space. With our hybrid architecture, we have attempted to



imitate Israeli Jews, but we have failed to tame the red bricks atop our balconies, overlooking vegetable gardens of tomato and eggplant. Hence, the question of the absence of the city cannot—in my view—be separated in any way from the more pressing and painful question of the loss of the countryside.

How can a true city be founded without a true countryside? Where will the new generation of writers, producers, and innovators come to the city from, to ask new questions, if not from a true countryside? They will come from over-populated ghettos, caught adrift between consumerist modernity and an overwhelming desire to escape these ghettos. But escape does not stem from a desire to assume wholesale a contemporary urban role: it is simply escape, without a compass, a heartbreaking escape from a neighborhood that has become unbearable to another neighborhood in an Arab or Jewish-Arab city, or to a so-called Arab ‘city’ in search of better material living conditions. The Palestinian countryside in Israel has failed to regenerate, and thus today we are incapable of building a true, regenerated Palestinian city.

We lament the lost Palestinian city at every possible occasion and in every new piece of research and study, and yet we do not lament the lost countryside.

***Ala Hlehel** is a writer, journalist, and Chief Editor of the Qadita website.

