POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT:
THE PALESTINIAN CONFESSIONAL GENRE

Salam Mir

Abstract: The personal struggle and creative achievement of Fadwa Tuqan (1917-2003), one of the most celebrated poets in the Arab world, signify the plight of the Palestinian people in the twentieth century. Her autobiography, *A Mountainous Journey, An Autobiography*, integrates the personal and collective struggle within the context of Arab-Muslim history. This article will explore the established poet’s shift to the confessional genre as the Palestinian Muslim woman writer investigates the historical events that befell her people. Inspired by “Poets of Resistance,” I argue that the underpinnings of Tuqan’s investigation of the Arab-Muslim tradition proffer an authentic, commanding voice that constructs an alternative history, challenging the dominant patriarchal paradigms. What emerges is a singular feminine voice that forges an identity that goes beyond the nightmare of history. In both the poetry and personal memoir, Tuqan’s career and groundbreaking voice signify an early empowerment of women agents in the cultural production of the Arab-Muslim world.

Keywords: Fadwa Tuqan, Palestinian literature, Arab-Muslim tradition, gender and Palestinian literature, confessional genre, Palestinian identity

*A Mountainous Journey, An Autobiography* by Palestinian poet Fadwa Tuqan (1917-2003) was first published serially in 1978-79, in the Arab Israeli magazine *al Jadid*. *Autobiography* is a personal account of the coming of age of this accomplished Palestinian poet, who is among the most celebrated contemporary women poets in the Arab world. The text traces the poet’s personal struggle against oppression in her conservative Muslim, environment, tradition-bound literary journey, and her triumph at finding her voice. A deeply intimate and private persona emerges. Poetry is equated with freedom and liberation, song and dance, love and mystery. The biography of the private self, moreover, is integrated into the public history of home and “school,” city and country. A dialectic concept of history emerges; the personal and the collective intertwine. Oppression/resistance; submission/rebellion; male patriarchy/feminine voice; colonial/anti-colonial; and occupation/liberation constitute the framework from which the private individual and the patriotic poet operate. Tuqan’s resonant voice is packed with dates and significant events about the poet’s personal life and Palestinian history from

Salam Mir is Associate Professor of English at Lasell College, Massachusetts.

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the early 1920s through 1967, as they have informed the poet and her people. Resistance is the fundamental means through which Tuqan interrogates the Muslim Arab tradition of the period to overcome the rigid rules of home, society and state. As I will argue in this article, Tuqan’s singular feminine position is an early secular voice for the Muslim Arab woman in the twentieth century. This article will trace the dynamic odyssey of Fadwa Tuqan in *An Autobiography* to illustrate her shifting stance to political commitment, the confessional genre, the construction of history and the reframing of resistance.

**The Personal History**

*Autobiography* relates the personal, poetic, and literary journey of Fadwa Tuqan. As the seventh daughter of one of Nablus’ most conservative, landed families, Tuqan had to contend with her tradition-bound, Muslim family and city. An eyewitness account, the narrative is organized in short sections that move between the personal life and the public history. Tuqan states that her story is one of “struggle, deprivation, and enormous difficulties” (*Autobiography* 11). The Arabic word for difficult (s’aba) appears in the Arabic title of the autobiography. The reviewed literature suggests that Tuqan’s struggle for liberation from the traditional Muslim Arab culture reflects the plight of Muslim Arab women in general.

From a young age, Fadwa Tuqan had to contend with the obstacles of her social, religious, and literary traditions. Forced to wear the veil and forbidden to attend school, she was kept in the house. She felt imprisoned. Her relationship with various members of her family and dialogue with literary figures and traditions reveal the process by which she interrogated social and literary codes as she struggled to define herself as a human being and a poet. Invoking the mythical figure of Sisyphus, Fadwa states: “I carried the rock and endured the fatigue of endless ascents and descents” (*Autobiography* 12). Considering this experience, it is instructive to examine how Tuqan found a way to insert her independence into this conservative environment.

The traditional Muslim Arab family, represented in *Autobiography* by the Tuqan family, is organized hierarchically according to sex and age. The younger are subordinate to the elder, females to males, with the father as the head of the household. Young females are additionally subordinate to older ones. Women’s place in the family and the society at large is subordinate; their purpose in life is to serve and obey the male. Being the seventh female in the family, young Fadwa had many rulers: “Whatever others supposed to be right, even if it was wrong, was what I had to accept” (*Autobiography* 18), she says. Halim Barakat reveals that at the turn of the century, Arab women were secluded and segregated; their roles were restricted to wife, mother, daughter, sister, and mother-in-law, etc. Their
status was discriminated against in marriage, divorce, inheritance, and property ownership; and in the sphere of social, economic, and political organizations, Arab women were marginalized. Barakat concludes that because religious ideology considered women to be a source of evil, anarchy, or deception, the prevailing values of morality focused on traditional ideas of femininity, motherhood, wifehood, and sexuality.2

Born in 1917, young Fadwa Tuqan grew up under a traditional system such as described by Barakat. All the women in her household were kept in the house; they were only allowed to go out with a chaperone. The Tuqan women had to wear the veil and could not sit in the company of men: “The man dominated family life, as in all homes of our society. The woman had to forget that the word ‘no’ existed in the language, except when she repeated, ‘There is no God but God’, in her ablutions and prayers. ‘Yes’ was the parroted word instilled in her from infancy, to become embedded in her consciousness for the rest of her life” (Autobiography 36).

Magida Salman elaborates on the role of Islam in supporting traditional values regarding the status of Arab women.3 She suggests that Islam’s highly detailed instructions about how Muslims should live and behave have intruded on all aspects of Arab life. Islam is the declared state religion of all Arab countries except Lebanon.4 The Muslim law (al-Shari’a) regarding family matters—marriage, divorce, inheritance, the judicial system, and polygamy—are adhered to in all Arab countries, except Tunisia and South Yemen.5 For young Fadwa the paternal aunt, Al-Shaykha (meaning a pious woman), epitomized the strictest and most confounding standards for the behavior of Muslim Arab women. The “secret agent,” as Fadwa dubbed her aunt, would reprimand the adolescent for wearing a short skirt, singing, or writing poetry. “A girl must be subdued every time she raises her head,” was the paternal aunt’s motto (Autobiography 33). Reem Al-Isawi mentions that the paternal aunt, “the epitome of ignorance and ossification,” downplayed young Fadwa’s inclinations to art and travel, and encouraged her brothers to deprive her of practicing her hobbies.6 The terrifying fires of hell were awaiting young Fadwa, her aunt would often remind her. “Al-Shaykha remains a nightmare that left its mark on my life for a long time” (Autobiography 34). Tuqan struggles against her relative and thus against the cultural and religious restrictions of Arab women of her class and generation.

Additionally, the witness-narrator in Autobiography offers some specific references to her childhood and adolescence that embittered the general state of oppression within her familial environment. Forced to wear the veil, Fadwa was under constant surveillance and control so that she would not dishonor the family name or cause a scandalous story. At age thirteen, young Fadwa is taken out of school and forced into “compulsory confinement to the house till the day of my death” (Autobiography 48). Her acceptance of a jasmine flower from a
sixteen-year-old boy triggers her oldest brother’s “magisterial sentence.” Not only is Fadwa deprived of school—the most difficult thing she had to endure—she is forbidden to play the lute or sing and dance. She can only do those things in secret when the male heads of the household are at work.

Fadwa describes her father as being extremely strict, detached, and without humor. He would not let his daughters get close to him, let alone show them affection. When speaking to Fadwa (in her presence), he would address her mother instead and refer to his daughter in the third person, negating her existence. In her interview with Tuqan, Linyah Badr mentions that Tuqan’s memories of her father are “dark and bitter”; and the poet confirms, saying that “conversation and expression were forbidden.” In the same interview, Tuqan also mentions her father’s extreme restrictions and double standard as far as the girls’ education is concerned. While her brothers were sent to private schools and universities for higher education, the girls had to be satisfied with food, clothing, and public education.7 Or in the case of Fadwa, private tutoring by her brothers was her lot. Tuqan’s sensitive and passive temperament probably made matters worse for the young poet-to-be. Her dream in Autobiography was to demolish the world of the Harem, “to break off all association with whatever represented authority in the family: Father, male cousins, paternal aunt. I avoided them all and thus learned to loathe whatever represented despotic domination and unjust authority in all social institutions” (Autobiography 81). Ambivalence towards her father is intensified by Fadwa’s contradictory feelings toward her mother. While she clung to Mother fearing her loss, Fadwa also had bitter feelings about her mother’s lack of affection and attention. To begin with, Fadwa’s birth is depicted as problematic: “I emerged from the darkness of the womb into a world unprepared to accept me. My mother had tried to get rid of me during the first months of her pregnancy. Despite repeated attempts, she failed” (Autobiography 12). Tuqan’s text, however, shifts the focus from the birth to the mother whose lack of control over her body is evident, demystifying motherhood. Because in the Arab world motherhood is valorized, this shift subverts the mother herself, her power, and the idea of matriarchy, according to Fedwa Malti-Douglas.8

Al-Isawi rightly suggests that taking her mother’s status as exemplary of that of the Muslim Arab woman, Tuqan generalizes about the condition of the Arab woman.9 As an adult, Tuqan rejects marriage, since it was restricted to cousins. She says: “I used to see my mother and sisters and all my [women] relatives. I saw woman as a slave who had no respect for being human. Her life was confined to cooking and procreation. Therefore, I hated to imagine myself imprisoned behind bars with no human spaces” (Conversation 57). By rejecting the only sanctioned role for woman in her Muslim culture, Tuqan casts herself as anti-tradition, anti-patriarchy. Thus her rejection of marriage does not only highlight the disorder that
is part of being a woman. But it also indicates refusal of complying with the will of men. Salman clarifies Islam’s mindset about woman: “In Islam, sexuality is virtually not condemned as such; it is the woman who must be controlled, as she is a threat to the security of the man….” She adds that since woman in Islam is fitna, meaning “beauty, disorder, or turmoil,” women’s movement must be confined to the spaces that the man can control. This means that the only safe ground is to see woman as wife, mother, or sister etc. As a single woman, therefore, Fadwa was still under the surveillance and control of the males in her family, but staying single would eventually earn her freedom. Arab men think that as a woman ages, she loses her sexual appeal and becomes less threatening. Thus, an older, single Tuqan would eventually gain her independence and freedom.

Tuqan’s feelings for and her relationship with her family, Al-Isawi says, are part and parcel of her literary story. “The subjective and objective worlds are inter-related, creating one tapestry that Tuqan weaves.” I believe that adding her own specific circumstances also renders Tuqan’s story realistically, complicating the nuances of her particular struggle. Fadwa’s alienation from parents, family and society is caused by the pervasive anachronisms of Islam against which she was trying to rebel in her journey to define her identity and poetic voice. It is arguable, then, that Tuqan proposes that liberation must begin at home with the search for identity. How does Fadwa confront her dehumanization within the confines of her home environment? Given the dual psyche of rebellion and submission within, is Fadwa able to transform her enslavement, as she put it, into imaginative creativity? Mediating herself through the clutches of family and society, the instruments of authority, the Muslim Arab woman-writer initiates the moment of liberation by naming herself as the up-and-coming poet. Poetry, as will be demonstrated below, becomes the venue that affords Tuqan freedom.

The Act of Naming

*Autobiography* reveals how poetry and special relationships with two brothers, Ibrahim and Nimr, afforded Tuqan a bridge that turned her struggle into imaginative creativity. It was only through the “word,” Badr suggests, that Tuqan could build a bridge between her and groups outside the family circle. The “word” allowed her to travel to other countries and other places (*Conversation* 13). Solitude, books, and self are transformed to become the pivots of Fadwa’s existence (*Autobiography* 84). When the thirteen-year-old rising poet shows promise, formal tutoring of poetry writing is initiated by her brother Ibrahim, a poet whose literary reputation had already been established. “He [Ibrahim] alone became the air I breathed, the air of health and personal happiness. His love and special concern for me gave me a feeling of contentment as a human being” (*Autobiography* 53). For the young
student, the mysterious and enchanting world of poetry and music would transport her to a timeless state akin to the one experienced by the mystical Sufi, as she describes her earliest memory of discovering poetry. At age thirteen and for the first time in the text, Fadwa names herself:

Name—Fadwa Tuqan
Class—(I crossed out this word, writing in its place:
Teacher—Ibrahim Tuqan)
Subject—Learning Poetry
School—The House

These were not just words to me; they were suns and moons. Before them, my life had come to a standstill, not moving with time. I had not known what to do with it. Now here was life in motion, its pace quickening, giving me the feeling of restored self-confidence. (Autobiography 58)

The lost paradise of books and pencils, studying and writing, has been regained where young Fadwa is transported to a mythical time beyond the confining space of “prison.” Malti-Douglas suggests that the naming of the real person is here identified with the poetic persona Since the heroine’s biological birth, and therefore the individual name received at birth, has been shown to be a literary absence, the act of naming signals a type of rebirth for her (1991: 6). Is the literary name as it appears in the textual document (Fadwa’s exercise notebook) within the text at hand enough to identify the character of young Fadwa, the witness of her story? Does the writing of poetry reconcile the duality of submission and rebellion within her character? Tuqan’s poetic career is evidence of her personal success. But the poet’s personal success story is also layered with the collective identity that the Palestinian people have also been struggling to voice.

Tuqan’s personal history strikes an unusual inverse parallel with that of Palestinian people. Nineteen seventeen, the year of Tuqan’s birth, coincided with the Balfour Declaration in which the British government promised to establish a Jewish National Home (JNH) in Palestine.¹² Nineteen forty-eight, the year of Tuqan’s father’s death, was the year the poet began to participate in politics and the world outside. Forty-eight was also the time of Al Nakba, the “Catastrophe,” when Palestine was divided and Israel established. By 1948, Tuqan was the up-and-coming poet who focused mainly on personal concerns and love poetry. When her father died and Palestine was lost in 1948, a slight shift in Tuqan’s journey for self-fulfillment takes place. The familial and sociopolitical changes signaled a turbulent period for country and poet. The poem entitled “A Life” aptly expresses Tuqan’s life at this historical juncture. Written after her father’s death, it is an elegy to both her father and one of her brothers, describing the life of “tears, a longing fond heart, a book of poetry and a lute”:

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On the sad nights / when silence endlessly deepens,
the phantom of loved ones pass / before me like wisps of dreams,
poking the fire alive beneath the ashes
and drenching my pillow with tears, / tears of longing
for ones who have died / and lie, folded in the darkness of the grave.

And here’s my youth / with all its failed dreams...
drenched by sorrow / whenever life embraces it with
thousands of braces and chains. / Pull it back,
that tortured alien youth / that prisoner, / stunted by captivity.

(Autobiography 206-207)

A lamenting tone and a self-absorbed stance dominate the sorrowful life of the bewildered persona. Although saddened and shocked by the scandal on Arab soil and the hordes of refugees who have flooded her hometown of Nablus, Tuqan’s feelings in forty-eight are still separate from her people. At this point, the poet still feels victimized, alone, helpless. Poetry has not yet formed the bridge between the individual and collective identity.

According to Malti-Douglas, the death of Tuqan’s father signifies a rebirth of the female, coming after the death of a male.13 Along with the shock of loss came the urgent need for change and the call for challenging the prevailing Muslim system of values. Fadwa and her mother, like many of the Nablus women, removed their veil, “that detestable ancient prison” (Autobiography 24). Additionally, in the 1950s and 1960s, Tuqan was able to go out of the prison of her home and city, and partake in the political agitation that swept the West Bank. She attended meetings; delivered messages to the families of resistance fighters; participated in cultural and political debates; or hid resistance fighters at her home. According to Barakat, 1948 challenged the prevailing patriarchal system in the Arab world. War and conflict, interference and influence of the West, urbanization and industrialization, and the political and economic changes that the region had undergone would strain the assumptions of the accepted codes.14 Then, Tuqan attempted to write political poetry unsuccessfully, in her estimation.

Initiation of Political Commitment

During the 1950s and 1960s and as Tuqan engages in political activism, a feeling of group solidarity is initiated. She participates in gatherings with the elite, educated women of the West Bank. The women’s outings and discussions in Jerusalem, Ramallah and Jericho revolve around art, literature, the creative arts, education, and the emancipation of women (Autobiography 122-123). Tuqan’s life
is further enriched with exchanging ideas with intellectual leaders and political activists. She forms a close relationship with the poet/political activist Kamal Nasir, assisting him while in hiding from the Jordanian authority. They also write poems for each other. “To the Imprisoned Singer,” a statement of support from Tuqan to the imprisoned Nasir, encourages him to “sing forth from behind the walls of suffering and night,” for “freedom will find victory” on “the road of hope” and “dreams” (Autobiography 210). Nasir in turn sends her “Letter to Fadwa” from prison in the West Bank, to assure her that he is still as she hoped he would be: rejecting humiliation, bleeding, in chains, but walking alone toward his goal. “Desire for freedom is my cross; / I thirst, though the cup is in my hand! / Life seethes in my youthful veins / yet I wander naked, seeking life for / my wounded people, that they might live / with happy pride, building their world.”15 As Tuqan’s socio-political awareness rises, she comes to appreciate communal work. She says that she “discovered the difference between a person’s feelings and thoughts when acting alone and those when working with a group. I tasted the joy of collective co-operation: getting outside myself and being part of a group delighted and overwhelmed me” (Autobiography 124).

Nonetheless, Tuqan cannot commit to a complete merging with the group yet, for she feels ambivalent toward political commitment. In addition to Tuqan’s propensity for subjectivity, there is perhaps a subliminal mistrust of ideology and politics lingering on from past imprisonment within the walls of her Muslim patriarchal home. After all, politics has always been identified with masculinity in her mind. As Malti-Douglas suggests, politics is “clearly connected to the male and is defined predominantly as his domain.”16 It is noticeable that of her generation of Palestinian poets, Tuqan is singled out for her lack of affiliation with a particular political party. Her interrogation of the relationship between poetry and political commitment is related to her valorization of freedom and individuality as the ultimate requirements for artistic expression. In her autobiography, she asks: “Is it possible for a person with a poetical nature to strip herself of her personality to the extent demanded in this age?” She goes on: “Why are poets all driven by one thing, politics alone? There are many sides to life; its facets are numerous, and a subjective tendency is one of these facets. So why eliminate it from poetry, since poetry is the reflection of life’s various situations?” (Autobiography 125). Underlined here is an implicit assumption that literature is a part of life, not merely a political agenda. Tuqan states that a poet is, above everything else, a person, before being political. Her query concludes that political parties in the Arab world suffer a lack, since they retain a subjective attachment to individuals rather than causes. Therefore, it is not necessary to join a party to be able to perform the role of poet, she decides.17
Nineteen sixty-seven, however, is the transitional moment that forced Tuqan out of the private room of her own into a more communal notion of literature. In 1967 Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza (the remaining land of Palestine). This war is referred to as “al-Nazha” when between 100,000 and 260,000 Palestinians were expelled from the newly conquered territories, many of whom became refugees for the second time. This year registers the time the private poet takes to the street. Then, the poet becomes a political activist, a socialite, and a people’s poet. From then on, love of the homeland takes priority, for her desire now is to write poetry that “ferments and ages in the earthen wine jugs of the people” (Autobiography 88). Poetry, thus, becomes an effective force in awakening the masses, and is strongly tied to the Palestinian resistance movement, Tuqan says (Autobiography 92). Since ’67, then, Tuqan became the public spokeswoman, dedicating her poetry to the cause of her people. Malti-Douglas suggests: “In an ironic way, Fadwa’s development inversely reflects that of her homeland. The year 1917 marks her birth and the Balfour Declaration, a death threat to her country; 1948 is a rebirth and access to political activity—and the loss of two thirds of Palestine; 1967 consummates the loss of Palestine and Fadwa’s full maturity.”18 This brings the discussion to political engagement, the shift in genre that Tuqan undergoes in the latter part of her creative career, and the ways An Autobiography constructs the collective history.

Political Commitment

Being a poet has proffered Tuqan a unique relationship with the Muslim Arab tradition. Although dominated by mostly male writers, Arabic literary tradition has provided a space for women poets. Thus Tuqan has had a feminine poetic tradition with which to identify and against which to react. Having established her reputation as a poet since the late ’50s, the writing of the confessional genre marks a departure for Fadwa Tuqan. The poet herself acknowledges the value of poetic license when she tells Badr: “Poetic license afforded me the freedom to say what I want. If I had written prose, it would not have been accepted. But because it’s poetry, people accept it, appreciate it and enjoy it” (Conversation 39). Setting her example, however, creates important tensions in Autobiography. I suggest that in writing her autobiography, Tuqan uses her poetic license strategically to her personal advantage and to that of her people. The personal and intimate life that had to be encoded in the poetry some sixty years ago can now be de-coded by the mature and established poet. And the public history that was stored in the collective memory for twenty years had to be unearthed and reconstructed in the narrative. Her affiliation with the cause of the homeland and the Palestinian nation is consummated after the transitional moment of the June War; it demonstrates
itself in her early rejection of the history of origins. She says: “My faith in the veracity of the history of genealogy is somewhat shaky, nor do I see much advantage in going back to the pages of history to search for the roots of ‘the family tree’, especially when those roots reach as far back as early nomadic life” (Autobiography 34).

Tuqan’s sense of belonging to the homeland comes to the fore after Israel occupies the West Bank and Gaza in 1967. Then, despite the severe conditions of the occupation, she stays in Nablus. The short poem “Enough for Me” crystallizes Tuqan’s somewhat mystical attachment to the homeland:

Enough for me to die on her earth / be buried in her
to melt and vanish into her soil / then sprout forth as a flower
played with by a child from my country
Enough for me to remain / in my country’s embrace
to be in her close as a handful of dust
a sprig of grass / a flower.

(“The Knight and the Horseman,” Autobiography 231)

The above lyric tells how attached she is to the land, the loss of which causes deep sadness. “‘Belonging to something even if it’s lost is of value,’ Tuqan says.”19 This brings the discussion to the historical moment of 1967, which marks her transformation into the politically engaged poet she has become since then. The June War results in a multiplicity of emotions for the poet: tragedy, alienation, isolation and resistance. Her passion for freedom is imbued with her anger at the imperial occupiers who have usurped her homeland and turned Palestinian life into a tragedy. Only a leap of the imagination could redeem Tuqan’s being. This historical moment, then, enables the poet to write political poetry of engagement that freely expresses the anguish and injustice her people have dealt with since 1948.

A comparison of two poems: “A Life” and “Song of Becoming,” written in 1948 and 1967, respectively, demonstrates Tuqan’s shift to political commitment. The elegiac tone of “A Life” dominates the 1948 poem: tears, a lute, and a fond heart, longing for poetry, possibly to escape the sorrowful life and sad nights.

Now I bow my head, desolate. / A lost horizon thunders inside.
Poems alone are my refuge. / In them I describe
my longings / only then can this soul / find calm.

(Autobiography 208)

Written after 1967 and strategically prefacing the English translation of Autobiography, “Song of Becoming” shows a change of tone and attitude toward
life, the craft of poetry, and the role of the poet. The poem speaks of the young resistance fighters who are forced to grow up beyond their chronological years:

They're only boys / who used to frolic and play
releasing in the Western wind / their blue red green kites
the colour of the rainbow
jumping, whistling, exchanging spontaneous jokes / and laughter
fencing with branches, assuming the roles / of great heroes in history.

(Autobiography 10)

The desolate, self-absorbed persona of the '48 poem is transformed in the '67 poem. Inner frustration and yearning are transfigured into anger, defiance, and resistance. The most obvious shift is in the use of the pronoun—the “I” of “A Life” becomes “They” in “Song of Becoming.” After the June War, the voice is the voice of the heroes of history, especially that of the young martyrs who willingly die for the homeland. Reborn, their death marks the rebirth of the nation: they “become the trees plunging deep into the earth / and soaring high toward the sun.” The speaker perceives how the young resistance fighters, “in plain rejection,” assume “the dialectics of destruction and building anew.” They are invading classrooms, streets, city quarters and squares, dislodging the Zionist complacency about the passivity or the claimed “non-existence” of the Palestinians. Anticipating the intifada, which would explode twenty years after the occupation (in December, 1987), Tuqan in sixty-seven describes future means of “resistance to the new imperialism,” as she put it. The poetic persona projects into the lives and actions of the boys who have “grown more than the years of a lifetime,” as they would face “sullen tanks with a stream of stones”:

When their torn limbs merged with the stuff of our earth,
they became a legend / They grew, and became the bridge
they grew, grew and became / larger than all poetry.

(Autobiography 10)

The shift in Tuqan’s stance foregrounds the martyrdom and sacrifice of young Palestinian fighters as the poet, now living under occupation, understands the full value of loss, exile and resistance. In this transformed view, death for one’s country takes priority over poetry. The poet’s voice and the resistance voice have merged. Immortalized in poetry, the young martyrs in turn reclaim Palestine as their land, writing it into history. From then on, Tuqan will write what may be described as resistance writing, and this is most obviously demonstrated in the shift to the genre of the personal memoir and the publication of A Mountainous Journey, An Autobiography.
The Confessional Genre and the Construction of History

Tuqan’s politicization process parallels that of the Palestinian people. After about twenty years and a second disaster, poet and people emerge as politically committed. Autobiography is testimony of the poet’s political maturity on behalf of her people, since it relates their history. Badr offers a tenable analysis of the autobiography when she says that the opening lines of the narrative invite the reader to follow an intimate, courageous journey of the imagination. Tuqan draws attention to the fact that the will is not sufficient to cross bridges and overcome difficulties. Action must accompany the dream to change. Badr concludes that Tuqan presents the conclusion before the cause so the reader senses how the creative imagination can provide the golden bridge to freedom (Conversation 11).

I have already discussed how the two major defeats of the Palestinians in 1948 and 1967 have been embedded in the poet’s personal odyssey. It is safe to claim that the correspondence between the personal story and the collective history become conjoined in the aftermath of the June War of 1967. Tuqan published Autobiography almost two decades after the June War. Speculations about her shift to the confessional genre may yield knowledge about the motives behind the writing of the autobiography, which belongs to the category of personal account literature. Comprised of memoirs, diaries, reminiscences, and autobiographies, this category flourished in Palestinian literature after the June War, according to Jayyusi, who also suggests that personal account literature is perhaps “the greatest witness to the age of catastrophe.” Whereas the writer as protagonist is the central focus of most personal accounts, she adds, “external” forces that define the sociopolitical context are almost always invoked in this genre.

Additionally, Jayyusi mentions three features of this category that pertain to Tuqan’s Autobiography. Similar to other deterritorialized literatures, Palestinian literature of personal account almost always incorporates politics, takes on a collective value, and focuses on the search for a national identity. Palestinian writers seek this genre to speak to the world that has isolated and denigrated them. Above all, since personal accounts rely mainly on memory, telling stories about the homeland has been a fundamental oral strategy to preserve that history and pass it on from generation to generation. Here, Tuqan is perhaps tapping into orality, the collective memory that has been nourished and preserved for more than four decades. I would like to suggest that the project of writing Autobiography is commensurate with Tuqan’s experience of the 1967 War. Her choice of the narrative form is evidence of her desire to partake in a larger literary project to analyze the complexity, horror, and depth of the historical moment.

So that the reader does not get the impression that Autobiography is a tedious history lesson, Tuqan’s narrative dips into a variety of strategies. For one thing,
the autobiography veers away from overemphasizing the chronological events of history. Neither indulging in a strict chronicling, nor describing exactly all events, Tuqan weaves several periods together in a non-linear fashion. There is a focus on the ruptures of history. She subtly inserts a few historical events she has witnessed in her hometown of Nablus and incidents that befell members of her family for their support of the nationalist movement. Her voice unravels the oppression of the British Mandate (1920-48) from within the liminal spaces that have been glossed over by other historiographers. For example, the events of the Great Rebellion of 1936-39 are mixed in with the riots that were unleashed after the UN Partition Plan (1947) became known to the local inhabitants.

Another technique Tuqan employs is the selection of a few events that offer an eyewitness account, underscoring the cruelty and demeaning strategies of the British Mandate system as a colonialist project. Simultaneously, the narrative juxtaposes the aggressive reality of colonialism with the heroic resistance of the Palestinian masses. In September 1937, for instance, violent clashes between the masses and the British authorities broke out over increasing Jewish migration, land sales, and the desire for independence. Consequently, the Mandate Government resorted to torture, mass arrests and banishment of Arab leaders of the National Committees that were springing up in many cities and towns at this time. *Autobiography* describes in detail one raid by British troops of the quarter where Tuqan lived. British soldiers rounded up civilians in their sleep-wear in the last hours of the night, allowing them no time to change their clothes. The humiliation of the elderly and the sick; the demeaning of the nationalist leaders, Tuqan’s father and brother included; and the pathos of the whole incident are depicted (*Autobiography* 82-87). Tuqan also speaks of the solidarity of the Nablus community against the enemy. Without naming the Balfour Declaration, she concludes: “[The British] were the root of the evil, the agents who fulfilled the ambitious and momentous designs of the Zionists” (*Autobiography* 87). Al-Isawi rightly affirms that Tuqan’s *Autobiography* is a “unique historical document.”

Al-Isawi also proposes that *Autobiography* demonstrates sensitively the apex of the revolutionary fire of the Palestinians. It witnesses the degeneration in Mandatory Palestine of Nablus and other major cities which suffered curfews and sudden siege; home searches and demolition; and fighting between the Palestinian masses and British soldiers. Tuqan’s text not only offers descriptive passages with exact names and dates to support this claim, but it also pinpoints the source of Palestinian anger and resistance—the Balfour Declaration, which had promised to establish a Jewish National Home in Palestine.

In addition, by narrating various aspects of the Great Rebellion of 1936-39, which has not received its due recognition by historians until recently, Tuqan unveils the internal weaknesses behind the Palestinian defeat. I believe that one of her
motives in highlighting the Rebellion is to address the gap in the scholarship. Abu Iyad (Salah Khalaf), one of the key figures of the Palestine resistance movement and a principal founder of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), speaks of the impact of the failure of the Great Rebellion on Palestinian nationalism when he says: “The brutal suppression of the great rebellion of 1936-39 had decimated and dispersed the surviving leaders, most of whom were either jailed by the British or forced into exile.” More importantly, in suppressing the Rebellion, the British authorities succeeded in disarming the Palestinians. So when 1948 came about, the Palestinian arms supply had not only been depleted. It had become obsolete because Palestinians were not allowed to purchase the modern arms they needed to defend their country against the Zionists. Expressing consciousness against the Mandate as a colonialist project, as Tuqan does, is a resistance strategy on her part, an imaginative act that refuses to be locked into a defeatist interpretation of history.

When Tuqan analyzes the history of the Great Rebellion of 1936, she does so with the historian’s attention to detailed facts. Giving a brief history of the political parties and their split, she does not shy away from pointing out the main weakness of the Palestinian national movement before the period that led to ‘48. “To its detriment, the country was divided between them [al-Husayni and al-Nashashibi families]” (Autobiography 27). Tuqan’s motives behind writing Autobiography, Al-Isawi suggests, include personal and impersonal reasons, such as historical documentation and critical analysis. The general strike, Tuqan maintains, was a major popular grass-roots struggle that forced the leadership to change its policy (Autobiography 83). This is demonstrated in the way Tuqan integrates the public with the private and analyzes the impact of a particular event. She also injects the moral element into her analysis, since she was keenly interested in philosophical issues. Tuqan feels that questions of justice (divine and human), existential issues of life and death, and problems about good and evil, etc., are important issues concerning life, writing, and history (Autobiography 126). Al-Isawi’s assessment is to the point: “Not only does she [Tuqan] open the windows of her surroundings and the world, she also points to the struggle, the contradiction, and the hopes of the individual and the collective.” “The collapse of the individual into the collective allows Tuqan to come to grips with the Palestinian and the Arab at all levels. Autobiography rejects the simplicity of destruction and defeat, lamentation and death, in search of freedom, learning and beauty.”

Tuqan’s critical inclination adds to the ironic stance with which she views Palestinian and Arab leaders alike. Feelings of betrayal by their leaders and the British have been a part of Palestinian oral history. Transcribing oral history in the autobiography gives voice to the silenced; doing it in the aftermath of the sixty-seven occupation is one way of turning actual defeat into a figurative
triumph. For example, Tuqan mentions how the Arab High Command halted the strike of 1936 after Arab kings and princes convinced the Palestinian leaders to negotiate with the British government, “relying upon the ‘good intentions’ of the English toward the Arabs!” (Autobiography 84-85). Tuqan’s ironic stance toward mainstream politics is historically tenable.

Furthermore, Autobiography highlights the complicity between the British Mandate authority and Zionist leaders. Tuqan selects one concrete event to which she was an eye-witness. She tells of one incident that dramatizes the physical and psychological terror experienced by Palestinians under the Mandate and its complicity with the Zionist project. A detailed description of the bombing of the Palestine Broadcasting Station in Jerusalem is selected.

Ibrahim Tuqan, Fadwa’s brother, was a recognized and well-established poet, and he was in charge of the Arabic program, at the Broadcasting Station. He, with two fellow Palestinian announcers and twenty-one children, were rehearsing a musical. On August 3, 1939, the Broadcasting building was bombed. The Jewish employees working in the station had not reported to work that day (Autobiography 96). Consequently, an investigation by the Mandate authority was ordered, followed by a court hearing. The verdict ruled in favor of dismissing Ibrahim from his post in 1940. The Zionist press had accused him of intentionally selecting literary and religious programs to encourage and promote anti-Semitism. This event reveals three issues. First, it demonstrates the overriding authority of the Zionist policy during the Mandate. Second, it is not only evidence of the terrorist activities Zionists were undertaking against Arabs, as early as the late thirties. It also testifies to the powerful infiltration of Zionist propaganda in Mandatory Palestine, which was permitted and supported by the British authority. More importantly perhaps is that the incident exemplifies an early strategy of the exploitation of the idea of anti-Semitism to rally support for the Zionist homeland. I agree with Al-Isawi who says that Tuqan’s narrative strategies here point to historical documentation.27 Extensive excerpts from newspaper articles written in the local Jewish press about Ibrahim’s programs and trial are reproduced in the narrative. They and the court verdict to dismiss Ibrahim demonstrate the powerful influence of the Zionist press (Autobiography 96-97, 100-103). What is demonstrated here also is literature’s political project, from the Palestinian perspective.

Scholars such as Badr and Malti-Douglas concur that Tuqan’s representation integrates Palestinian history within the personal / literary biography. Unlike the English translation of the autobiography, the original Arabic Rihla Jabaliyyah, Rihla Sa’ba was published in two parts. Badr observes that while part one is dominated by the personal tone, the public voice is more apparent in part two. She asks Tuqan to comment. The poet answers: “They [the Israelis] have prohibited life and destroyed every personal note in it. We cannot lead a personal life because
of the intensity of the great problems the occupation has created…. I believe the occupation has dampened all our emotions and life. The misery, the pain and the continued suffering we have been living have obliterated normal living” (Conversation 54). This comment indicates the intense cruelty of direct military occupation, which has been the inspiration behind the writing of Autobiography.

Conclusion

In writing A Mountainous Journey, An Autobiography, Fadwa Tuqan is tapping into Palestinian nationalism in the post-'48 period to the Palestine resistance movement through the 1967 War and its aftermath. In the 1970s, the Palestinian Resistance Movement was gaining popular and international momentum. In 1974 the PLO, under the leadership of Yasser Arafat, was recognized by the United Nations as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. Tuqan’s imaginative text marks the writer’s participation in the legitimization process. This is significant when one considers that the 1948-generation grew up under Hashemite Jordan, Egyptian Gaza, and in the refugee camps, with no clear knowledge of the facts of history. Then, only oral history told by parents and grandparents circulated among Palestinians. As Rashid Khalidi suggests, in comparison with other Arab countries such as Egypt, Tunisia or even the religiously governed, divided Lebanon, Palestine was denied the apparatus of controlling education and the media, the means of promoting a cohesive concept of identity.28 Some may argue that this state of affairs may have burdened the imaginative writing with identity formation and other national concerns. I would contend that one of Tuqan’s motives might have been political motivation, which links literature and history. An Autobiography is a primary site for substantiating and challenging the uniformity of historical narratives about Palestine, which had been written by western and Israeli historians. Autobiography, I believe, makes an invaluable contribution by providing a more sympathetic picture regarding the causes of the Palestinians’ defeat, one that underscores their steadfastness rather than their weakness. Tuqan’s concept of history transcends the past imaginatively, looking toward the future. She says: “I always yearned to go beyond time and space…. Time is that of repression, subjugation, and being lost in nothingness; space is imprisonment in the home” (Conversation n.p.).

Terri DeYoung’s comment about Tuqan’s poetry aptly sums up her creative impulse. He says that Tuqan’s poetry provides a record for all facets of the Palestinian experience: from life before the rupture of 1948 “to the sense of alienation implicit in being completely cut off from a large chunk of one’s homeland and family [before 1967] and the awareness of the thousand daily compromises and negotiations between power and resistance that are part of
living under occupation.” I believe that Tuqan’s *Autobiography* encapsulates the multiple causes behind the Palestinian problem: settler colonialism, Zionism, the Mandate system, and inner fragmentation and rivalries among Palestinian leaders. When studying history, it would be commendable to view creative writing as complementary to historical narrative since literature offers the possibility of humanizing history.

This article has traced the personal and literary journey of the Muslim Arab writer Fadwa Tuqan, from Palestine. Drawing on Tuqan’s poetry and her autobiography, *A Mountainous Journey, An Autobiography*, my discussion has demonstrated how the Muslim Arab woman writer inserts gender into the nationalist discourse, which complicates the representation of the struggle for liberation. Muslim Arab women were relegated to the sidelines during the early decades of the twentieth century up to the 1970s or so. Breaking the personal and literary barriers, Fadwa Tuqan’s poetry and *Autobiography* afford agency to Muslim Arab women. The shift to engaged poetry and her choice of the confessional genre seem to indicate that the committed poet sees the urgency to participate in the reconstruction of history from the woman’s perspective. Her desire for personal liberation parallels that of her people. In doing so, Fadwa Tuqan redefines the role of the Arab-Muslim writer in the formation of the nation.

**Notes**

4. Lebanon’s demographics and mixed religious and ethnic population dictated a different constitutional establishment. Ibid., 7.
5. Ibid., 7.
6. Reem Al-Isawi, *Fadwa Tuqan, naqd al-dhat, qira’at al-sira* (Fadwa Tuqan, Critique of Self: A Reading of Autobiography) (Cairo: Al-Dar al-Masriyah al-Lubnaniyah, 1999), 38, 89; all translations from the Arabic are mine. Al-Isawi mistakes the paternal aunt for the grandmother.

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12. The British Mandate, which included a preamble of the Balfour Declaration, was approved by the League of Nations. On November 2, 1917, the British Minister of Foreign Affairs, Arthur James Balfour, sent a letter to Baron Lionel Walter de Rothschild, a British politician and influential Zionist. The letter states that Britain supports the establishment of a “national home for the Jewish people in Palestine”: “His Majesty’s Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a National Home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.” Quoted in Michael Ionides, “Zionists and the Land,” in Walid Khalidi, ed., *From Haven to Conquest*, 2nd printing (Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1987), 256.
17. See also Al-Isawi, *Fadwa Tuqan, Critique of Self*, 67.
18. Malti-Douglas, “Problematic Birth,” 176. Al-Isawi also mentions the same point about the inverse correspondence between Tuqan’s career and Palestine’s history; *Fadwa Tuqan, Critique of Self*, 53.
21. Ibid., 66-68.
23. Ibid., 49-50.
26. Ibid., 98.
27. Ibid., 53.