
*Readings in Syrian Prison Literature* is a groundbreaking study about the correlation between prison literature from Syria and human rights discourse. The book sheds light on the causes behind the Syrian Uprising of 2011 and the ensuing and ongoing civil war that divides the Syrian people against the authoritarian regime of Bashar al Asad. The book comprises six chapters with an introduction, a coda, nine color illustrations, and two bibliographies: Arabic and English. Employing an interdisciplinary approach, R. Shareah Taleghani juxtaposes the themes and forms of this literary genre with other forms of writing, proffering a convincing argument for the value of reading prison literature alongside history proper.

Chapter 1 addresses the debate over the genre of prison literature. Taleghani contends that earlier Arabic criticism had underscored content and sidelined the question of form. Alternative forms of prison writing should be examined to expand the parameters of this genre, she suggests. For example, the short story, memoir, and other experimental forms, as well as graffiti, challenge traditional documentary forms. Chapter 2 opens with reports about the event that launched the Uprising in the town of Dar’a, on the Syria-Jordan border. Having been inspired by the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, 15 school children had sprayed their school walls with protest graffiti. The act elicited the children’s arrest, torture, and being held incommunicado by the Syrian Security Forces (p. 21). The people of Dar’a ushered in mass protests in their city, a movement that spread to the rest of the country. The author proceeds to analyze the intersectionality of the “themes of recognition, vulnerability, and sentimentality” (p. 21), as expressed in the children’s graffiti, with the central concerns of short stories and a play written in prison. Exploring the links between literary representations of the prisoners and their families and the impact of the events on their physical vulnerability and human psychology, she proposes a novel interdisciplinary approach to the theorization of prison literature. Such a methodology “interrogates and transgresses” (p. 18) linguistic frameworks of the representation of violence and suffering, as well as the Eurocentric discourse of human rights.

Chapter 3 delves into the interplay of the themes of vulnerability and recognition in prison literature, specifically the correlation between torture and voice. The
author critiques the narrative of reports by human rights organizations and courts for rendering the narrative about torture narratable and readable. Such narratives, she says, mute the prisoners’ voices whereby they are perceived as “silent objects of torture” (p. 22). The alternative genres of poets and novelists depict the subjectivities of detainees whose individual voices are heard loud and clear. Similarly, chapter 4 focuses on the organizational reportage of the physical plant—measurements of prisons and mathematical numbers of cells and detention centers; prison conditions; and arbitrary sentencing. Again, the formal generic structures of language are critiqued for pre-empting the living experience of the many Syrian prisoners who feel that prison is “a form of life” (p. 22).

The case of Tadmur Military Prison is the subject of chapter 5—Tadmur is known as Palmyra for tourists. The atrocities of this notorious prison and its forms of sousveillance (watching from below) have solicited several reports by human rights organizations since the 1990s, while Syrian officials continue to deny human rights abuses. Taleghani compares such documented reports with Mustafa Khalifa’s narrative depictions of the “worst forms of human cruelty and suffering” at Tadmur Prison (p. 23). In his memoirs and novel, The Shell, he opts for the use of surrealism. Chapter 6 offers a self-reflexive commentary—a metafiction of sorts—about the efficacy of narrative to represent the carceral experience and/or system. In addition to contrasting the transparency of other genres with the opacity of official and formal reports, the author also explores the correlation between metafiction and the exilic space of many political dissidents before and after 2011. So that more alternative forms suit the real experiences of imprisonment, torture, and abuse, she recommends that more scholarly work is needed in this area. Readings in Syrian Prison Literature is an excellent and thorough investigation of prison literature from Syria—a must read for readers interested in learning about the conditions in Syria. The book would be of interest to scholars and students in history, the social sciences, legal studies, and human rights.


Becoming Palestine by Gil Z. Hochberg is an insightful study about the artistic productions of contemporary Palestinians who contest the settler colony’s manipulations of the archive. In their search for new languages that break away from the conventional paradigms of nationalism, ethnic origin, and the nation-state, young artists reject the traditional use of the archive as a depository of the past. Instead,
they opt for an imaginative archival framework of the present as potentiality for the future. The book is in five chapters, with an informative introduction, an afterword, 30 illustrations, and extensive notes and bibliography.

Chapter 1 reconsiders the orientalist ethos of German Jewish ethnomusicologist, Robert Lachmann. Due to his interest in cultural connections rather than divisions and separations, he was sidelined and ignored by both Zionists and British officials during the British Mandate. Taking Lachmann’s lead, Jumana Manna, musician and film director, embarks on a journey of film- and music-making. She records the music and films contemporary Mizrahi Jews and Palestinians, some of whom are family members of musicians Lachmann had recorded in the 1930s. In retracing of Lachmann’s brief musical broadcasting career, she also shares the recordings from his archive. This process of reinventing Lachmann’s interest in musical connections for contemporary communities is of value to the contemporary impasse. It challenges the orientalist mindset, “in a country today divided by walls, fences, and checkpoints” (p. 41) and provides potentiality for “fostering coexistence” in the present and the future.

The cinematic contributions of Palestinian director Kamal Aljafari of the Jaffa Trilogy are explored in chapter 2. He rearranges the archives of films, videos, and photographs of the Israeli cinematic archive of Jaffa, from the Palestinian perspective. Unlike the colonialist archival exclusions of Palestinians of the city, Aljafari’s digital version foregrounds Palestinian natives, whose music is inescapable. His rearrangement stresses the Palestinian persistence of being invasive of the city while contesting the colonial cinematic success (p. 33). The next two chapters deal with the biblical archives of Israel’s archeological projects, whose discourse dominates Israel proper and that of the international community. Chapter 3 presents Larissa Sansour’s Sci-Fi essay-film that questions the authenticity of “digging,” introducing “burying” (p. 34). The legitimating archeological claim to Palestine falls through with the planned burial and “discovery” of artifacts. Chapter 4 discusses the collaboration of multi-media artists Ruanne Abou-Rahme and Basel Abbas, who also dispute the “status of archaelogy as the national archive” of Israel (p. 34). In setting up their alternative tour by contemporary Palestinians of the 400 villages that were destroyed by the Israeli Defense Forces during the 1947–48 war, the artists undermine Israeli goals and methodological manipulations of archeology and the aura of the archeological archive. They suggest that not only is the colonial project incomplete, their project reclaims place and time for Palestinians, “to activate a potentiality to become unbound from colonial time,” as they put it (p. 34).

Who would think of gesture, movement, or dance as disrupting to the traditional archive? Palestinian dancer, choreographer, and activist Farah Saleh does. Her work is the subject of the final chapter of Becoming Palestine. Saleh conceives of her body as an archive, and she uses it to find alternative knowledge to the impasse in
which Palestinians find themselves. How does Saleh’s repertoire activate and animate the archive, asks Hochberg? Saleh says that her archives of gesture, body movement, and choreographed dance create a somatic archive, one that defies being “fully read,” like a textual document (p. 109). The result is an “affective experience,” not static or stable, for it is different every time it is performed. The affect creates a “mental memory,” which even if it is only observed, it “opens up discussion about social and political issues,” according to Saleh (p. 110).

Becoming Palestine is a most interesting contribution to studies about the Palestinian resistance against the settler colony, under which they have lived since 1948. Gil Z. Hochberg adds a radical analysis of the imaginative creations of young artists in the twenty-first century. It would be an eye-opener to students and scholars of dance and the performing arts, and Middle East, international politics, and cultural studies.


A Small Door Set in Concrete is one woman’s personal account of the life of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. Journalist, writer, translator, and political activist, Israeli Jew Ilana Hammerman faces an existential threat after her husband and sister die in one year. To defy death, she journeys to the end of the world, as she put it. Not heeding warnings about the evil Maoris, she sets out on a bike trail in a small Maori village, in New Zealand. On returning home and again challenging the stereotypes about the “dangerous” Palestinian Arabs, she begins her regular visits to aid Palestinians in the occupied territories. Her freedom to move within Israel is put in the service of helping Palestinians whose freedom of movement is greatly restricted under Israel’s military occupation. This brief review will highlight some of Israel’s strategies to control and discipline Palestinians, especially those who dare to resist.

With a prologue and an epilogue, the narrative is in two main parts, titled: “The West Bank” and the “Gaza Strip.” There are about 13 sub-sketches about life under occupation of workers, prisoners, children, and farmers, and in Gaza, the large open air prison, in the words of Ilan Pappe. Not only do we learn about the brutal pursuit of the daily lives of ordinary Palestinians. But we also feel Hammerman’s empathy, laughter, irony, compassion, and joie de vivre, as Palestinians share “their hours of joy and grief, … [and] their strengths and vulnerabilities” with her “certain kind of freedom” (p. 13). In terms of genre, this is a
non-fictional account that would be classified as documentary, from the Palestinian perspective.

In her red Ford Fiesta, Hammerman transports a cancer patient to the hospital; takes children to enjoy the sea for the first time in their lives; and smuggles workers into Tel Aviv, so they can earn some money because there is no work in their community. We hear the voice of the worker-father she smuggles in the trunk of her car; learn of Adnan Abdallah’s prolonged administrative detention for actions he did not commit; and listen to Hammerman’s rage against Israel’s judicial military system against Palestinian. Her rendition of Adnan’s surreal trial by the “despicable authorities” (p. 35) is captivating because of its clarity, depth, and humanistic ethos. The trial is also absurdly Kafkaesque in nature. The physical plant of the Ketzi’ot Prison in the Negev desert with its concrete, barbed wire, and galvanized roofs seem to be a makeshift court. Judges, military personnel, and prison police appear to be automated rather than real; classified information cannot be disclosed. Similarly, the outdoor court-room with its separating fences and flimsy chairs and tables are emblematic of the “tragicomic spectacle which the system produces incessantly in a multitude of variations” (p. 91). According to Hammerman, the “Israeli Jewish woman with humanist values” (p. 86), as she identifies herself, we also learn of Halutza prison which held 2,200 prisoners. She tries to help Jamil, who was detained for ten years, at the Ofer military base “for an insubstantial membership and attending an insubstantial meeting and writing insubstantial slogans, none of which could be proved” (p. 122). He tells her of the containers in which prisoners are stored until the court hearing begins (italics mine). These are “closed containers, a suffocating space, and [prisoners] received neither food nor drink there” (p. 129). When a prisoner’s name is called, he appears with shackled feet and sits in the front row, forbidden to sit or speak with his family, lawyer, or other personnel.

The most poignant stories Hammerman tells are about the people in Gaza, “a huge concentration camp. . . . A strip of land choked, enclosed, and besieged from all sides and devastated by wars. . . .” (p. 241). Although Hammerman does not deal with the origin of the question of Palestine, nor does she bring up the 1948 historical moment, the narrative is a must read for all readers who wish to learn about the plight of Palestinians under Israeli occupation, a plight that has been taking place since 1967, under the very eyes of the international community and human rights agencies.