

TENSION

Our life under Occupation cannot be described in one word. But, if I were to do so, I think that no word would serve so well as “tension.”

Tension inside, tension outside. On the personal level and on the common. Between you and the occupiers. Between you and those behind the Bridge. And between you and yourself. Different ideologies, different points of view, different influences and reflections. But the same key words are repeated by all: “Palestine,” “Liberation,” “PLO,” “Independence.”

Some say “the liberation of all Palestine.” Others say “an independent state in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.” Others say “Gaza Strip and the West Bank *and* Galilee.”

Discussions and arguments and accusations between you and those within the borders, you and those behind the borders, you and yourself to keep your patience, faith and sanity.

Tension, tension, tension. You feel you are in a whirlpool, a whirlwind, a pressure cooker. You can imagine yourself in this situation: a whirlwind blowing around a whirlpool with a pressure cooker in the middle, and you are there, right inside the pot. It’s an awful feeling, and yet you are almost sure that when the cooking is over, you will be the most delicious dish the starving Arab nation has ever had. A dish to nourish, to enrich, to give health and life, and not to be swallowed in the same old traditional way.

Often we have this feeling, and most often we have cried: “Why me? Why only me? Why do I have to play the painful role of the crucified? I am not an angel. I am not a hero. I am not a superman. I am tired, exhausted, fed up and burnt. I am just an ordinary, simple, average human being. I don’t want to be anything except what I am.” But, I did not have the right to choose my part in the tragedy, in the play. My part was designated by a power which was beyond my reach. So, whether I like it or not, I have to play this prearranged part. I played. I played it poorly. The audience was silent, unmoved, eyes reflecting disdain. I cried, “I don’t want to play this part.”

“Whether you like it or not, you have to play it.” I played. Again I failed. I was angry.

“I don’t suit this part, it’s too much for me!”

“You have to play it.”

Again I played, and again, and still my acting was poor and the audience unmoved.

“I don’t want to.”

“You must.”

I shouted at the director, at the audience, at myself: “But the audience is so insensitive.”

“This is the reflection of your bad acting. Good actors create good audiences.”

I was challenged.

“All right, you will see. I will light the stage with glaring lights, with action, with feelings, with love and hatred, with fears and tears, with the expected and the unexpected. I’ll do it.”

I thought, if I cannot change my part, why not change myself? But it is not easy to change yourself from a simple, ordinary, average human being into a hero. But this is the way to change! If you cannot change the part, cannot change the audience, the only solution is to change yourself. And I discovered that I had changed already; the challenge had changed me, I was motivated, I was inspired.

I open my eyes in the morning. I am still here, inside the pressure cooker and still whirling. Winds and currents and steam. I listen to the radio. Fighting in Lebanon. My heart beats. What’s going to happen this time? Another Black September? Another Talezzaater? I wait and wait, I listen to this news and to this and that. The voice of the PLO, Israel, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Egypt, London, Monte Carlo, all of them. I wait for hours, days, weeks and months; the fighting is over. The voice of the PLO is still there. The vigorous, throbbing, motivating song is still there, on the radio and echoing in the demonstration on the West Bank and Gaza Strip. “I carried my gun so that the generations after us will hold a scythe.”

My heart is relaxed, I am still alive, still moving, developing and progressing. I exult, “Look! The audience is stirring; it is the beginning!” Next time, next month, next year, they will reflect and react, but, by then, my acting too should be better. I am not a failure. I breathe.

I open my eyes. Still I am here inside the pressure cooker. Occupation, demonstration, news, trials, prisons, demolished houses, demolished souls. Taxes; more and more, a new devaluation, a new settlement. Tension. They built a new settlement there; tomorrow, they'll build a new one here. Where shall I go then? To whom shall I protest? To the court? They *are* the court. To the Arabs? God save us; they cannot save themselves. People there are suffering experiences similar to mine. Jails, trials, poverty, sickness and bitterness. No one is allowed to say the regime is rotten, the ruler is a damned ignorant, dirty thief. To whom shall I protest? To the big powers? To America? Americans, the defenders of democracy, defend the rotten rulers in the Third World, but why? Are they in love with those Sheikhs and Shahs? Arab oil, Iranian oil, OPEC? The markets are soaked with American products. American cars, American washing machines and refrigerators, American hair-dryers and canned goods and ties and pants and bras. To whom shall I protest? The ground is moving, my heart is beating, they'll take the rest, where shall I go then? To the Arab world? And repeat the same story? The wanderer, the disinherited, the outcast? Black September and the other, smaller Black Septembers that take place everyday? To America? What the hell am I going to do in America? How shall I get there? I have no money to get there, no language, no heart, no visa. And leave this land? My roots, my memories, my neighbors and my loved ones? What do I have in America? Nothing, nobody, I'll be a beggar, I'll starve, I'll get sick, nobody will ever care for me. That country is a mysterious one. Cars and lights and buildings that reach God on his throne. Millions of people with a different language, a different way of life, different hearts. They don't care for each other the way we do, brother. It is true. Someone I know was in America and told me: "Look, Abu Khaled, if you get sick or need anything, you will die and no one would care." Why should I go there and die? If I have to die anyway, it's better to die at home. At least, someone will care—my family, my neighbors, the mayor, the Red Cross, the PLO. But where is the PLO?

"It's there, Abu Khaled, in Beirut, in the United Nations, inside Israel, around you, inside your house."

"Inside my house?"

"Inside your house."

"I don't believe it."

"How many children have you got, Abu Khaled?"

"Plenty."

“What are they doing?”

“Khaled, God bless him, is working there, inside Israel. Fatmeh is a teacher. The children are at school.”

“What do they think?”

“They hate the Occupation, of course. Khaled says, ‘I had a fight today. Someone called me *Araveem Milokhlakheem*, ‘a dirty Arab.’ I was angry. I punched him, he punched me back. I fell to the ground. But tomorrow I’ll show him. I will show him.’ ”

Fatmeh says: “Israel occupies us, but America occupies the world.”

The children didn’t go to school today. Yesterday, when they went, they demonstrated and shouted, “Down with Occupation! Down with America! Down with Imperialism!” They shouted, “PLO, Israel No!” They threw stones at the soldiers; the soldiers beat them. They took many people off to jail. We had to pay fines. Two thousand liras, four thousand, ten thousand. Those bastards of ours do not think about us, brother, they demonstrate and we are the ones who have to pay. How much are we supposed to pay? We paid everything for all sorts of things—taxes, fines, devaluations, settlements, our sweat, our blood, our souls. They are not satisfied; they want more. Khaled says, “Tomorrow, I’ll show him. Yesterday, I fell to the ground; tomorrow, he will fall. I’ll show him.”

Fatmeh says: “You are getting old, Father. You don’t know anything.”

“Who knows then? You, the woman? The stupid little girl of yesterday?”

She laughs at me and says many things about freedom. Freedom of Palestine, freedom of nations, freedom of women.

What is this? Don’t you think that life is becoming too hard for us, brother? Even those silly creatures have tongues nowadays. They look, shamelessly, right into your eyes, and say, “You don’t know anything.” God save us, the world is passing through its last days. As if the Occupation weren’t enough. Even women have tongues these days. Wonderful! It’s better to die. Let’s go bury ourselves. But who will take care of the house then? Who will buy food, who will pay the thousands of liras to get the boy out of prison; who will break that little woman’s stubborn head and tell her to mind her own business and not talk about Occupation and freedom and nations? Who will break her head if I don’t?

And that boy, I’ll also break his head. For a stone he throws at a

soldier, I have to pay two thousand, four thousand, ten thousand. Where shall I get all that money? Is this what Israel wants? To make my life miserable and unbearable so that I leave here and go there? There, where? To Black September? To Talezzaatar? To America where I will die and no one would care? Where shall I go? I have no other place, I have no one. Nobody wants me, and I want nobody and nothing except to live in peace. But where is peace? Khaled fell to the ground again, and again says the same thing: "I'll show him." Fatmeh continues pouring philosophy over my white-haired head, and that little bastard continues to throw stones at the soldiers, shouting "PLO, Israel No!" How is the PLO my friend? How?

"Look around you, Abu Khaled, can't you see?"

"I see nothing except those taxes and those fines, and the new settlements all around."

"Listen to the radio, Abu Khaled."

"I don't believe it anymore. They are lies, they are all liars. I don't believe anyone. One is worse than the other. Damn them, as if we didn't have our fill of Occupation!"

"Listen to that song, Abu Khaled. 'I carried a gun so that the generations after us will hold a scythe.' "

"It's a lie! I carry no gun, and all that the boys carry are stones. It's becoming a game for those kids. They don't like to go to school; they have fun demonstrating, and we are the ones who pay for their fun. I'll break the boy's head, and Fatmeh's head also. She is responsible for that, she tells her students things about freedom, and the generation is spoiled. They are kids, they get easily aroused. They go and demonstrate and are taken to prison. Today, they took the boy. Tomorrow, they'll take Fatmeh. I told her that, and she laughed at me and said: 'You're getting old, father. You don't know anything.' "

Damn this life, even women have tongues these days. I hope she finds someone and gets married and gets off my back. But there are no men here, not enough for all the crowds of women. All that we have are men as old as I, and the children and workers who will not suit Fatmeh. She says she will not marry someone like Khaled. Why, my dear? What's wrong with Khaled? He is a man. Uneducated? So what, you stupid thing. Do you think because you are a teacher you are something more than a woman? He is a man, you are a woman, a mere woman. He doesn't have enough money? All right, I agree, a man should have enough money. Nothing makes a good man more than good money. But

who would care for you of those who have good money? You are not Asmahan, you are not the mayor's daughter.

She says something else about freedom, a new, classless freedom. What is this? To have all people on the same level? Who told you that? Even in the *Koran* it is said: "We raised some of you over others." That's classes. This is what the *Koran* says. She says, "I don't care for the *Koran*." What? What? Oh, I'll have a heart attack, she'll kill me. The Israelis are killing me. The Arabs are killing me. Everybody seems to have the desire to kill these days. I am lost. I am dead. But who will buy the food? Who will pay the taxes? Who will pray to God to forgive the blasphemy manifested by everybody? Let's go, brother. Let's go downtown, have a good waterpipe in the cafe, maybe we'll feel better and forget all about it.

"Ahlan Abu Gohammad, how are you today? Not fine? Why, what is the matter? Don't tell me! No, no! I don't believe it, your land? Your own land, where? Oh, God save us, they are getting nearer everyday. Today, it's your turn, tomorrow, it's mine. And Abu Gahmoud? What happened to him? Taken to jail? Why? What has he done? Fidaiyeen? Weapons? Oh no, it's a lie, a lie. He is a good man. He wouldn't kill an ant, ya, Sheikh. He is like me, a good-hearted, weak-hearted fellow. What is this? You can never find a moment of peace or rest, not at home, not in the cafe, not even in your bed. You spend the night thinking about the new tax, the new fine, the settlement. Khaled might succeed in knocking him down; they'll catch his soul. Fatmeh is still unmarried, no educated man to suit that philosopher. Educated men leave here and go there. Go to Kuwait, to Saudi Arabia, to America, to hell. This is what Israel wants. Those who do not go out on their own, she drives to the Bridge and tells them, 'Go to hell.' And they go to the oil countries or to America!"

Hell here, hell there, why move then? I don't want to move. This is my town, my land, my home, my bed. I am not leaving, Israel will not drive me to the Bridge. Why should she? I am a peaceful man who wants nothing except to live in peace. But they don't allow me to live in peace. They might take my land. Yesterday, they took Abu Gohammad's land, tomorrow, they'll take mine. Today, they took Abu Gohammad to jail, tomorrow, they'll take Khaled—and no fine on earth will ever get him out. I know what will happen to him. He'll rot there, like the thousands of others. They'll offer him a good twenty, fifty, ninety or 130 years. They do that often, very often. I'll try to convince him not to ck that damn Israeli down.

“But he hit me first, Father!”

“All right, all right, be a good-hearted man and forgive.”

“He called me *Araveem Gelokhlakheem*, Father. He said I should go back to the desert where I belong. He said we are dirty, we are liars, we are all thieves. He said we are nothing, we don’t exist. I’ll show him. Tomorrow, day after tomorrow, the day after, he’ll get it. He’ll realize then that I do exist.”

“You are stupid, Khaled. You can’t do that, let’s face it. You’re not as powerful as you think.”

“Thieves are not static, Father.”

“Oh, and who’s that?”

“Fatmeh, your daughter, Father. It’s your age, Father, you even forget your daughter.”

“What is that strange word you said, you stupid thing. What does it mean?”

“Static means that things remain the same. If you aren’t static, things change.”

“Is that what you teach your students?”

“This is what history teaches us, Father.”

“What is that? Damn this life! Even women, even women!”

“Due to change, Father.”

“Where is this change, you stupid thing? The Occupation is still the same. Palestinians are still the same. The United Nations is still the same. The freedoms you talk about are still the same. Nations, classes, women and everything else. There is no change! I do not see any.”

“It’s your age, Father, you need thicker glasses. It’s age. It’s your age.”

Tension. Conflicts and agitation and pain. It is painful. Being inside a pressure cooker is no joke. But, when the cooking is over, a dish will be offered. And it’ll be delicious, I assure you. This is not a commercial advertisement like you see on American TV. If you were younger, Abu Khaled, your sight would be sharper, you get what I mean? If not, I advise you, get thicker glasses.