



HAARETZ

Book Review

Between the Trauma of the Holocaust and the Trauma of Nakba

Elias Khoury's 'Children of the Ghetto' adds a new layer to the Israeli-Palestinian story

Avraham Burg, May 11, 2018

"Yeledi Hageto: Shmi Adam," by Elias Khoury; translated from Arabic into Hebrew by Yehouda Shenhav-Shahrabani; Maktoob, New World Press and the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, 2018. "Children of the Ghetto: My Name is Adam," translated from the Arabic by Humphrey Davies; Maclehose Press, forthcoming in October 2018.

It's very hard to review something so close to perfection. About all one can do after such an engrossing read is describe, quote, compare and reflect. Elias Khoury's remarkable literary skill and the brilliant Hebrew translation of Yehouda Shenhav-Sharabani (a work of art in itself) make "Children of the Ghetto: My Name is Adam" one of the most poignant and important novels of recent years. After it, no words are needed, if only because it is one of the most eloquent works ever written about silence. "Silence is the story of my life," writes Khoury. Silence is his tool of expression, as blindness is José Saramago's means of observation.

Khoury — one of the greatest writers of our times and perhaps the greatest Arabic-language writer of this generation, definite Nobel Prize material — is as intriguing and complex as the tragic and sensitive heroes of his books. Born into a well-off Christian Lebanese family in Beirut in 1948, his life is a constant journey between political activism and the higher realms of fiction and literary criticism. As the nationalist, pro-Palestinian fervor grew after 1967, he left behind Beirut's comforts and joined Fatah movement in Jordan. Expelled from there during Black September, he went to the Sorbonne in Paris to complete his doctorate. For years, he has been a prominent voice on Beirut's impressive intellectual scene. He joined forces with Mahmoud Darwish, and they and 12 other intellectuals signed a petition against a Holocaust-denial conference planned in Beirut in 2001. Khoury, the bourgeois Lebanese, became the great chronicler of the Palestinian Nakba, even more than Ghassan Kanafani and Emil Habibi. Until Khoury, the Nakba was silent. The generation of the Palestinian catastrophe wrapped itself in the sorrow and silence that always envelop trauma and its victims, just as with our first-generation survivors. Khoury lifted the lid to enable a literary, intergenerational discussion of all that happened then, and all the possibilities of the present.

His partnership with Darwish also gave him a deep understanding, from an unfamiliar angle, of the great poetry of the most important Palestinian poet and, through it, an understanding of the silent Palestinian generation — the 1948 generation that was defeated and turned inward. Darwish's

poetry must be read, Khoury writes, through his experience of being expelled from the village of Al-Birweh: "The critic must study the silence of Darwish's words, not their speech. ... not just the crime of the Palestinians uprooted from their land, because a bigger crime followed. ... not the silence that arose from trauma... [but] the silence imposed by the victor on the vanquished. ... This is where literature, which can give the victim a new language, comes in. It will be the language of silence that will take us with Darwish toward the wind." (Quotations were translated by Haaretz.) And it is with such enchanting and incisive literature that he speaks to us.

Mixed identity

The novel's plot is quite simple. Adam Danun is a man of multiple identities, a Palestinian-Israeli who emigrated to New York. From his falafel shop, he looks at the elements and experiences that have shaped him: the Israeliness and Hebrew he adopted after abandoning his mother, who might not be his birth mother; the Arabic into which he was born and, through it, at the Palestinian tragedy wrapped in its silences. He is at once refugee and writer, survivor and chronicler, historian and one who despairs; who loves and leaves; who is born into death and ends his own recorded life. Perhaps we and the Palestinians needed a third eye to give us a mixed identity, both ours and theirs.

In the hands of Khoury, "who transcended the clamor of words to discover the eloquence of silence," beauty and tragedy blend because "we Arabs describe beauty through silence." The newborn Adam is found sprawled across the dried-up breasts of his dead mother, left behind by the trail of refugees who abandoned their beloved city Lydda, today's Lod.

Somehow, the infant is brought back to the fenced compound built by the conquering Israel forces in the heart of Lod. He is raised by his mother — not his real mother — and there are various men who might be his father. The cleverest is a blind man who is intermittently part of Adam's life from his young childhood to his lonely end in a dreary New York apartment.

This novel is another layer in the Palestinian story as it hasn't been told to Israeli Jews since 1948. "Gate of the Sun" (published in Arabic in 1998, Hebrew in 2002 and English in 2012 (A Hebrew translation by Moshe Hacham was published by Andalus Press in 2002), was the first part. Now comes the painful focus of the follow-up: the Israeli war crimes obscured by propaganda about "the world's most moral army" and the righteousness of the "purity of arms" that is forever being defiled. S. Yizhar focused on the semifictional Khirbet Khizeh; Khoury goes straight to the bleeding wound. To Lod, to Operation Danny, to the war criminals who were considered heroes then and whose disgrace couldn't even be prettified by a whole team of Itamar Ben-Gvirs and Yoram Sheftels; crimes of the War of Independence, that ever since Natan Alterman's poem ("About This) have refused to disappear from public discussion, despite the mighty Zionist effort to suppress them. It's no wonder that Khoury insisted that "Children of the Ghetto" be translated first into Hebrew.

Khoury not only researched thoroughly everything that happened in Lod from the perspective of the vanquished Palestinians. He also has a deep understanding of Judaism (and its sanctification of Abraham who binds his son for sacrifice). He is well-acquainted with Israel's writers and major figures and the ideas that motivate it in regard to the conflict, and is right on target when he says that all we ever want is "to sear into the Palestinians' consciousness that longing and nostalgia for their land is worthless and liable to lead them, humiliated, unto death."

He is a master of Arabic literature from its earliest days through the computer keyboards of its modern critics. He is the Haim Be'er, the secure repository of the glorious heritage of Arabic literature. He truly understands and expresses what it means to be Palestinian, with an articulateness far more acute than that of the people's official representatives: "Israel has turned the lives of three generations of Palestinians into an ongoing Nakba. The Israelis bet on the Palestinians' forgetting and continued, with the stupidity of those who hold power, to inflict disasters upon the Palestinians daily ... and the generation that was supposed to forget experiences its own Nakba in the present."

Khoury has never been permitted to visit Israel, due to his being a citizen of an "enemy state." However, it's hard to shake the sense that he spent long days in the archives of the army and Yad Vashem, that he is personally acquainted with the commanders of Operation Danny; that he extensively studied the Holocaust; that he knows by heart the orders issued in 1948 and is wholly familiar with the main figures of the time.

He depicts the atmosphere and feelings of the time as if he were there himself, recording everything as it happened: the color of the flies that buzzed around the dead and the stench of the bloated corpses, the taste of the stagnant water, the taste of the oranges rotting in the fields and the smell of fear. As in some of his other books, Khoury gives himself the freedom to roam between his role as narrator and being part of the narrative. He controls his protagonists and they also control him. Sometimes when the tempest of the novel subsides a bit, his own autobiographical foundations are revealed: "I know the narrator of Bab al-Shams ("Gate of the Sun") personally."

His writing is always a masquerade. Nothing is as it seems. The Israeli is a Palestinian, the Palestinian a kind of Jew. Faces peek out, costumes of true and false identities interchange. It's "the third eye ... that sees ... the expression of the lack of clarity that exists in all the tales of the Nakba." And interwoven throughout is the Palestinian trauma, courageous self-criticism ("Lydda was certainly no paradise, and Palestine was no heaven. I despise nostalgia") as well as the Israeli tragedy, from the helplessness of the Holocaust to intoxication with weapons and power.

Khoury's physical location in Beirut is not a random matter. Only from there, apparently, can he publish his weekly critical essays in Al Quds Al-Arabi, which spare nothing and no one. He writes whatever is on his mind, without little restraint He criticizes Arab, Lebanese and Palestinian society with the same vigor that he applies to writing about us Israelis.

This is not a binary, black-and-white novel. "Children of the Ghetto," like "Gate of the Sun," has much acceptance, almost tolerance, for the "new Jew," the Israeli and his history: "I am not interested in revealing the crimes of the Israeli forces. ... My story is not an attempt to prove anything. ... I don't hate the Jews. They will die too, and when they die they will be dead like us and cease being Jews. We will cease being us and they will cease being them. So why all the killing? By God, I don't understand. I don't hate anyone. But why?"

His basic stance is very humanistic: The other is also me, I am someone else's other. And therefore I – the narrator and chronicler – am constantly committed to sensitivity, honesty and emotional precision. He does not present just ordinary people who suffer and love. And all comes swathed in epic writing that reaches back into the depths of Arabic literature and stretches to the present.

It seems, from the perspective of Khoury/Adam, that the Israeli and Palestinian fates are so intertwined as to comprise a single split personality. But the two parts of the personality are unequal.

One is strong and aggressive, the other submissive and still defeated. And so, Khoury arms the Palestinian victim with the doomsday weapon of the narrative's polemic: Jewish destiny and mute, nonviolent protest, which served the Jews so well for millennia. This move is stunningly wise and wily.

The title is a deliberate bit of plagiarism: In 1882, Herzl's London friend Israel Zangwill published a book called "Children of the Ghetto" about a Jew from the ghetto who is torn between his traditional identity and the powerful temptations of the world outside. Zangwill is credited with the notion of Zionism as a people without a land coming to a land without a people. To which Khoury effectively replies: You may have been a people without a land, but we are the people of this land, and now because of you we became a people without a land. The Palestinians became the Jews' Jews."

But Khoury does not end with Zangwill, who died long before the Nazis came to power. He knows that in Israeli parlance, "ghetto" is practically synonymous with Warsaw. And he directs the discussion there as well: "I didn't conceal my Palestinian identity, but I hid it in the Palestinian ghetto [Lod] in which I was born. I was a son of the ghetto and it bestowed upon me the immunity of the Warsaw Ghetto." As Khoury sees it, the Holocaust and the Nakba were born entwined, and thus no one has a monopoly on ghetto psychology.

The heart of the book is the memory of life in the Lod "ghetto." The new refugees think the word must mean "Palestinian neighborhood" or "Arab neighborhood" in the Hebrew language of the occupation. They're unaware that history is having a cynical laugh on the side, knowing that Holocaust-survivor soldiers brought this terminology with them: "They think they're in Europe. They came here and brought with them the ghetto so as to imprison us within it ... in a cage in which the Palestinians will get used to their new lives." At the time of the war, neither side realized the role-switch by which the Palestinians became the new Jews.

I feel that this is Khoury's existential argument: The death marches went from Auschwitz to Birkenau and from Lod to the West Bank. The dead didn't really care why they died. Their suffering was similar. Therefore we should talk about what we have in common rather than competing over who suffered more. Traumas of the past are the starting point for the hopes of the future. And so this sad book is also incredibly optimistic.

The book was published thanks to the wonderful Arabic-to-Hebrew translation project Maktoob, which offers us a interpretive translation in keeping with the finest wisdom of the Jewish Sages: "One who translates a verse according to its form is a liar" (Kiddushin 49a). This project is not only about translating literature, but about mediating a new language of dialogue, one that was offered to us the first time by Anwar Sadat but we didn't understand what he was saying to us, and the second time in Oslo, which we rejected on the Temple Mount with Ariel Sharon and Ehud Barak. Now is the time for the deep language, the language of observation and literature. The language that the translator, Shenhav-Sharabani, taught himself as an adult, providing a space for an Arabic (not of the checkpoints and the Shin Bet) within separatist Hebrew. He and his cohort deserve much praise. And may peace be their reward.