

EXTRACANONICAL POETRY

My Happiness Bears No Relation to Happiness: A Poet's Life in the Palestinian Century, by Adina Hoffman. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2009. vii + 405 pages. List of Illustrations to p. 409. Notes to p. 442. Acknowledgments to p. 445. Index to p. 447. \$27.50 cloth; \$20.00 paper.

Reviewed by Khaled Furani

In telling the story of Taha Muhammad Ali, Adina Hoffman captures with remarkable sensitivity the sadness, hilarity, mysteries, absurdities, and absences that have made up the life of an extracanoncal Palestinian poet, whose reputation in English surpasses his reputation in the Arab world. Born in 1931, Taha, as Hoffman refers to him, hails from the vanquished village of Saffuriyya and for decades sold trinkets to Christian pilgrims, only a few kilometers from his obliterated birthplace, in Nazareth, where he and his family made their home after a brief refuge in Lebanon.

Hoffman's profound identification with Taha reaches to the book's bones. The

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structure of her narrative echoes Taha's strong sense of place, as each main section is named for a place where Taha has lived (Saffuriyya I and II, Lebanon, Reina, and Nazareth I and II). Grounded in each location, Hoffman adroitly braids the personal with the public and sweetness with suffering as Taha and his family have encountered them.

The book's itinerary further reflects Taha's poetic evolution, which might be considered that of a "late bloomer"; he was over fifty when he published his first *diwan*. Only in the final quarter of the book is the reader treated to Taha's actual poetry and his relation to the poetic scene. Here, specimens of Taha's unrhymed and unmetered works are quite ably translated by Hoffman's husband, Peter Cole, and two other friends, Gabriel Levin and Yahya Hijazi, an Israeli and a Palestinian respectively who previously published Taha's works in a translated anthology, *So What: New & Selected Poems, 1971-2005* (Copper Canyon Press, 2006).

Hoffman's knack for details is astonishing. Her verbal rendition, enhanced by several photographs of peasant Saffuriyya, evokes the perilously seductive idea expressed in one of Mahmud Darwish's titles, "Unfortunately, It Was Paradise." With her dexterous use of an impressively large collection of archival and oral sources, Hoffman gives life to an otherwise desiccated recitation of dates and statistics within a lush and precious narrative—precious because it preserves, within a "strong language" (English), intimate details of a Palestinian peasant and poetic life steeped in orality that might otherwise be lost, especially at a time when the very recollection of the Nakba is under assault by the Israeli legislature.

As it traverses varied terrains of peasant life, Palestinian nationalism, Zionism, Arabic literary modernity, tacit aesthetic theories, religion, and, of course, politics, this powerful and important narrative does leave one with difficult, and even tragic, questions. Hoffman, an American-born Jew living in Jerusalem, represents Taha's life, but, as a Jew, also attempts to reconcile her life with his. With a residual Zionism (she comments on the "sad" state of Israel's State Archives, but she does not say why and for whom it is "sad"), she occasionally brings in the sincere voices of conscientious Jews who bore witness to

the suffering of Palestinians or who cared for their dignity (Hoffman mentions Rabbi Yehouda Magnes' views of Count Bernadotte and Lieutenant Colonel Dov Yirmiyah's eventual resentment of the Israeli flag). One more manifestation of the Jewish predicament is the possibility, hovering at the end of the book, that Hoffman's identification with Taha is precipitated by her seeing something of her own personal paradigm of the Jew (or desired Palestinian) in him—he who avenges by simply ignoring the enemy, who finds life and people sacred, not land, let alone the notion of dying for it. So to what extent, one must ask, does Hoffman's desire for reconciliation undermine or enhance the force of her narrative?

A second question has to do with Hoffman's notion of "the political." Although Hoffman is explicit about the political import of her endeavor (contrasting divisive politics with the openness of humanism), the political seems to always be an externality, an encroachment if not a menace to "art," which she curiously defines as "the less absolute" realm of the two (p. 7). Hoffman, who has described the African-American poet Amiri Baraka as a "rant-prone" poet delivering "unhinged absurdities" at the Dodge Poetry Festival in New Jersey, is consistent in her politics since she identifies more easily with Taha's politically "indirect" work than with the more politically "direct" poems of Tawfiq Zayyad, Rashid Hussein, or practically any of the more recognizable figures of Palestinian poetry. Time and again, seemingly driven by her liberal and secular sensibilities, Hoffman characterizes the local Palestinian audiences that come to hear these poets as conservative, but does not explain how these audiences might react to Taha, if at all. Rather, Hoffman implicitly contrasts these reactions to those of fellow poets and literary critics, mostly abroad, who favorably receive Taha's work.

Finally, this book is silent on its own entrapment: in promoting the cause of prose in verse and the usual politics that comes with it, both Taha and Hoffman are continuing Kant's assault on the ear, launched at the opening of the modern era. And so, while disclosing Taha's poetry to the world, Hoffman participates (as Taha did before her) in essentially concealing the rich oral-musical tradition and its potentialities on which Taha (largely) turned his

back when he forsook acoustic measurement in verse only to supplant it with occasional resort to demotic local Arabic. Thus, Hoffman's work is a unique addition to the chronicles of Palestinian ironies in the modern era. For, although it is the first biography of a Palestinian poet to appear in English (it is worth noting here that Hanna Abu Hanna wrote an autobiography in Arabic), it is of a Palestinian poet who has been fascinated by the written. By brilliantly taking his Saffuriyya identity way beyond the immediate sense of Palestine, Taha is, in Hoffman's apt and poignant description, "nobody's national poet" (p. 4). Is that perhaps the final saddest irony, that the Palestinian poet must comply with the dictates of literacy and humanism in order to become a biographic subject in the West?