

Souls in the Face of Death : A stylistic Reading Of Fadwa Tuqan's Selected poems

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Abstract

This research paper endeavours to study stylistically Fadwa Tuqan's selected poems. The aim is to achieve an indepth understanding of her poetic craft and uncover her artistic strategies in mirroring her nation's concerns. Two approaches are followed : One is the qualitative method, which is the initial phase of the research which entails our collection of pertinent information about Tuqan's biography, significant previous studies on her poetry and the historical background. The second is the stylistic descriptive approach which entails the application of the literary stylistic approach in the analysis and description of the selected poems, namely, Labor Pain, The Deluge and the Tree, The Sacrificial and the Land and finally Face Lost in the Wilderness. The findings show that her style is modernist, simple, accessible but evocative. She adopts the free verse form lately. Through her vivid imagery, symbolism and metaphor, she mixes between tenderness, pain, resistance and hope. She presents the voice that refuses to die

Keywords: Fadwa Tuqan; poems; stylistic analysis.

Introduction:

Palestinian poetry is a poetry of a land that bleeds and people who refuse to surrender to death. Loss and pain gives rise to many distinguished voices which incarnate the Palestinian dream for liberty and peace. Names as Mahmoud Darwish, Samih al Qasim, Tawfiq Zayyad, abdel Rahim Mahmoud, Fadwa Tuqan among others leave their impact on poetry at both national and international scale and thus, reaching out the Palestinian cause worldwide. The 'mother of Palestinian poetry' Fadwa Tuqan has written eight major poetry collections between 1952 and 2000. To cite some of them : *My Brother Ibrahim* (1946) ; *Alone with the Days* (1952) ; *I Found It* (1958) ; *Danos Love* (1960) ; *Before the Closed Door* (1967) ; *The Night and the Riders* (1969). A remarkable

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shift in her themes is noted from personal and romantic poetry to a portrayal of struggles for life under Israeli occupation. In this research, four poems by Tuqan are selected for a stylistic investigation, namely, *Labor Pain*, *The Deluge and the Tree*, *The Sacrificial and the Land* and finally *Face Lost in the Wilderness*

Through this stylistic analysis, we aim to provide an objective framework to connect Tuqan's linguistic form with its thematic meaning. That is we move beyond subjective interpretation to highlight how her linguistic choices contribute to the overall meaning and aesthetic effect.

1.A Short Biography of Fadwa Tuqan (1917–2003)

Fadwa Tuqan, often called the “Poet of Palestine,” was one of the most influential Palestinian poets of the 20th century. Born in Nablus, she overcame social restrictions on women's education With the help and encouragement of her brother, the poet Ibrahim Tuqan. Her early works highlighted her personal sorrow and the struggles of women in general, but after the 1948 Nakba and the 1967 occupation, her poetry became a powerful voice of resistance, exile, occupation, expressing the pain and resilience of the Palestinian people.

Tuqan was a prolific poet who left behind a large body of work. We can state some of her collections with strong themes of pain and resistance as : *The Night and the Horsemen* (1969), it contains a poem with the same name. It captures the collective pain of Palestinians after the occupation and their determination to endure ; *Alone With the Days* (1952), an early collection, still shaped by personal sorrow ; *Mountainous Journey* (1985), it combines autobiography and poetry of resilience ; and *River of Fire* (1993) which mirrors the ongoing struggle of Palestinians and the cost of occupation.

Translated into many languages, her work gained international recognition. Fadwa Tuqan's legacy endures as a symbol of strength, resistance, and the unyielding spirit of Palestine.

2.Literature Review

The aim of this brief literature review is to demonstrate the high position Tuqan holds among scholars, and how her poetry is vital for integrating feminist perspectives against patriarchal constraints, displacement, and loss.

The long research paper *The Aesthetics of Repetition in Fadwa Tuqan's The Last Melody* (2018), prepared by Nour El Ibrahim and Mohamed Douabcha is a significant stylistic study. By depicting the different levels of repetition in the poem, i.e, at letter level, word level and expression, the researchers are able to demonstrate its function in the poem. They come up with many conclusions including : The repetition highlights the poet's vision as well as her artistic capability ; Repetition reflects the poet's psychological interest in a particular fact ; repetition attempts to attract the attention of the reader to a particular fact ; and finally, the strong presence of repetition at both semantic and rhythmic levels.

Raghad Shakir Deair (2022) demonstrates in her research paper how Fadwa Tuqan's poetry is a mirror of the historical struggle against Zionism in Fadwa Tuqan's anti-war poetry: a cry against Zionism. The researcher goes through two important events that shaped the crisis between Palestine and Israel and led to the displacement of thousands of Palestinians living in refugee camps. They constitute the Palestinian diaspora. Nevertheless, the Palestinians demonstrated a strong sense of identity and culture abroad. The Arab-Israeli conflict led to the emergence of the 'Palestinian Resistance Poetry'.

After the June war of 1967, Tuqan composed many poems, including : *'The Night and the Knights'* ; *'Words from the West Banks'* ; *'My Sad City'* which describes the day of the occupation of the Zionists, and how the city turned into ruin ; in *'The Plague'*, Tuqan features the Zionist occupation as « the plague that spread in my city » ; *'Hamza'* ; *'To my Strange Friend'*, referring to the Israeli occupation as 'the strange friend'. (Deair, 2022).

In addition, Tuqan expresses, in her poems, senses of terror, death, despair, resistance to destruction, resurrection from injuries. Her poems were as a means for surviving death. (ibid).

In his article *The Aspects of Poetry in the Poems of Fadwa Tuqan* (2024), Al Sarraj explores the historical and personal struggles that shaped Tuqan's poetic experience. The writer displays important facts in her childhood which was filled with loneliness, deprivation from education, and social restriction. Her sense of loneliness and isolation were intensified by the death of her brother and mother. Her brother Ibrahim played a significant role in her literary development. In this regard, themes of loss, loneliness were prevalent in her poetry. Tuqan used her poetry also to call for women's liberation, self-expression and participation in political affairs.

Tuqan's life was also filled with national pains and sorrows after the catastrophe of 1948 which was referred to as Nakba and the displacement of the Palestinians. In the light of this, the direction of her poetry turned towards themes such as suffering, struggles to instill courage and perseverance in the Palestinians to fight for their land and preserve their identity. (ibid).

The contribution of literature in creating narratives of resistance and social mobilization in the context of political conflict is the main objective of a research paper by Fitri Liza, titled : *Literary Works as a Medium of Advocacy for Peace and Social Justice in Palestine : A Philosophical Value Study of Fadwa Tuqan's Poem*.

Fitri analyzes two of Tuqan's poems, namely, '*Hurriyyah al-Sha'b*' and '*Madinati al Hazina*'. She follows an interdisciplinary approach in which she applies three theories : John Rawl's theory of justice ; Benedict Anderson's nationalism ; and Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis. She find's out that Tuqan's two poems are not only artistic productions, but also « manifestations of collective resilience that strengthen national identity and the spirit of resistance to oppression ». Ultimately, she comes up with the conclusion of the importance of literature in constructing strong narratives of resilience and « mobilization of social solidarity in the context of political conflicts.

Ultimately, the literature about Tuqan is enormous and impossible to cover. In this context, through this reasearch paper, we would like to add

into the reading of Tuqan, adding a stylistic perspective hoping it might highlight her art as a pionner of modern Arabic literature.

3.A Stylistic Reading of Tuqan's Selected Poems

3.1.The Historical Background

Palestine, located in the Eastern Mediterranean and part of the Levant, has long been a crossroads of civilizations. Before 1948, it was home to Arabs, Jews, and Christians, with Jerusalem holding special religious significance. Over history, it was ruled by many empires, including the Assyrians, Romans, Byzantines, Islamic Caliphates, and the Ottomans.(<https://www.pcrf.net/information-you-should-know/what-was-palestine-before-1948.html>, 2025)

After World War I, Britain was given a mandate to govern Palestine, promising a Jewish national home while protecting Arab rights. Rising tensions between Arabs and Jews led to violence, and repeated proposals for separate states failed due to opposition from both sides.

In 1947, the United Nations suggested dividing Palestine into independent Jewish and Arab states, while placing Jerusalem under international control. The Jewish population generally accepted the plan, but the Arabs opposed it, sparking a civil war. On May 14, 1948, Israel declared its independence, bringing an end to British rule. This declaration led to the first Arab-Israeli War, during which neighboring Arab nations became involved, and hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were displaced. (ibid)

In 1967, the Six-Day War erupted between Israel and several Arab nations, including Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. The war significantly altered the situation in Palestine, as Israel took control of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip. From then on, Gaza and the West Bank were under Israeli occupation, worsening humanitarian conditions in those regions. The aftermath of the war also fueled the growth of Palestinian nationalism, as Palestinians pursued statehood and the recovery of their lands. (ibid).

3.2. A stylistic Analysis of Tuqan's Poems

3.2.1.Labor Pain (1952)

Labor pain was first published in 1952 within the collection of poems « *Alone with the Days* ».

In the face of the repression policy Israel occupation towards the Palestinian people, giving birth to children is in itself a powerful mode of resistance against the attacks of the intruders.

In the light of this, Fadwa Tuqan portrays labor pain as an important event in her poem 'Labor Pain'. In spite of the ruins and death everywhere, life persists to come through child labor :

'through the ruins of fields and homes

Earth shivers with love,

with the pain of giving birth'.

Nevertheless, with a straightforward style and clear language, Fadwa is convinced that hope is still there for a new life through child labor. Using metaphor, she conveys the idea that though the Palestinian land is filled with blood, life will blossom within it :

'where the rose of blood

Blooms on the wound'

'The rose of blood' is a metaphor of the land of Palestine, and *'the wound'* is a metaphor of death and repression.

3.2.2.The Sacrificial and the Land (1985)

'The Sacrificial and the Land' is a kind of narrative poem presented through multiple narrative voices, namely, the first person narrator, the third person omniscient narrator, and the free direct speech which records, from time to time, a conversation between a mother and her son who goes to fight for the freedom of his land. And of course the son never comes back.

Narrative poetry is a form of verse that tells a complete story, incorporating familiar literary elements such as plot, characters, setting, conflict, and a clear beginning, middle, and end. It may also include poetic devices like rhythm, rhyme, and imagery, though the presence of all these features can vary.

The most apparent stylistic feature, in this poem, is the use of the free direct speech wherein the speaker is easy to identify.

Using the free direct speech enables the poet Tuqan to shift the perspective of the narrative and give voice to the characters to speak for themselves. The free direct speech has the function to make the reader focus on the speech and its significance more than its structure, implying in this way, the importance of the speaker's words.

At the beginning of the poem, the narrator through the first person narrator, expresses his/her helplessness to save his/her country with words :

*'Shall I protect my family with the word ?
Shall I save my country with the word ?
All word today
A salt that neither pleases nor blooms '*

Then, a change in point of view interferes, i.e, it is the third person omniscient narrator, through which the poet moves to describe Mazen who in a moment of awakening resolves to go to fight for the freedom of his land :

*'In the dazzle of astonishment and loss
A divine lamp lit the recesses of his heart'*
'lamp' is a metaphor of enlightenment that is featured by its divinity to Mazen takes. suggest the righteous decision

Through the free direct speech, Mazen addresses his mother informing her about his determination to go to war along with his companions. Mazen is ready to give everything for the freedom of his land, he says to his mother :

*'And all that I have, all all my heartbeat
And love, selflessness, and worship
I give it to her, to the earth
As a dowry For nothing is more precious than you,
Mother, But the earth '*

The son knows the difficulty of his road, and he is ready for that :

*'For our path is ardeous
And before the arrival time you throw yourself into the distane*

*The hellish shores of the night
We cross them on torches of blood..'*

After that the first person narrator returns back, as if a witness of the scene. It interferes to continue the narration to speak again of Mazen and portraying him as a hero :

*'And I sought refuge for him in the name of God and the Quran
Mazen, the young prince, was the master of nights
He was her glory and pride and he was
Her great giving to the homeland'*

Then the the narrator's voice moves back to the third person narrator to focus on the mother this time :

*' In the tent of night
And in the vastness of the open air
She stood up to pray
And raised to the sky her face
And the sky was
Full with stars and mysteries '*

In the subsequent stanza, the third person narrator takes us to the past, through a flashback technique, the time when the mother gave birth to her son which made her discover the meaning of her existence. Then, the poet gives her voice through the free direct speech, to speak directly her opinion and encourage her son in his demeanour :

*' Hey my son
Hey my liver
For this day
For it I gave birth to you
.....
Go, for nothing is dearer than you my son,
but the earth '.*

In the sixth stanza, the third person narrator returns back again. It speaks about a city called Tubas and its people :

*'Tubas beyond the hills
Ears straining at words
And eyes from which sleep has fled'*

In this stanza, the poet draws an image that conveys unrest and fear in the people of the city through metonymy.

Metonymy is a literary device and figure of speech where a word or phrase is replaced with another that is closely associated with it, rather than its literal name. This association can be through symbolism, part of a whole, ... For instance, "the crown" refers to the monarchy, "Hollywood" refers to the film industry, and "ears" stand in for "attention". Metonymy serves as a linguistic shortcut to convey ideas, create vivid imagery, and add layers of meaning in a concise way.

In this regard, the use of the words 'ears' and 'eyes' in the poem refer to people being in a state of emergency.

Finally, the third person omniscient narrator continues with the seventh and last stanza. It announces the death of Mazen :

*'And the falling star burned and passed
Across the hills
Planting living radiance on
The hills'.*

Through euphemism 'the falling star', the poet conveys the death of the hero Mazen. Euphemism is a mild or indirect word or expression substituted for one considered too harsh or blunt when referring to something unpleasant or embarrassing.

Ultimately, in spite of the passing away of the hero, hope does not leave the souls of the inhabitants of the land who are never defeated by death :

*'In a land that death will never overcome !
Never death will overcome'*

3.2.3. The Deluge and the Tree (1988)

'*The Deluge and the Tree*' was published within Tuqan's collection titled : « *Daily Nightmares : Ten Poems* ». English translation done by Naomi Shihab.

'*The Deluge and the Tree*' is also a kind of narrative poem presented in the third person omniscient narrator. This poem represents a strong image of resistance. It is made up of three stanzas. In the first stanza, the narrator speaks about the destructive Jewish settlement and how Western countries reacted to it at that time : '*When the hurricane swirled and spread its deluge of dark evil*', this line contains a lexical cohesion that suggests destruction and evil : '*hurricane, deluge, dark evil*'. Situating the poem in its wider extrinsic context, we can interpret the '*hurricane*' as metaphor suggesting the Jewish settlement ; and '*the deluge*' suggests killing and death. This will be confirmed in the third stanza. So, with the Jewish settlement, Westerners thought that Palestine is defeated :
'*The Tree has fallen !*
'*The great trunk is smashed !*
'*The hurricane leaves no life in the Tree*'

Michael Toolan states that when a writer uses the direct speech of the character, he aims to show the importance of his speech. Thus, related to Toolan's theory, the narrator has recorded the speech of the Westerners directly to suggest their conviction of what they said and its atrocity.

In addition, the narrative voice speaks about the Jewish settlement in the first stanza using the past tense. The past tense is usually used to suggest a past action that ended. In this regard, the poet is suggesting that the Jewish settlement would end sooner or later. However, the idea of the first stanza is juxtaposed in the two subsequent stanzas.

Starting with a free direct speech which we readers don't know who is its speaker : whether it is the voice of the omniscient narrator, or a

character from Palestinian people. It is direct because there is the quotation mark in addition to the structure of the interrogative statement : ‘*Had the Tree really fallen ?*’. The answer to this question comes quickly after it in the second line, conveying refusal to surrender, with ‘*red streams*’ a metaphor which refers to the blood of the martyrs as a cost for liberation.

‘Never ! Not with our red streams flowing forever

*.....
fed the thirsty roots,
Arab roots,
tunneling deep, deep, into the land !’*

Resistance and hope become strongly expressed in the last stanza. It a matter of fact, being watered with blood the Tree will evidently rise up, and life returns :

*‘When the Tree rises up, the branches
shall flourish green and fresh in the sun
the laughter of the Tree shall leaf
beneath the sun
and birds shall return,...’*

Through the lexical cohesion : ‘Tree, green, fresh, sun, laughter of the Tree, birds’, we see that tone changes into a lighter and hopeful one. The poet draws an image of life contrary to that dark image stated in the first stanza.

Presenting the narrative voice in the present simple tense while referring to Tree has the purpose to convey the idea that the Tree will blossom sooner or later and forever.

3.2.3.1.The Symbol of the Tree

Throughout the poem, the poet writes the word Tree with a capital letter. This word is the theme of the whole poem, and repeated all over the three stanzas. Thus, the Tree is the symbol of the land of Palestine.

3.2.4.Face Lost in the Wilderness (1995)

'*Face Lost in the Wilderness*' is a narrative poem presented in the first person omniscient narrator. The narrator is a character within the story.

'*Face Lost in the Wilderness*' is a bleak poem full of gloomy images that picture the impact of the Jewish settlement on the narrator. The moments wherein the narrator shifts to free direct or indirect speeches are intense, opening the reader to the wounds and hurt inside her with her bewilderment and despair. Moreover, through imagery and metaphor, the narrator expresses her burning agony :

*'Between my heart and the luxury of passion
stretches a desert where ropes of fire
blaze and smolder, where snakes
coil and recoil, swallowing blossoms
with poison and flame'*

Thus, passion is represented as being 'luxurious', a thing not easily afforded because there is a dangerous desert that separates her from it. This desert is filled with ropes of fire and poisonous snakes.

In the second stanza, the poet shifts the narrative voice to the free direct speech, wherein we know the speaker. It is the voice of this first person narrator speaking directly to her lover :

*'No ! Don't ask me to remember. Love's memory
is dark, the dream clouded
love is a lost phantom'*

Having her country being occupied and destroyed by the Jewish settlers, the narrator is no longer interested in love, she says : '*love is a lost phantom*', because she is more concerned with her devastated country :

*'In the mirror of my heart you can find no shelter,
Only my country's disfigured face,'*

The third stanza is the longest one. The free direct and indirect speeches are strongly present. In this stanza, the narrator explains to her lover, through imagery, why she no longer thinks of love :

*'Our love was young. Did it grow in this horror ?
In the night of defeat, black waters
Covered my land, blood on the walls
Was the only bouquet.'*

Connected to this image of death everywhere, the narrator, through flashback returns to speak about life in the past, expressing her nostalgia, as a way of short relief :

*' My people used to plant fields and love life
Joyfully they dipped their bread in oil
Fruits and flowers tinted the land
with magnificent hues'*
Desparation prevails the poem, and is emphasized with the verbs : *'I hallucinated'* and *' I raved'*, and more importantly, through the free direct speech :
*' will the seasons ever again
give their gifts to my people ?'*

However the answer is sad :

*'Sorrow-Jerusalem's night is silence and smoke.
They imposed a curfew ; now nothing beats in the
heart of the City but their bloodied heels
under which Jerusalem trembles
like a raped girl'.*

In the fifth stanza, there is indication of time passing. Twenty months have passed since the land was defeated :

*' twenty moons have passed,
twenty moons and my life continues,*

*your absence too continues. Only one memory remaining :
The face of my stricken country filling my heart'.*

The last stanza, starts with a monotonous tone. It is a monotony within a desperate situation caused by displacement and killing :

*' And my life continues-
the wind merges me with my people
on the terrible road of rocks and thorns. '*

We read an other imagery in the narrator's road of displacement with her people :

*'A rush and din, flame and sparks
lighting the road-
one group after another
falls embracing, in one lofty death. '*

These lines portray the dangerous road of displacement, filled with killing and death. In this regard, the theme of death is also reinforced through the different words scattered throughout the poem :
'snakes, poison, slain, horror, defeat, beast, hell, bloodied, trembles, raped, darkness, dragon, stricken, terrible, thorns, spears, roaring, mystery, death'.

Furthermore, the reiteration of the stylistic feature 'night' is also apparent in the poem ; for example :

1. *'Friend, the **night** has slain the moon'* (fifth line of the second stanza)
2. *'In the **night** of defeat, black waters,...'* (third line of the third stanza).
3. *' Sorrow-Jerusalem's **night** is silence and smoke'* (26th line of the third stanza).

The repetition of the word 'night' reinforces the bleak tone of the poet. However, with all the preceding sad scenes, the reader is relieved by the last four lines of the last stanza :

*'The night, no matter how long, will continue
to give birth to star after star
and my life continues,
my life continues'*

The spirit of resistance lies in the words ' *to give birth to star after star*', suggesting that the land of Palestine will continue to give birth to heroes.

Conclusion

This research paper is an exploration into the artistic potential of the mother of the Palestinian poetry Fadwa Tuqan. Through the stylistic analysis of her selected poems : *Labor Pain, The Deluge and the Tree, The Sacrificial and the Land* and finally *Face Lost in the Wilderness*, Tuqan displays a strong sense with the language wherein she experiments with the free direct and indirect speech, in addition to her artistic manipulation of point of view and natural and symbolic imagery. Her style carries both tenderness and defiance.

Fadwa Tuqan's poetry is lyrical, clear, and deeply emotional. It fuses personal experience with collective struggle. Her poetry demonstrates a shift in form, like many modern Arab poets, moving from rigid classical forms toward free verse, allowing greater flexibility in expressing fragmented realities of exile and struggle.

Her nation's concerns shape her poetic experience thematically and stylistically. She uses her poetry as a narrative of a nation suffering from Israely occupation. Her poems are a call for resistance and perseverance in the face of the machine of death that kills Palestinians everyday.

Her poetry makes her one of the central voices of modern Arabic poetry, especially in the context of Palestinian identity and resistance.

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