



Ramleh, pre – 1948 Palestine

(The Arabic for *nation*, *umma*, is a direct derivative from *um*, which means mother.)

At another point he writes, «Political and cultural independence is incompatible with economic dependence.» He then expounds his attitude both to the past and to the West, as the major influences on the Arab society at present, as follows:

If we are to cast one look at the past, then we have to cast two at the future; for we know perfectly well that time will not wait for us till we begin where our predecessors ended, or where developed nations began. We have to begin where these have so far reached, and thus make full use of the latest achievements of civilization. We have to take from the West whatever can stimulate our talents and breathe new life into our tradition.

Al Husseini concludes his book with the following remark: «History has not ended. It is going on, and it will keep going on so long as there is life on the face of the earth.»

The Short Story

This period witnessed the rapid development of the short story. Many of the «symptoms» of immaturity that characterized the short story in the previous periods, now disappear. Most important of all, short story writers seem to have learnt to be more subtle and less didactic, to pay more attention to the form and the narrative technique, and to achieve a formula whereby the content is well integrated into the structure of the work.

The short story writers of this period include: Khalil Beidas, Mahmud Seifeddin Al Irani, Najati Sidki, Isaac Al Husseini, Abdul Hamid Yassin, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra and Jamal Al Husseini. This period also witnessed the appearance of two women writers, Najwa Ka'war and Asma Tube. But Najati Sidki's *The Sad Sisters* is perhaps the best collection of short stories in the whole canon of pre-*nakbah* Palestinian literature.

The collection consists of eighteen short stories, five of which belong to the period we are dealing with. They are: «The Living Corpse», «The Sad Sisters», «Days in a Lifetime» and «Simon Bouzaglou.» Giving its title to the whole collection, «The Sad Sisters» is the most representative work not only of the author, but of that particularly sad chapter in the history of Palestine. It was written in Jaffa in 1947, when the Zionists had already seized a considerable portion of the city and a number of its suburbs, notably Tel Aviv. In a symbolic manner, it tells the story of the city and, by implication, the whole of Palestine.

At the literal level, it is the story of five sycamores that used to stand in a row opposite an old Arab estate, maybe a house,

school or mosque, located among Arab plantations in a Jaffa suburb, where Tel Aviv now stands. One morning, the five trees find themselves in a totally different, distressing world, with the old estate and plantations simply gone! Instead, they find themselves surrounded by high buildings inhabited by strangers (i.e., Jewish immigrants) and their cafes and clubs. The trees are sickened to find themselves, overnight, strangers in their own, age-old world, with the true strangers having, overnight, made themselves perfectly at home. Besides this heart – breaking irony, the trees that used to feel that they were an integral and, therefore, very significant part of their world, are now reduced to green *things* decorating a Tel Aviv sidewalk.

The narrator, a displaced Palestinian who shares the fate of the trees, sits beneath one of them, resting his head against its trunk. He falls asleep and, in a wonderful dream, sees the trees transformed into five sisters dressed in black, sitting in a circle, wailing. When they have cried their throats and eyes out, they decide to spend the night sharing memories with each other. They take turns according to age, and the eldest one tells of her infinitely happy past with her husband and children. So do the second and the third. With the story of the fourth, misery begins. She tells of the *thuwwar* (i.e., revolutionaries) who were hanged on the sycamore standing by her house, henceforth called the Martyrs' Sycamore. They, then, wait for the youngest, born in 1917 (when the Balfour Declaration was signed), to start her story. She hesitates for some time and then, pressed by their curiosity, she finally asks them, «Do you really not know my story? Don't you know why we are dressed in black, and why we are called the Sad Sisters?»

«Enough, enough!» they retort, weeping, «Don't tell us anything. The morning has overtaken us.» The story ends with the narrator saying, «As I woke I found myself lying beneath the five sycamores. An autumn wind was blowing savagely, blasting everything – man and bird and beast. Only these trees were not shaken. They stood as firm as a mountain.» It is interesting to note that the narrator's optimism was not ill-founded; for what are the *fedayeen* of the Palestinian revolution, and the *shebab* of the intifada, but the offspring of those sad, steadfast sycamores?

As was remarked at the outset of this series, pre-*nakbah* Palestinian literature has not received sufficient research. The reason for this lies, partly at least, in the fact that a considerable part of this literature was physically destroyed during the barbaric assaults launched by Zionist terrorist organizations in 1947–48 against the peaceful civilian population of Palestinian towns and villages. The libraries thereby destroyed (especially those owned by Jerusalem, Haifa and Jaffa intellectuals) are said to have been the richest ones in the Arab world. Moreover, pre-*nakbah* writers are now either dead, or dispersed in all corners of the earth, which makes it all the more difficult for the would-be researcher of that phase of Palestinian literature to obtain the necessary data. Other reasons relate to existing trends in literature research in this part of the world. Students of Palestinian literature usually find it safer and more rewarding, academically speaking, to address post-*nakbah* literature, where no such difficulties exist.

Finally, mention must be made of two pioneering works on pre-*nakbah* Palestinian literature, namely, *The Life of Modern Palestinian Literature* (see full citation in DP no. 43, 1991) and Dr. Kamel Al-Sawafiri's *Modern Arabic Literature in Palestine 1860 – 1960*, published by Dar Al-Ma'aref, Cairo, 1975. Both works, especially the first, have provided me with a considerable part of the data I so badly needed for the writing of this series.