***The Power of Electronic Literature***

***Towards the Founding of a New Palestinian Literature of Resistance***

**Abstract**

This paper examines electronic literature (“e-literature”) and its ability to influence public opinion in its political and literary dimensions. Palestinian poet Dareen Tatour’s jailing over the 2015 publication of video poem “Resist, my people! Resist them!” is examined as a case study, along with numerous important questions arising from it: Wherein does the power of the poem lie? Why did the Israeli government see such a threat in it? Can e-literature truly be exploited for terrorist purposes? Are we witnessing a new literature of Palestinian resistance in electronic form? What new horizons do digital forms offer to literature?

**Preamble**

This paper examines electronic literature (“e-literature”) and its ability to influence public opinion in its political and literary dimensions. Palestinian poet Dareen Tatour is examined as an example, drawing on a specific court judgment (State of Israel v. Dareen Tatour) in relation to her work and her jailing for the publication of the online poem.

Tatour published a video poem in October 2015 entitled “Resist, my people! Resist them!” on both YouTube and Facebook.[[1]](#endnote-1) The Israeli government subsequently brought a number of serious charges against her, including incitement to terrorism, intifada and jihad, and inflammation of public opinion. After three years of legal proceedings, she received a five-month jail sentence, with a further six-month suspended sentence.

The Tatour case is allusive of the “Palestinian literature of resistance” and the fate of some of its proponents. Such literature is not new, of course; it began when the Palestinian-Israeli conflict did. Writers such as Tawfiq Ziad and Mahmoud Darwish faced a range of Israeli government sanctions, including jail and banishment. Such sanctions have, nevertheless, mostly followed long after the act of resistance itself. No-one had ever been thrown in jail for publishing a single poem before; and this is especially noteworthy regarding a relatively unknown figure such as Tatour. The case raises numerous important questions: Wherein does the power of the poem lie? Why did the Israeli government see such a threat in it? Can e-literature truly be exploited for terrorist purposes? Are we witnessing a new literature of Palestinian resistance in electronic form? What new horizons do digital forms offer to literature?

**Who is Dareen Tatour?**

A few preliminary details about Tatour herself are in order: Dareen Tatour is a poet and photographer born in 1982 in Reineh, near Nazareth. She studied engineering, programming, media and cinematic production. Her poetry collection, *The Other Invasion*, was published in 2010. Three years of legal proceedings followed her publication of “Resist, my people! Resist them!” She was arrested in August 2018, and she wrote a book during her incarceration, entitled *My Dangerous Poem: Memoirs of a Poet Held in the Jails of the Occupation*, recounting her sufferings in the prison system. She was little known in literary circles before this, but this event prompted me to study the secret of her poetry’s power and how it led a relatively unknown poet to prison.

**The legal problem with the poem**

It is impossible to understand the problem the poem presents without examining the judicial ruling itself and the state’s accusations addressed within it. Reading the judgement leads one to conclude that the state’s complaint lies in power ascribed to the poem on two levels: first, the typology of the poem as e-lit; and second, the poem’s grass-roots nature.

1. ***The typology of the poem***

The text of the poem reads as follows:

I will not accept a peaceful solution

I will never haul my country’s flag down

even if I am dragged out of my homeland

I will make them kneel in my time to come

Resist, my people, resist them!

Resist the settler’s robbery

and follow the caravan of the martyrs.

Had the poem been published as text only, there may have been little interest in it, and perhaps it would not have attracted media hype. It is a very familiar type of poem to both Palestinian and Jewish readers. The political climate is never free of tension and conflict between Arabs and Jews. Politically contentious slogans, expressions, and texts are a normal experience for both sides, familiar in printed and social media, even in the graffiti and street posters in Arab and Jewish towns. We need only look at the Sonara newspaper and website,[[2]](#endnote-2) which devote a weekly column to the works of resistance poet Sameh al-Qasim; or at the Al-Jabha Facebook page,[[3]](#endnote-3) for its thousands of texts by leading voices of the Palestinian resistance. There are countless other examples.

Gabi Lasky, Tatour’s defense lawyer, has noted that she has presented dozens of poems by Palestinian writers from within Israel containing much more severe and confrontational sentiments than those found in Tatour’s work, yet these writers were not arrested.[[4]](#endnote-4) Tatour’s father has also pointed out that the video clips in the poem all pre-dated it and were not produced by Tatour, leading one to question where the issue lay.[[5]](#endnote-5)

The experience of viewing the text with accompanying video imagery and music changes matters significantly. The poet begins to recite in a low voice, accompanied by music that begins quietly, then reaches a crescendo when the poet’s words are coupled with scenes of violence and clashes between Palestinians and the Israeli army. The integration of text and carefully selected video clips, along with the poet’s voice and the music, lend the piece a three-dimensional power. Word, voice, and image are coordinated, each enriching the other, something the legal ruling points to itself in Article 3.[[6]](#endnote-6)

The state justified the serious charges on the basis of the poet’s words: “Resist, my people, resist them!/Resist the settler’s robbery and follow the caravan of the martyrs.” It is noteworthy that, in order to make its case for incitement to terrorism (under Article A of the 2016 Anti-Terrorism Law), the state relied on video content, which it regarded as clear evidence. The judgement reads:

The poet confessed in front of the investigating committee that she had established the precise details of the choice of video clips to accompany this text for a full week beforehand. Thus, the textual content and the violent video scenes are considered part of a violent message that the poet wished to convey.[[7]](#endnote-7)

After investigation, the judges indicated that it was difficult to view the poetic aspects in themselves as a call to violence, but these became problematic when presented in conjunction with images of violent protest. They concluded that the digital format of the poem had endowed the work overall with greater expressive power of its content and communication of its sentiment.

***B. The grass-roots nature of the poem***

Video poems that are predominantly published via social media have consequently had a greater receptive impact. They therefore have also had a greater effect on public opinion in that form, as far as both the poet and the state are concerned. Article 4 of the court judgement itself notes the thousands of views and “likes” the poem has received since its publication, as well as positive and encouraging comments added by viewers.[[8]](#endnote-8)

The poet defended herself – as detailed in Article 8 of the court judgement – by saying that freedom of expression was a fundamental principle of democracy, especially in a state like Israel that considered itself democratic. The state responded that there were many precedents to establish that “freedom of expression is considered one of the foundational values of democracy on condition that it does not impinge on other values such as the security and safety of citizens, preservation of the public good and state security” under article 11A and B of the 2016 law. It added that the counterterrorism law required the arrest of the poet since the legal definition of terrorism therein did not only encompass threats to individuals’ security but also to the general mental well-being of citizens through provoking anxiety and fear.[[9]](#endnote-9) Thus, given the publication of this work and the supportive comments received from its viewers, it would take only one individual to follow through on a terrorist act in response to her “join the caravan of the martyrs” call for it to “effect a terrorist act” as specified in Article A of the 2016 Anti-Terrorism Law.[[10]](#endnote-10) The state also argued – as stated in the court judgement – that spreading the views of “terrorist organizations” in this way impinged on state security, especially given the heightened tensions and fierce clashes between Palestinians and Israelis at the time.[[11]](#endnote-11) Thus, the issue of temporal context becomes important for e-literature. E-literature acquires additional force when it coincides with current events, whereas printed literature cannot have the same immediacy.

**Discussion**

There is no doubt that Tatour’s case raises a number of questions about e-literature. The state’s accusations against her prompt reflection on issues such as the relationship between e-literature and terrorism: Is it possible to exploit this literary form for non-literary aims such as supporting terrorist groups by spreading their ideas? If so, does the literary text thereby transgress the confines of creativity, since it is founded essentially on political content? Secondly, and quite separately from the legal case, are we seeing the beginnings of a new Palestinian literature of resistance in electronic form?

The first question on the relationship between e-literature and terrorism requires reference to several studies on terrorism and the media that we do not have space to address here. It is therefore preferable to discuss the second question of resistance literature as a discrete issue and confine our discussion of e-literature to literary critique.

Addressing the literature of resistance first requires a definition of “resistance” itself. “Resistance” is a complex and integrated defense mechanism integrating word, viewpoint, and weapon. There are several forms of resistance, without doubt including literary resistance essentially based on words, but aimed at action and effect. Resistance mobilizes society intellectually and psychologically, and prepares it for organized confrontation, the greatest of which is with the homeland’s occupier. It advocates the mobilization of all communal and national energies.[[12]](#endnote-12)

We know, of course, that the literature of resistance is not a Palestinian invention. Hikmet, Neruda, Lorca, and many others belong to the global school of literary resistance.[[13]](#endnote-13) That said, such literature has reached an apex in Palestinian literature, in light of the still-ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

A number of poets emerged following the “Nakba” in 1948, devoting their pens to the Palestinian issue and describing that ‘catastrophe.’ They turned their books into weapons of resistance.[[14]](#endnote-14) Of course, the Israeli authorities did not ignore them: many were ostracized, jailed, or deported. We need only refer to Golda Meir’s statement following the assassination of Ghassan Kanafani: “Today, we have eliminated an entire battalion.” When Mahmoud Darwish wrote the poem, “Those Who Pass Between Fleeting Words,” Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir took it to the Knesset and shouted that “Darwish wants to banish us from the river into the sea!” Darwish famously responded: “Tear up the settler camps and I will tear up the poem”.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Most in the history of Palestinian resistance artists have had a broad literary grounding also enmeshed with the broader resistance culture. This has accompanied their political activity. Sameh al-Qasim, for example, was fired as a teacher due to his profuse poetic as well as political activity. Tawfiq Ziad was arrested more than once, and Mahmoud Darwish likewise spent his life as a refugee. Abd-al-Rahim Mahmoud died in combat as a resistance “martyr”.[[16]](#endnote-16)

The role of the poets was to raise awareness amongst Arab people and beyond, and also among the Palestinians inside Israel who had clung onto their lands. It was up to such writers to highlight links between those communities supporting the Palestinian issue and issues of liberties in general. They also played a part in urging solidarity, unity and depicting the 1948 Nakba. They highlighted the massacres, demolitions, and displacements, depicting the struggle of the Palestinian people to defeat offensives and obtain their rights and freedom. They urged demonstrations, strikes, and revolutions. They fought land confiscations and the policy of Judaization, while reciting poems of rebellion, hymning the various democratic forces that stood alongside of them.[[17]](#endnote-17)

Critic Shukri Ghali, in his 1979 book, *The Literature of Resistance*, detached the poets of the Occupied Territories from armed resistance literature, and depicted them as protest writers, whereas Lameen Bseiso considered them poets of resistance because they related word to deed and advocated armed struggle, not words alone. Ghali did not deny the role of the poets of the “interior” (i.e. within the State of Israel) supporting the resistance. He states: “The poetry of the Palestinian opposition inside the occupied territories supports the resistance in an indirect way, nourishing it with a tributary of reality and develops its dimensions with eyewitness testimony”. At a Cultural Enlightenment Forum in Palestine conference, Palestinian critic Adel al-Osta contended that the literature of the resistance began to weaken after the Oslo Accords, because the symbols of the poetry of the resistance began to write about peace and excluded expressions of resistance, such as “resist” and “kill”.[[18]](#endnote-18)

On the basis of all of this, we can say decisively that Tatour’s poem belongs to the literature of resistance, but there is a great difference between the traditional resistance literature and the e-literature of resistance exemplified in her work. If the writers of the “interior” were removed from the milieu of resistance because they relied on the word more than the act, Tatour’s poem forces us to reconsider the issue. In the poem, we find a direct call for resistance using the verb itself. Tatour also links word to deed. However, the “act” in this poem takes a different trajectory. It is not a real act of the poet herself, like those of Abd-al-Rahim Mahmoud and others. It does, however, bear some putative resemblance. The poet melds “resist” with video recordings of live action that embody the sense of the resistance and propose different forms for it. Sometimes the resistance is represented in the throwing of stones or burning tires or the Israeli flag. In other words, “resist” is translated from a verb into an event, an action. This is precisely the point Hayles discusses in *The Time of Digital Poetry*.[[19]](#endnote-19)

Thus, one of the fundamental differences between traditional and digital resistance literature is that the former is based on words supposedly related to subsequent action, while the latter is founded on simultaneous word and action. The latter is not merely advocacy of action, but also enactment. The recipient imagines that everything in the poem is also achieved on the ground. This enhances the power of the poem, its impact on the recipient, and perhaps their willingness to carry out a like act. This is precisely what worried the government in Tatour’s case.

This transition from language to praxis is accompanied by a parallel transformation in the poet’s status. The artist becomes a poet of the resistance rather than a mere protest poet. The artist of resistance e-literature differs from traditional resistance *litterateurs* in other ways too. We have shown that resistance e-literature can acquire an additional range of powers to surpass its predecessor. These have a sharper impact on the recipient because they stimulate their senses and feelings directly. These characteristics are very important in the literature of resistance because its principal aim is to have influence.

Moreover, the dissemination of digital resistance literature on social media platforms such as YouTube and Facebook gives it an enormous penetrative power, transcending the barriers of time and space that have restricted traditional resistance literature. They provoke public opinion and foment an intense interaction among readers and artists. This means that the poet does not only convey a message to a very large readership in a very quick order, but also sees its direct effects. The role of the poet does not end with the publication of the poem but takes on added dimensions.

Electronic resistance literature has another important value: the ability to renew itself and align with events. We have seen that Tatour chose a particularly sensitive time to publish the poem, but that she can also republish the poem on social media whenever she wishes. Each such occasion could add new dimensions to the work. This means that the electronic literature of resistance is open to renewal.

**Conclusions**

Though Tatour was a relatively unknown writer, her poem was able to acquire the potency of an entire armory of poetry and mobilization of the traditional resistance poets. We can also understand this poem as the cornerstone of a new Palestinian electronic resistance literature. Electronic literature in general remains largely unknown in Palestine and Israel. When Tatour wrote this poem, it is likely that she was not thinking of it in terms of e-literature, though she was certainly aware that she was writing resistance literature. We appear to be living at a seminal time in the history of the development of Palestinian resistance literature away from hard copy to electronic forms. There is nothing surprising in this, since literature is a national issue for Palestinians and must perforce reflect the author’s identity, hopes and sufferings. Each new birth provokes questions and speculation about the newborn. Will the leading figures of Palestinian electronic resistance literature of young people be able to invest in technology in a way unlike the traditional resistance literature? What prospects and possibilities will digitization open up? Will this literature be looked upon more as politics than literature? We cannot yet answer these and like questions, but they are important for both future research and comparative criticism.

1. Dareen Tatour, “Resist my People, Resist Them!” YouTube, October 3, 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=R1qnlN1WUAA. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Sonara, www.sonara.net, accessed September 14, 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Al Jabha, Facebook, www.facebook.com/AlJabha, accessed September 14, 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Alaraby TV, “Doreen Tatour: A Prisoner Because of a Poem, Resist my People, Resist Them!” YouTube, accessed September 14, 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=LIW8vqpWc6s. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Alaraby TV, “Doreen Tatour.” [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. State of Israel v. Dareen Tatour, Nazareth Magistrates Court, 4480-11-15. 2018, 174. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Israel v. Tatour, 180. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Israel v. Tatour 174. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Israel v. Tatour. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Israel v. Tatour, 176-177. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Israel v. Tatour, 177-178. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Hasan Jum’a, *Aspects of Resistance Literature: Palestine as an Example* (Damascus: Syrian Public Institute of Books Publications, 2009), 34. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Ibrahim Abbas, “The Palestinian Literature of Resistance: Roots, Features, and Developments,” *Al-Madina*, November 11, 2015, al-madina.com/article/413405. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Ghassan Kanafani, *The Literature of Resistance in Occupied Palestine 1948-1966* (Cyprus: Al-Rimal Publications, 1996), 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Abou Zaid Hamouda, *The Literature of Resistance in Palestine* (CITY: Palestinian Cultural Enlightenment Society, 2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Raqiah Zaidan, *The Influence of Left-Wing Thought on Palestinian Poetry* (Kufr Qara’: Dar al-Huda, 2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Zaidan, *Influence of Left-Wing Thought*, 58-60. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Hamouda, *Literature of Resistance*. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. N. Katherine Hayles, *The Time of Digital Poetry: From Object to Event* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)