**The Power of E-Literature: Towards the Founding of a New Palestinian Literature of Resistance**

This paper examines electronic literature (‘e-literature’)’s ability to influence public opinion in its political and literary dimensions. Palestinian poet Dareen Tatour is examined as an example, drawing on a specific judicial ruling in relation to her work.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Tatour published a video poem in October 2015 entitled “Resist, my people! Resist them!” on both YouTube and Facebook.[[2]](#footnote-2) The Israeli government consequently filed a lawsuit against her on a number of serious charges including incitement to terrorism, intifada and jihad, and the inflammation of public opinion. After three years of court wranglings, she received a five-month jail sentence, with a further six suspended.

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 began. Writers such as Tawfiq Ziad and Mahmoud Darwish faced a range of Israel government sanctions up to and 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, notable especially with it being someone relatively unknown like Tatour. The case raised numerous important questions, such as: 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?

We should first explain who Dareen Tatour is. She is a poet and photographer born in 1982 in Reineh, near Nazareth and studied engineering, programming, media and cinematic production. Her poetry collection *The Other Invasion* came out 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.

*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 the poem’s power. This power is seen on two levels: the visual dimensions of the poem itself, and the mass popular appeal of its content being available on social media.

With regard to the video dimensions of the poem itself, the text includes the following:

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 would, perhaps, have been little interest in and media hype about it. 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 Israeli villages. We need only to look at the Sonara newspaper and website[[3]](#footnote-3) which devotes a weekly column to the works of poet of the resistance Sameh al-Qasim or the Al-Jabha Facebook page[[4]](#footnote-4) for its thousands of texts by the leading voices of the Palestinian resistance. There are countless other examples.

Gabi Lasky, Tatour’s defense lawyer, has stated that she had presented dozens of poems by Palestinian writers from within Israel that contain much more astringent and confrontational sentiments than those found in Tatour’s work, yet they had not been arrested.[[5]](#footnote-5) 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 therefore.[[6]](#footnote-6)

If one views the same text accompanied by its video actuality and music, the matter is entirely different. 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:

[[7]](#footnote-7)

The state justified the serious charges on the poet’s words: “Resist, my people, resist them!/Resist the settler’s robbery and follow the caravan of the martyrs.” What is notable for the incitement to terrorism charges is that the state relied for its case, as clear evidence in its view, on the video content.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The judgement continues:

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.[[9]](#footnote-9)

After investigation, the judges indicated that it was difficult to view the poetic aspects in themselves as a call to violence, but became problematic when presented in conjunction with images of violent protest.[[10]](#footnote-10) 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.

*The poem’s popular platform*

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, at least as far as both the poet and the state are concerned. The text of the verdict in Tatour's case itself notes the thousands of views and ‘likes’ the poem has received since its publication, as well as positive and encouraging comments appended by viewers.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The poet defended herself in the case by saying that freedom of expression was a democratic fundamental, especially in a state like Israel that considered itself as such.[[12]](#footnote-12) 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.”[[13]](#footnote-13) 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. 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”.[[14]](#footnote-14) The state also argued that spreading the views of “terrorist organizations” in this way impinged on state security, especially given the then heightened tensions and fierce clashes between Palestinians and Israelis,.[[15]](#footnote-15) 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 has opened e-literature up to a number of questions. 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 of 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, 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.[[16]](#footnote-16)

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.[[17]](#footnote-17) That said, such literature has reached an apex in Palestinian literature particularly, related to the still ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

A number of poets emerged following the ‘Nakba’ in 1948 around the same time and devoted their pens to the Palestinian issue and describing that ‘catastrophe.’ They turned their books into weapons of resistance.[[18]](#footnote-18) 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.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

Most in the history of Palestine 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’.[[20]](#footnote-20)

The role of the poets was to raise awareness both amongst the 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 win 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.[[21]](#footnote-21)

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 in the interior 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”.[[22]](#footnote-22)

We can from all of this say decisively that Tatour’s poem belongs to the literature of resistance, but there is a great difference between the traditional resistance literature we have just discussed 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*.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Thus, one of the fundamental differences between the 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 the 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 give it an enormous penetrative power transcending the barriers of time and space that have restricted traditional resistance literature. They provoke public opinion and garner too an intense interaction among readers and artists. This means that the poet does not only convey a message to the largest readership, and 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*

Tatour’s poem, although by a relatively unknown writer, has been able to acquire the potency of an entire armoury 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.[[24]](#footnote-24) 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? Certainly, we cannot answer these and like questions now, but they are important for both future research and comparative criticism.

1. The text of the legal ruling in Tatour’s case (referred to as ‘the court judgement’ hereafter) can be viewed at www.takdin.co.il. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=R1qnlN1WUAA [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Sonara.net [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Facebook.com/AlJabha [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=LIW8vqpWc6s [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Paragraph 3, Page 174 of court judgment. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. بند א עמ 180 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Tatour was partially exonerated on the charge of incitement to violence. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Court judgement, paragraph 4, p. 174. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., Paragraph 8, pp. 175-176. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Section 11A and B of the Anti-Terrorism Law, pp. 176-177. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See Section A of the Anti-Terrorism Law 2016, p.178 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., p.181 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Hasan Jum’a (2009), *Aspects of Resistance Literature: Palestine as an Example*, Damascus, Syrian Public Institute of Books Publications, p.34. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibrahim Abbas (2010), “The Palestinian Literature of Resistance: Roots and Features,” Al-Madina.com, Al-madina.com/article/413405, last accessed 5 September 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ghassan Kanafani (1996), *The Literature of Resistance in Occupied Palestine 1948-1966*, Cyprus: Al-Rimal Publications, p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See Abou Zaid Hamouda (2007), *The Literature of Resistance in Palestine*, Palestinian Cultural Enlightenment Society. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Raqiah Zaidan (2009), *The influence of Left-Wing Thought on Palestinian Poetry*, Kufr Qara’, Dar al-Huda, pp. 58-60. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See Hamouda, *Literature of Resistance*. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. N. Katherine Hayles (2009), *The Time of Digital Poetry: From Object to Event*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Eman Younis (2016), “Transcontinental Text: the Novel *Chat* as an Example of Globalizing Electronic Literature”, *Hyperrhiz*, https://doi.org/10.20415/hyp/016.e05, last accessed 5 September 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)