

Telling the real

Literary reportage in contemporary Arabic literature

Monica Ruocco

The objective of this paper is to delineate the recent evolution and innovations of literary reportage in contemporary Arabic literature, a genre of considerable significance for a number of reasons, primarily due to its capacity to engender a novel form of engagement. The paper seeks to furnish an overview of select reportages composed within the last two decades by writers who have employed this genre to investigate the connections between the creative word and committed journalism, between fiction and truth. The paper will then focus on the role of literary reportage in war situations, where it functions as a counter-narrative, emphasising the inescapable role of the written word in situations of violence and dehumanisation.

Keywords: literary reportage, Arabic contemporary literature, Arab journalism.

1. Introduction

At the turn of the 21st century, the Arab literary sphere has witnessed the emergence of a considerable number of writers who exhibited a marked inclination to experiment with new forms of writing and genres.

Among these new forms, the ‘literary/narrative reportage’ has not yet been the subject of significant scholarly attention.¹ The rise of these new genre has been inextricably linked to the

¹ In the introduction to the collective volume ‘Literary Journalism across the Globe,’ John Bak discusses the distinction between Anglo-American literary journalism and European literary reportage, noting that the two genres have historically diverged due to political factors. However, he observes that there have been periods when the two forms have converged, leading to a productive exchange during times of social and political upheaval. He concludes that “Literary journalism thus is and is not literary reportage” (Bak and Reynolds 2011: 3, 8). In line with Hartsock’s assertion that “European literary reportage and American literary journalism are very much the same when they both emphasise narrative and descriptive modalities and eschew discursive polemics” (Hartsock 2016: 122), this study will favour the expression ‘literary reportage’ due to its ‘elasticity’ and its dominant “discursiveness, expository and argumentative in nature” (Hartsock 2016: 82).

emergence and dissemination of the ‘new media,’ which have profoundly transformed the ‘Arab/ic literary field,’ evoking parallels with the 19th-century *nahḍa* (Winckler 2018: 27-29).

This genre, whether termed literary journalism, narrative journalism or creative nonfiction, first appeared in daily newspapers in the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century, and by the century’s end it had become firmly established in the popular press (Hartsock 2000 : 21 ff.). A seminal contribution in this regard was made during the 1960s by New Journalism, a form of journalism characterised by its literary underpinnings and marked by subjectivity, thereby positioning journalistic endeavour as a pivotal element in the social construction of reality.²

From a stylistic perspective, literary reportage is a heterogeneous and hybrid literary genre that challenges the traditional distinction between fact and fiction, between mimesis and invention, and reveals the tension between the observing subject and the observed object. Reportage emerges from the convergence of these two distinct elements, resulting in a narrative that intricately weaves personal experience, inherently subjective by nature, with the journey as an external factor in the subject’s life (Baronti Marchiò 2011: 53). Despite being marginalised by the academic establishment, literary reportage claims its own credibility and literary autonomy. This is achieved through precise stylistic and substantive characteristics, whereby the chronicle, which is ephemeral in nature, is modulated according to a more articulated architecture to suit the narrative:

a narrative literary journalism defies some of the more conventional wisdoms in the journalism academy, where for so long it has been a cardinal rule that journalism should be clear, transparent, and unambiguous. The problem with such wisdom is, of course, that life is not always clear, transparent, and unambiguous. This is why a narrative literary journalism can prove to be a compelling and even profound discourse: it gives us the courage to confront the frailties of our cultural totalizations (Hartsock 2016: 5).³

² The most renowned exemplifications of this literary tendency are Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* (1966) and Joan Didion’s *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968). In his introduction to *The New Journalism*, Tom Wolfe definitively established reportage as the most popular genre of narrative writing of his era. (Boynton, 2005, 7). The genre’s full legitimisation came with the awarding of the 2015 Nobel Prize in Literature to Svatlana Aleksievič, a Ukrainian-born Belarusian journalist and writer.

³ In the 21st century, a significant group of writers came to be collectively known as New New Journalists. Through their investigative and in-depth reporting on social and cultural matters, The New New Journalists have revitalised the tradition of literary journalism, elevating it to a level of popularity and commercial success that was not envisaged by their 19th-century or late 20th-century forerunners. The longstanding debates between ‘journalism’ and ‘literature’—between ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ reporting—carry less weight for this generation, allowing them the freedom to blend the strengths of both styles (Boynton 2005: 14).

The act of recounting a sequence of events in a ‘natural’ manner is widely regarded as one of the most fundamental definitions of narrative. Consequently, literary reportages can be defined as “documentary accounts whose modalities are complementary, narrative and descriptive, or narra-descriptive” (Hartsock 2016: 10). This literary genre aims to recount facts in a fictional document in which every single word is supposed to be true from beginning to end. The transcription of reality is subject to the creative-literary principle of the author's artistic and intellectual sensibility. A distinguishing feature of literary reportage is its presentation of stories that have been experienced by the writer in the first person, incorporating elements such as environments, contexts, living conditions, dialogues, and profiles of people encountered. These elements are meticulously documented and substantiated through direct testimony, contributing to the authenticity and credibility of the narrative. The distinction between fact and fiction becomes increasingly indistinct, and the personal narrative becomes interwoven with the broader public narrative, thereby addressing a new imperative for both individual and collective commitment. In a post-truth world, where ‘alternative facts’ replace actual facts and feelings have more weight than evidence, the decline of traditional media is extremely evident (Lee McIntyre 2018: 134). This makes literary reportage more and more important.

2. Arab writers and literary reportages: Traversing the memory divide

The Arabic language features several terms used to define this genre, including *al-riḥla al-ṣaḥāfiyya*, *al-rībūrtāǧ al-riḥli*, and the more widely recognised *al-adab al-ṣaḥāfi*.⁴ In relation to the practice of literary reportage in the Arabic-speaking world, David Abrahamson and Ibrahim Abusharif have stated that “it is notable that there is a relative absence of literary journalism in the Arab/Muslim world” (Abrahamson and Abusharif 2012: 23).⁵ Nevertheless, there are numerous examples of fiction writers who have successfully transitioned between their roles as fiction writers and reporters. In a 2014 paper, Samah Jumaa Abu Marzouk examined the genre of satirical journalism, citing examples from classical prose and highlighting the reports of *nahḍa* literati, emphasising the significance of journalistic activity among contemporary writers (Abu Marzouk 2014: 69 ff.).

⁴ See Fayṣal (1960), Muḥammad (1985), Naǧm (2010).

⁵ As proposed by the authors of the essay, the ‘exceptions that prove the rule’ pertain to the Egyptian Nawāl al-Sa‘dāwī, Rami George Khouri—born in New York City to Palestinian Christian parents—and other ‘Arab-American’ authors such as Edward Said, Laila Lalami, Moustafa Bayoumi, Alia Malek and Diana Abu-Jaber (Abrahamson and Abusharif 2012: 28).

In relation to the contribution of contemporary Arab writers to the genre of literary journalism, it is worthy of note that since the 20th century, certain writers have excelled in this genre. These include, among others, the following: Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, ‘Abbās Maḥmūd al-‘Aqqād, Naḡīb Maḥfūz, Yūsuf Idrīs, Muṣṭafā Amīn, Ğamāl al-Ġiṭānī, Muḥammad al-Maḥzanġī in Egypt; Ğassān Kanafānī and Rašād Abū Šawār in Palestine; Zakariyā Tāmīr, Ğāda al-Sammān and Muḥammad al-Māġūt in Syria. Sa‘īd Furayḡa, Ğumāna Ḥaddād and Ilyās Ḥūrī in Lebanon, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Munīf in Saudi Arabia/Jordan, In‘ām Kaḡahġī and Luṭfiyya al-Dulaymī in Iraq and many others.

As Elisabeth Kendall asserts: “journalism played a role of unparalleled importance in the evolution of modern literary forms and techniques in Arabic” (Kendall 2006: 1). In this regard, the example of a novelist such as Naḡīb Maḥfūz is particularly pertinent. After graduating in philosophy in 1934, Maḥfūz decided to become a professional writer as early as 1936, beginning his career as a journalist for newspapers such as *al-Risāla*, *al-Hilāl* and *al-Ahrām*. Since the mid-1970s, Naḡīb Maḥfūz has been writing his column *Wiġḡat nazar* every Thursday in the pages of *al-Ahrām*.⁶

The journalistic activity of these authors was inextricably linked to *iltizām* (commitment), a concept that was elaborated in a literary sense by Ṭāhā Ḥusayn in the late 1940s (Klemm 2000: 149). The notion of ‘writing for a cause,’ linked to modes of ‘dissent,’ ‘resistance’ and ‘subversion’ (Pannewick and Khalil 2015: 10), became a priority for many of these writers, who often adopted a pseudonym to continue their journalistic work. For instance, Kanafānī adopted the name ‘Fāris Fāris,’ Anīs Maṣṣūr employed the names ‘Šarīf Šarīf’ and ‘Munā Ğa‘far,’ and Zakariyā Tāmīr signed his articles as ‘Ğuhā al-Dimašqī’ (Abou Marzouk 2019: 112).

3. Reportage and politics: the remaking of the world before 2011

Literary reportage is inextricably linked to the experience of travelling, which in turn is never an innocent enterprise and always occurs within political systems (Euben 2003: 19). Goffredo Parise, a prominent Italian novelist and reporter,⁷ who “used and to some extent reinvented for the Italian

⁶ Maḥfūz’s journalistic work has been collated and arranged chronologically and thematically in two publications: *Ḥawla al-dīn wa-l-dīmūqrāṭiyyah* (‘On Religion and Democracy,’ 1989; Diana 2012), The second publication, *Ḥawla al-‘ilm wa al-‘amal* (‘On Science and Work,’ 1996) collects the articles written by Naḡīb Maḥfūz on *al-Ahrām* just before the Nobel Prize was awarded and during the years immediately following.

⁷ The literary talent of Goffredo Parise (1929-1986) was evident from his debut novel, *Il ragazzo morto e le comete* (‘The Dead Boy and the Comets,’ 1951), with its raw realism and intense poeticism, followed by *La grande vacanza* (‘The great holiday,’ not translated, 1953) and the success of *Il prete bello* (‘Don Gastone and the Ladies,’ 1954), with its provincial setting and realistic structure, the first post-war bestseller. This was followed by *Il padrone* (‘The Boss,’ 1965), a scathing satire of the culture

readership this genre of realist travel writing when he was sent as a reporter for the *Corriere della Sera*” (Salonia and Mueller 2022: 272), was a notable exemplar of this genre. In the author’s personal opinion, “reportage can be considered a novel, with the writer assuming the role of the protagonist” (Perrella 2015: 98).⁸ Parise’s texts have been distinguished by a distinctive and innovative capacity to transform his geographical travels into “narrative *remote movements*” (Perrella 2015: 10).⁹ The objective of Parise’s reportage was to empathise with the sentiments of the individuals he encountered, and he was acutely aware of his identity as “a perpetual and unwavering colonial writer,” whether he desired it or not. This phenomenon, as Parise himself acknowledged, was not merely a matter of political fervour but rather an expression of a profound physical and mental yearning that propels an individual to blend their own identity with that of others, even in geographical spaces and cultural contexts that diverge from their own origins:

When a writer elects to travel to a nation engulfed by political turbulence and military operations, it is not political fervour or military fervour that propels them; rather, it is human passion. This human passion can be conceptualised as a form of physical and mental hunger, propelling an individual to blend their own blood with that of others, in locations or nations that are not their own. [...] The objective is to participate, as in a transfusion, in that very confused, less schematic, but undoubtedly more ‘eternal’ feeling which, in its totality, dominates the people of that devastated country [...]. The writer, upon arriving in such a nation, is guided by an inherent sense of direction, leading him to the most humble and impoverished segments of society, the dispossessed and disillusioned. [...] The writer’s objective is not to acquire or disseminate factual information concerning political developments or military operations; rather, it is to capture the essence of the repercussions, the nuances of emotion, and the profound sense of loss that pervade the lives of the people (Parise 2007, 228, my translation).

industry and a denunciation of neo-capitalist alienation. Immediately after *Il prete bello*, Parise embarked on a career as a correspondent for prominent national newspapers. In 1966 he was dispatched to China on behalf of the Milanese newspaper *Corriere della Sera*. The texts were subsequently collected and published in a book entitled *Cara Cina* (‘Dear China,’ not translated, 1966). The following year he travelled to the Far East, which was then ravaged by war. From Thailand, Laos, South Vietnam and later Biafra, he sent articles to the weekly *L’Espresso*, edited by Eugenio Scalfari. These articles were more than mere reportages; they were diaries from the front. Parise, who risked his life on multiple occasions during this period, published a selection of these articles in the essays *Due, tre cose sul Vietnam* (‘Two or three things on Vietnam,’ not translated, 1967) and *Biafra* (1968). These two texts were supplemented by other accounts of his role as a war correspondent in *Guerre politiche. Vietnam, Biafra, Laos, Cile* (‘Political wars. Vietnam, Biafra, Laos,’ 1976), while *New York, con un’appendice di lettere* is an epistolary reportage published posthumously in 2001.

⁸ The author further elaborated on this perspective, stating that “my approach to reportage and to novel-writing is analogous, as both are born from the same concept, which initially takes a very simple form” (Perrella 2015: 98E).

⁹ The title of a short novel written by Parise when he was just eighteen years old is *I movimenti remoti* (‘Remote movements,’ not translated).

A notable distinction emerges between Goffredo Parise's reportage and the work of many Arab authors. While Parise's accounts are frequently set in locations external to his own country of origin, the works of the Arab authors are often set in their respective home countries or within the broader context of the Arab world. An examination of the politics of representation and the cultural and ideological implications inherent in Arab literary reportage reveals a number of young writers who have chosen this genre as their ideal means of expression, precisely because of its progressive, secular and reformist nature. Novelists Yūsuf Raḥā (Youssef Rakha, Egypt) and Kamāl al-Riyāḥī (Kamal al-Riahi, Tunisia) revise and transcend the canonical models of narrative journalism, reformulating the very idea of reportage.

The creative process that stands behind the reportages of Yūsuf Raḥā (1976) is characterised by the inextricable relationship between diverse artistic media.¹⁰ The distinctive nature of Raḥā's reportages can be attributed to his unconventional conceptualisation of the creative process, which encompasses the integration of diverse artistic expressions and methodologies. This approach involves the transposition of literary reportages and travelogues into forms such as poetry, fiction, chronicles, blogs (Pepe 2019, 2022), photography, and video (Ruocco 2018: 153).¹¹ Between 2006 and 2009, Raḥā published three reportages: *Bayrūt šī maḥall* ('Beirut, Some Place,' 2006), *Bū Ruqayba 'alā maḍaḍ* ('Bourguiba Reluctantly,' 2008), and *Šimāl al-Qāhira ġarb al-Fīlibīn* ('North of Cairo, West of the Philippines. Travel Essays,' 2009). This series of reportages on the Arab world prior to the revolutions of 2011 includes accounts of his travels in Lebanon, Tunisia, Morocco, the Emirates, and Egypt. These texts are characterised by an intricate weaving of narratives, with geographical landscapes intertwined with a geography of emotions. Observations on history are metamorphosed into poignant and caustic depictions of the Arab world before 2011.

Raḥā, who considers the Polish reporter Ryszard Kapuściński to be his model, does not adhere to a rigid itinerary when conducting his reportages. Instead, he appears to lose his way by transitioning between various dimensions. During his travels in Morocco, reflections on the intimate dimension of

¹⁰ Born, raised and based in Cairo, Yūsuf Raḥā has worked as a cultural journalist, literary translator, and creative writing teacher. His first novel is *Kitāb al-Ṭuġrā* ('The Book of the Sultan's Seal,' 2011), which won the 2015 Banipal Seif Ghobash Prize for the English translation, and his third, *Paulo*, was on the long list of the International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF) in 2017 and won the 2017 Sawiris Award. His photo reportage, *Bayrūt šī maḥall* (2006), was nominated for the Lettre Ulysses Award for the Art of Reportage.

¹¹ This combination of genres is evident in Raḥā's fictional works, particularly in *Kitāb al-Ṭuġrā*, which was published in February 2011, shortly after the fall of Mubarak, by the Cairo-based publishing house Dār al-Shūrūq. The novel is an imagined evocation of Cairo in the period following 9/11, a meditation on the decline of Muslim civilisation and a prophetic call anticipating the 2011 revolution.

existence are juxtaposed with contemplations on Arab literature and culture. The descriptions evolve into a interrogation of the author's surroundings, characterised by a pervasive sense of sarcasm and a palpable political and existential anger:

I do feel there was space for more topical and on-the-spot creative writing, though, and it's indicative of the structure and values of the literary scene that there wasn't. Perhaps I should mention that Ryszard Kapuściński, the Polish war correspondent and father of literary reportage, is among my principal role models; and he wrote right there as things unfolded before his eyes.

It's a cliché of literary discourse to say that you can only write about a historical event once it's been over for a long while, because you're supposed to take the time to assimilate and make sense of it. My feeling is that's a load of rubbish. When time has passed you write in a different way, your writing may have a deeper sense of what was going on. But only when you write with the raw energy of the moment do you really get down the danger and the madness and the beauty of something [...].

One thing about this kind of writing is that it defies genre, so you might end up with poetry and political analysis on the same page, as you sometimes do in my long pieces on Arab cities, three of which were published in book form between 2006 and 2010 (Rakhā 2014).

Raḥā's response to Wolfe's assertion that literary journalism is "journalism that would be read like a novel [or a] short story" (Hartsock 2016: 83) appears to align with this concept. Indeed, Raḥā's reportage on Beirut reflects the confusion and chaos that reigned in Lebanon during his ten-day stay, a month after the assassination of Prime Minister Rafīq al-Ḥarīrī in 2005. Raḥā arrived in the capital of Lebanon on 13 April, and participated in the commemorations of the 30th anniversary of the outbreak of the civil war:

This whole Lebanon thing has me hooked. Everyone agrees: it's complicated. I've read *Beirut, Beirut* by Sonallah Ibrahim; I didn't understand a thing. It made no difference that I wanted to understand. Things only changed when I made friends out there, and they sent me books and documentaries. My colleagues at Al Ahrām Weekly massage the news till it fits their mould. The unspoken consensus is that Israel and America are evil (as are all those who sympathise with them), whereas the Arabs...? Decent! But deceived... [...] But then, just like that, this whole Lebanon thing has me hooked. I'm so glad I'll be there for the April 13th anniversary, so pleased I answered S's call, so happy that at last I'm going to find out what Beirut means. The face of the poet-journalist I've never met but whom I call a friend. Ziad Rahbani's tunes. The Mediterranean's far shore. Manqousha with zaatar for breakfast (Rakhā 2006: 8-9; my translation).

The same tone and atmosphere can be found in *Wāḥid ṣifr li-l-qatīl: al-kātib fī ṣūrat al-muḡrim* ('One zero for the dead. The writer in the image of the criminal,' 2018) published in 2018 by Kamāl al-Riyāḥī

(1974).¹² In this reportage, the Tunisian writer chronicles his experience of residing in Algiers from October 2009 to April 2010. He meticulously delineates the geographical milieu in which he finds himself, a context characterised by dystopian overtones. Furthermore, he reflects on the consequences that this context has on his existence and his literary output.

al-Riyāḥī begins his account with a detailed description of his place of residence, followed by his observations of the city, some of whose rituals and sport events surprised him during the 2010 World Cup qualifiers. These events led to the emergence of threat of terrorism and political assassinations in communal spaces, as well as the growing boredom with the monotony of his work as a proofreader and translator, and the deadly loneliness that consumes him (al-Riyāḥī 2018: 39). The text employs a revolutionary language, reminiscent of that utilised in Raḥā's reportage, and it does not appear to demonstrate any intention on the part of the author to establish a peaceful and conciliatory relationship with the country in which he was residing. Instead, al-Riyāḥī elects to delineate the contradictions, the disturbing aspects and, above all, his unease and discomfort during his experience. It is noteworthy that at the time of writing, the author was uncertain whether his diary would be published as a book. The crux of the account lies in the author's depiction of his life of reading and writing,¹³ and his endeavour to portray a nation that, in his experience, had not yet recuperated from the injuries inflicted upon it by history. For al-Riyāḥī, Algeria is a nation afflicted by a sense of desolation, devoid of a future and bereft of prospects. In an attempt to overcome its misfortunes, Algeria employs a form of irony, a tendency to laugh at everything, and ultimately even at itself. al-Riyāḥī's writing offers a multifaceted perspective on Algeria, with a primary focus on the experiences of intellectuals who were subjected to blind terrorism during the turbulent years or "black decade" (*al-ashriyya al-sawdā'*) and the subsequent societal violence that has permeated Algerian society, resonating even in the realm of sports. In contrast to his contemporaries who exhibited a keen interest in football during their formative years, al-Riyāḥī harbours an aversion to the sport. This animosity was further exacerbated by the temporal concurrence of his residency in Algeria with the conflict that ensued between Egypt and Algeria during their World Cup qualifying encounter. On 27 November, al-

¹² al-Riyāḥī is a writer, activist, critic, broadcaster and guest lecturer at the University of Toronto's Centre for Diaspora and Transnational Studies and Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations. Among his novels are *al-Mashraḥ* ('The scalpel,' 2007), which won the Golden Comar in Tunis and *al-Ġūrīlā* ('The gorilla,' 2011). His reportage *Wāḥid ṣifr li-l-qatīl: al-kātib fī ṣūrat al-muḡrim* was awarded the Ibn Battuta International Prize for Travel Literature in 2018. However, in 2023, his *Frankenstein Tūnis* ('Tunisian Frankenstein'), a collection of satirical articles with a cultural and literary background on Tunisian political affairs during the time of Kais Saied, was banned by the Ministry of Culture.

¹³ In the section dated 25 November, the author expounds on his literary endeavours in his novel *al-Ġūrīlā*, emphasising his utilisation of other fictional works and references to establish the characters' identities (al-Riyāḥī 2018: 73).

Riyāḥī published a statement on the football dispute, in which artists were also involved, expressing strong disapproval of the war and its excessive patriotism. The Tunisian novelist then goes on to recall the election results in the Arab republics,¹⁴ emphasising the striking similarity in the percentage of votes won by each president. This is intended to emphasise that the real struggle is not between the peoples in the green rectangle, but in the field and in the streets against the rulers (al-Riyāḥī 2018: 80-81).

In their reportage, both Yūsuf Raḥā and Kamāl al-Riyāḥī combine elements of past and present, public and private spheres, dream and reality, biography and travel writing, fiction and poetry in a continuous challenge that Yūsuf Raḥā describes in the following lines: “one thing about this kind of writing is that it defies genres, so you might end up with poetry and political analysis on the same page” (Rakhā 2014).

4. Women on the front

In the aftermath of the 2011 revolutions, there was a significant increase in the number and quality of reports published by Arab journalists and writers a substantial proportion of whom were women.¹⁵

In the history of world literary reportage, a significant number of women writers have alternated between their work as writers and journalists in bearing witness to war from a proximate vantage point. Notable examples include Palestinians Fadwā Ṭūqān (1917-2003), who contributed to the progressive journal *Sawt al-Baḥrayn* in the early 1950s, and Liyāna Badr (b. 1950), who covered the events at Sabra and Shatila in 1982 and later documented the refugee camp's history through eyewitness accounts. In addition, Syrian Ġāda al-Sammān (b. 1942), who, as a journalist, explored aspects of Lebanese life that were largely ignored by the mainstream, namely the plight of the poor in neglected areas of north and south Lebanon. Finally, we should also include the Egyptian Nawāl al-Sa‘dāwī (1931-2021), the Lebanese Ḥanān al-Šayḥ (b. 1945), born into a shiite family, who, before

¹⁴ He maintains his connection to the unfolding events in his country by monitoring the news coverage of the Tunisian elections, and on the page dated 25 October, 20 days after his visit to Algeria, he becomes aware of the results of the elections in his country (al-Riyāḥī 2018: 44).

¹⁵ Concurrently, there was an increase in subjective and non-professional modes of information and dissemination, as well as alternative modes of journalistic practice (Bebawi-Bossio 2014: 25). Since the 2003 invasion of Iraq the so-called citizen-journalists have played a crucial role in recounting the intricacies of quotidian existence in the context of war and invasion, a phenomenon that has been significantly influenced by the technological forces on new media in the internet era. A notable early example of this phenomenon was the blog Baghdad Burning signed by “Riverbend,” a young Iraqi woman who chose to remain anonymous for reasons of personal safety (El-Nahhas 2021: 14). For a more detailed discussion of the relationship between citizen media and narrative theory, see Sadler (2021).

turning to fiction, worked as a journalist in Beirut, and the Yemeni Bušra al-Maḡṡarī (Bushra al-Maḡtari, b. 1979) known for her work as a writer, journalist and activist.¹⁶

The events that have transpired in Syria since the initial demonstrations for greater democracy in March 2011, and the experiences of the Syrian people, ensnared as they are by a dictatorial regime and religious fanaticism, have been extensively documented. This struggle is further illuminated by Samar Yazbik's (Samar Yazbek, b. 1970) courageous literary reportages, which were written between 2011 and 2018.¹⁷ The first of these reports is *Taqāṡu' nīrān: min yawmiyyāt al-intifāda al-sūrīyya* ('In the Crossfire: Diaries of the Syrian Revolution'),¹⁸ which was born out of the revolutionary process in Syria, from its outbreak to Yazbik's departure from the country.

In the aftermath of her exile, Yazbik has been compelled to act as a witness to the events that have befallen her homeland. Notwithstanding the inherent dangers, in the summer of 2012, she undertook the first of numerous clandestine and courageous visits to Syria, successfully penetrating the country via a breach in the Turkish border. She subsequently undertook three arduous journeys to the Idlib region, where she bore witness to the horrors of civil war at first hand, in the company of activists. The account of her experiences has been documented in her second reportage, *Bawwābāt arḡ al-‘adam* ('The gateway to nowhere,' 2015),¹⁹ a work that combines elements of travel writing, personal diary, and journalistic reporting. From the earliest peaceful pro-democracy demonstrations to the formation of the Free Syrian Army and the emergence of Islamic State, in her reportage Samar Yazbik provides an account of the daily lives of fighters, children and ordinary men and women struggling to survive. In the initial pages of her reportage, Yazbek asserts that the objective of her account is to distinguish the mainstream governmental narrative from its counter-narrative:

¹⁶ al-Maḡṡarī rose to prominence as a leader of anti-government protests in his hometown of Taiz during the 2011 Yemeni revolution. Her nonfiction work *Māda tarakta warā‘ak? Ašwāt min bilād al-ḡarb al-mansiya* ('What You Have Left Behind: Voices from the Land of the Forgotten War,' 2018) is a powerful collection of testimonies that alternates between the accounts of victims of the Houthi militias and those of the Saudi-led coalition, illuminating the tragic consequences of the conflict in Yemen.

¹⁷ Novelist Samar Yazbik (sometimes transliterated as Yazbak), born in Jableh, Syria, near Latakia, studied Arabic literature at Latakia University. A vocal advocate for human and women's rights, she fled Syria in 2011 due to threats and has lived in France since 2014. In 2012, she founded *Women Now for Development*, an NGO empowering Syrian women, and received the PEN/Pinter Prize for her book 'In the Crossfire: Diaries of the Syrian Revolution.' Yazbik also earned the Swedish Tucholsky Prize, Dutch Oxfam/PEN Prize (2013), and the French Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres medal (2016).

¹⁸ The title of the English translation is 'A Woman in the Crossfire.'

¹⁹ The reportage has been translated into English with the title 'The Crossing: My journey to the shattered heart of Syria.'

Everything I recount in the following narrative is real. The only fictional character is the narrator, me: an implausible figure capable of crossing the border amid all this destruction, as though my life were nothing but the far-fetched plot of a novel. As I absorbed what was happening around me, I ceased to be myself. I was a made-up character considering my choices, just able to keep on going. I put aside the woman I am in real life and became this other imaginary person, whose reactions had to be commensurate with whatever it was she was living for. What was she doing here? Confronting existence? Identity? Exile? Justice? The insanity of bloodshed? (Yazbek 2015: 12).

Samar Yazbik appears to posit the notion that the mere collection of notes and data on an event does not suffice for the creation of a literary reportage, that is to say, a compilation of texts that, as Nicola Bottiglieri asserts, “requires a literary diegetic project, *i.e.* a strong narrative idea that incorporates the accumulated material and transforms it into a story. The writer-reporter draws upon both journalism and the novel, employing the analytical-descriptive register of essay writing, coupled with the expressive power of mimetic language” (Bottiglieri 2011: 8).

The Syrian writer’s creative process is further exemplified in her work *Tis‘a ‘ašara imrā’a: sūrīyyāt yarwīna* (‘Nineteen Syrian Women tell to us,’ 2018), in which she delineates her methodology into three distinct phases: research, travel and interviews, and transcription.²⁰ This account elevates Yazbik’s commitment to the Syrian cause and the preservation of memory from a feminist perspective. Indeed, in *Tis‘a ‘ašara imrā’a*, Yazbik focuses her narrative on the voices of women, who are frequently disregarded, and who played a significant role in the revolution. In addition to their active engagement, these women also had to contend with a deeply entrenched patriarchal society, including male revolutionaries. Over a period of three years, Yazbik undertook the task of documenting the experiences of more than 60 women, meeting with them in the cities where they had sought refuge or engaging with them via Skype for the purpose of the research.

Yazbik’s work presents a nuanced perspective on the revolution, provoking critical questions about Syria’s social structure and its role in the uprising’s challenges. With the exception of an introductory explanation of the project, Yazbik refrains from direct involvement in the narrative, allowing each chapter to be recounted by a different individual. While Yazbik refines their words, giving them coherence, she carefully maintains each woman’s unique voice and perspective. The reportage is driven by two interwoven objectives: firstly, to reconstruct a memory and an identity of Syria that are increasingly elusive; and secondly, to serve as a medium for articulating a counter-

²⁰ The book is the result of a series of interviews she conducted with fifty-five Syrian women in their countries of asylum—Turkey, France, Germany, Canada, Lebanon, England and the Netherlands—as well as on Syrian territory. See also the French and the Italian editions: *19 Femmes. Les Syriennes racontent* (2019) and *Diciannove donne* (2019).

narrative to the dominant discourse. “This book is my way of resisting,” asserts Yazbik, “I believe that writers and intellectuals have a moral duty to the victims, to fight against oblivion” (Yazbek 2018: 11).

In the reportage *Fī sūq al-Sabāyā* (‘At the Sabaya Market’) published in 2018,²¹ Iraqi poet Duniyā Mikhāʾīl (Dunya Mikhail, b. 1965)²² has followed a similar path to Samar Yazbik’s. This reportage combines travel writing, poetry, fiction, documentary essays and historical and political analysis. Mikhāʾīl’s return to Iraq in 2016 is significant in this context. She states that: “Twenty years after leaving Iraq on a one-way ticket, I returned to my country today, on May 27, 2016, not so much to visit the living as to visit the dead” (Mikhail 2018: 232).

The Beekeeper chronicles the narrative of Abdullah Shrem, a beekeeper and businessman who established networks of smugglers to liberate a significant number of women who had been abducted by Daesh. Drawing upon a large number of personal accounts collated by Duniyā Mikhāʾīl during her travels, this project unveils the voices of Iraqi Yazidi women, children, men and entire families who have been abducted and enslaved since 2014. This project underscores Mikhāʾīl’s commitment to amplifying the voices of civilians that are often overlooked. The reportage provides a comprehensive account of the experiences of the author and those of thousands of others who have travelled from Iraq to Syria or Turkey, by car or on foot, enduring protracted periods of time in often inhospitable conditions to reach more secure borders, camps, or refuge in neighbouring countries. The reportage vividly captures the linguistic diversity of these regions, showcasing a tapestry of dialects and languages, including but not limited to Iraqi, Syrian, Kurdish, and Turkish. This linguistic mosaic serves as a testament to the rich cultural heritage and remarkable resilience of the people:

After four hours of waiting, we set off in a convoy. There were hundreds of us, including Muslims who’d lived in the same region alongside us for hundreds of years. It was like Judgment Day, people walking to God knows where, some of them barefoot, clutching their children or carrying elderly people on their backs (Mikhail 2018: 37).

²¹ The reportage has been translated into English by the author and Michael Weiss with the title ‘The Beekeeper: Rescuing the Stolen Women of Iraq.’ This version is used for quotes.

²² Born in Baghdad, she was employed by the Iraqi newspaper *The Baghdad Observer*. However, she subsequently found herself subject to mounting threats and harassment from the Iraqi authorities on account of her writings. This situation ultimately compelled her to flee to the United States in 1990. In 2001, she was awarded the UN Human Rights Award for Freedom of Writing. Her poetry collection *al-Ḥarb taʿmal bi-ḡadd* (‘The War Works Hard,’ translated by Elizabeth Winslow. New York, NY: New Directions: 2005 and London edition, Carcanet: 2006) won PEN’s Translation Award. In 2022, she was awarded the 18th UNESCO-Sharjah Prize for Arab Culture in recognition of her significant contributions to the promotion of Arab culture on a global scale.

Following her return to Michigan, Dunyā Mikhāʿīl continues her investigation through telephonic or electronic communication, thereby initiating a novel form of reportage that transcends geographical boundaries:

Back in Michigan, time was flying. It was after two in the morning and I only had a few hours before I had to go to work. Instead of going to sleep I made some Turkish coffee and sat down to transcribe [all the stories] from the recording I'd made. Sometimes I can't transfer the feelings so I just stare at the walls instead, the walls of a house filled with people who can't be bought or sold—at least that's what we believe (Mikhail 2018: 65).

In his essay on the subject of the relationship between travel and poetry, Christopher M. Keirstead states that in the present age, “it is uncommon to encounter poetry coexisting with prose in a travelogue, and many do not associate poetry with this form at all.” Keirstead (2019: 442). A further distinctive feature of Dunyā Mikhāʿīl's reportage is precisely the alternating of poetry and prose, which, according to Keirstead, underscores “an enduring creative, motivational, even organic, connection between poetry and the experience of mobility and travel” (Keirstead 2019: 442):

Some of my old friends heard that I was back in the country. They hurried to put together a poetry reading. Poetry wasn't on my mind during this urgent time, but they said that I couldn't leave the country without reading some of my poems. It only took them three hours to actually organize the reading, including all the preparations and spreading the word on social media. That was the same amount of time it took for me to get from Dohuk to their place in Erbil. The road was very dangerous by car; every time the driver passed the cars in front of him by veering into oncoming traffic, leaving only a tiny distance as the drivers were forced to swerve suddenly—and every time I automatically threw my hands up to cover my face. I didn't expect too many people would show up for that last-minute reading, but I was wrong. Some of the audience included writers I'd known a long time ago, when I had just started writing poetry (Mikhail 2018: 243-244).

In their reportage, Samar Yazbik and Dunyā Mikhāʿīl establish a series of interconnections between descriptions of places, war records and literary creation. By transcending the conventional boundaries of non-fiction, these two writers have sought to attain a truth that is often elusive to fiction writers. They have delved into the role of gender in shaping the genre, proposing an alternative depiction of the world and a decolonised perspective on boundaries and identity.

5. Storytelling, war and memory: reportages from Palestine

Since October 2023, the impediment to reporting on events in Gaza and the Occupied Territory, due to the prohibition on journalists and the indiscriminate killing of many of them, has inevitably resulted

in an augmentation of the number of citizen-journalists, an increasingly popular phenomenon for the dissemination of first-hand news in contexts of conflict and war.²³ This role, since the 1960s, has often been filled by numerous intellectuals who have also been reporters. Significant figures in this regard include Ġassān Kanafānī, Fadwā Tūqān, and Liyāna Badr, along with other prominent names such as Maḥmūd Darwīš, Mu‘in Bsīsū, author of *Yawmiyyāt Ġazza* (Diaries from Gaza), Murīd al-Bargūṭī, and Suad Amiry (Amiry 2010) among numerous others.

Amongst the body of Palestinian authors, ‘Āṭif Abū Sayf (Atef Abu Saif, b. 1973) is distinguished by his unique ability to explore the “power” of fiction and non-fiction in his works.²⁴ Abū Sayf’s initial reportage on the 2014 Gaza conflict was originally featured in international newspapers, subsequently compiled into the book *The Drone Eats with Me. A Gaza diary*.²⁵

He wrote his reportage directly in English, with the objective of contributing to the exposure of the crimes being committed against the people of the Strip. Abū Sayf focused on the details of ordinary lives and asked himself: “Looking at this diary, I feel foolish about other things too, like the daily rituals I maintained. Why, for instance, did I risk my life every day walking to and from the Internet café just to type these pages? I guess you have to be foolish to survive the madness. I certainly was” (Abu Saif 2014: 393).

Similarly, during the 2023 war, his dispatches from Gaza were published in various Western newspapers and subsequently compiled into a volume titled *Don't Look Left: A Diary of Genocide*, released

²³ From October 2023 to January 2025, 203 Palestinian journalists were killed. Reports also indicate that 399 journalists have been injured, and 43 others captured (<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20250110-palestinian-journalist-saed-nabhan-killed-by-israel-army/>).

²⁴ Born in the Jabalia refugee camp to parents who were immigrants from Jaffa, ‘Āṭif Abū Sayf is a writer, novelist and politician. In 2018, the Fatah Media, Culture and Intellectual Mobilisation Commission appointed him as the movement’s spokesperson, and between April 2019 and March 2024, he served as Minister of Culture in the government of Mohammed Shtayyeh. Abū Sayf holds a BA in English Language and Literature from Birzeit University, an MA in Political Science from the University of Bradford in England, and a PhD in Political Science from the University of Florence in Italy. He taught Political Science at the University of al-Azhar, Gaza, and is Chief Editor of *Siyāsāt* magazine, published by the Public Policy Institute in Ramallah. Since his literary debut in the late 1990s, Abū Sayf has written numerous novels and short story collections. His novel *Ḥayāt mu‘allaqa* (‘A life suspended,’ 2014) was shortlisted for the 2015 Arabic Booker Prize. He has published other novels, including *Zilāl al-dākira* (‘Shadows of memory,’ 1997), *Ḥikāyat layla sāmīr* (‘The Tale of a night of chatter,’ 1998), *Kurat al-ṭalj* (‘The Snowball,’ 2000), *Ḥaṣram al-ḡanna* (‘The sour grapes of paradise,’ 2003), *Christina* (2016), *Muṣāt lā ya‘burūna al-ṭarīq* (‘Running in place,’ 2019), *al-Ġanna al-muqfala* (‘Locked paradise,’ 2021). Abū Saif’s novel ‘Running in Place’ was the first novel from Gaza to be translated into Hebrew and published in Israel.

²⁵ In the same year Abū Sayf edited *The Book of Gaza*, an anthology of short stories by Gazan writers published by Comma Press (Abu Saif 2014)

in March 2024.²⁶ On 7 October 2023, Abū Sayf was in Gaza with his fifteen-year-old son, in order to open national cultural events as Minister of Culture in the Palestinian National Authority.²⁷ Following the commencement of hostilities, he chose to remain in the Strip to bear witness to the unfolding events,²⁸ and his reportage provides a poignant and profoundly affecting account of the human cost of war, and the profound psychological impact on those who remain.

The reportage provides a chronicle of the initial 84 days of the conflict, with detailed accounts of the days spent in his northern home and a further 30 days living in a tent after being forcibly relocated to the southern Gaza Strip. During this period, he maintained a daily writing practice, producing both Arabic and English texts, which he subsequently shared with friends for publication in newspapers.²⁹ For Abū Sayf, writing was a task and a responsibility, as he himself remarks in the afterword to the book:

Looking back over this diary, I find myself not wanting to remember any of it. [...] I was writing these pieces every day because I wanted others to know what was happening, I wanted there to be a chronicle of events in case I died. I felt the presence of death many times. I could feel it looming behind me, over my shoulder, and I wrote as a way of fending it off, to defy it, if not to defeat it, and, if nothing else, to take my mind off it. As the war continues, I can only think of survival. I cannot mourn. I cannot recover. My pain has to be postponed. My sorrow delayed. Now it is not the time to think of any of this. But in this book, I can see all those I've loved and lost, and can keep talking to them. In this book, I can get away with the belief that they are still with me (Abu Saif 2024: 473-474 e-book)

²⁶ Edited extracts from these diaries have previously been published in the following publications: In English: *The Washington Post* (30 Oct 23, 11 Dec 23), *The Guardian* (13 Nov 23, 6 Dec 23), *The Nation* (16 Nov 23, 27 Nov 23, 11 Dec 23), *Slate* (29 Nov 23, 30 Nov 23, 2 Dec 23) and *The New York Times* (2 Dec 23). In Spanish: *Página 12* (19 Nov 23). In French: *Le Nouvel Observateur* (23 Nov 23) and *Le Monde* (4 Jan 24). In Italian: *Corriere della Sera* (12 Nov 23). In Basque: *Berrria* (8 Dec 23-20 Dec 23). The texts from these war diaries were also published in *al-Ayyām* newspaper, where Abū Sayf has been writing a weekly article for a period of fifteen years, and in *al-ʿArabī al-ġadīd*. The book has been translated into Arabic with the title *Waq̄t mustaq̄taʿ li-l-naġāh* ('Time Out for Survival') by the Jordanian Dār al-Ahliyya.

²⁷ Abū Sayf's provenance is the Gaza Strip; he was residing in the West Bank with his family at the time, in accordance with his political duties.

²⁸ "Then [...] I decide to stay. This might not prove to be the wisest decision I've ever made, but it's the right one, for me at least. I cannot simply flee out of fear and abandon my relatives just to save my own skin—nearly all my surviving family are here: my father [Talal], my three brothers [Mohammed, Ibrahim and Khaleel], my five sisters [Awatif, Halima, Naema, Eisha and Asmaa], not to mention two half-sisters [Amina and Samah] and a half-brother [Mosa] (Only one of my siblings lives outside of Gaza, my half-sister Leena in Amman)." (Abu Saif 2024: 25).

²⁹ In his foreword to the book titled *The pain of those who remember America*, the journalist and war correspondent Chris Hedges asserts that: "When the first edition of these diaries was published, as an ebook on 26 December 2023, Atef was still trapped in southern Gaza with his son" (Abu Saif 2024: 12).

A striking feature of this reportage is the regularity with which it was maintained, and the wealth of detail it contains. This makes it a noteworthy historical, social and cultural document, proffering a distinctive perspective on a seminal moment in the annals of Palestine.³⁰ Abū Sayf juxtaposes the accounts of the devastation suffered by Gaza and its inhabitants, including some of his closest relatives,³¹ with the recounts of his personal history as a member of a family forcibly displaced from Jaffa to Gaza, where he resided for a significant period, particularly during his childhood and youth (Abu Saif 2024: 349 ff).

It is through these accounts, the experiences of ordinary individuals from Gaza are brought to light, each with their unique narrative, as well as the experiences of writers, poets and artists. These include Fātina al-Ġurra, a poet residing in Belgium who was destined to be in Gaza and attend the war, and the poet and journalist Sa‘īd al-Suwayrkī, the novelist Hānī al-Sālīmī, the poet Salīm al-Naffār, who was killed with his family in a bombardment, and others. The reportage offers a poignant glimpse into the daily realities of life under wartime conditions, where the pursuit of basic necessities like sustenance often takes precedence over more trivial matters. A particularly salient example of this phenomenon is that of the novelist Hānī al-Sālīmī, who, in an act of desperation, resorted to burning a portion of his literary collection, consisting of 200 volumes, in order to fuel a fire and prepare sustenance for his children (Abu Saif 2024: 326-327).³²

Since 7 October 2023, a plethora of reports have emerged chronicling the ongoing and historical events in Gaza.³³ Numerous writers have felt compelled to document the profound impact of the war

³⁰The significance of memory as a recurring theme in contemporary Palestinian literature has been extensively documented (Sibilio 2012: 19). Prior to Abu Saif’s reportage, Palestinian academic and writer Rif‘at al-‘Ar‘ayir (Refaat Alareer), who was killed in 2023 in Gaza, edited an anthology of 23 short stories by fifteen of his students and friends from Gaza. These were written during Israel’s 2008-2009 twenty-three-day offensive war on Gaza, Operation Cast Lead. The anthology was subsequently published in a book entitled *Gaza Writes Back* (Alareer 2014). According to Alareer, “Writing is a testimony, [...] a memory that outlives any human experience, and an obligation to communicate with ourselves and the world. The underlying sentiment is that existence is purposeful, and that the act of recounting tales of loss, survival, and hope is paramount” (Alareer 2014: 527). al-‘Ar‘ayir edited a second anthology (Alareer 2016) after the 2014 war on Gaza.

³¹The sister-in-law of Abū Sayf was killed in a bombing attack. The attack also resulted in the death of her husband and their two sons, and left her daughter with severe injuries (Abu Saif 2024: 473).

³² A narrative analogous to that of al-Sālīmī’s has been recounted by Muḥammad al-Zaqzūq (Muhammad al-Zaqzouq, b. 1990) in his reportage, which has been translated into English by Katharine Halls and published under the title ‘Writing from the Vortex of War’ (<https://theideasletter.substack.com/p/writing-from-the-vortex-of-war>). A portion of this reportage has also been translated into Italian and published under the title ‘Io scrivo e rimango a Gaza’ (<https://ilmanifesto.it/io-scrivo-e-rimango-a-gaza>).

³³ A substantial body of Jordanian and Palestinian intellectuals published a reportage entitled *Lī yadān li-aktub: šahādāt min dāḥil Ġazza* (‘I have two hands to write. Testimony from Gaza’), in which they collated a considerable array of testimonies from men and women from Gaza, meticulously arranged in chronological order from the onset of the war to 10 September 2024.

on their lives through literary works. In a similar manner, a group of authors recently published a reportage that is also a last will, *Kitāb al-waṣāyā*.³⁴ This book has been conceived and edited by Rīm Ghanāyim (Reem Ghanayem, b. 1982), a Palestinian poet, translator and a researcher in the fields of Arabic and English Literature, and introduced by the Argentine writer Alberto Manguel and the American philosopher Judith Butler. The issue, which is an emotional portrait of life in the shadow of concrete existential danger, includes 17 wills by artists and writers from Gaza, some of whom are still living, and some of whom did not survive to see its publication.³⁵

Kitāb al-waṣāyā is a unique document in which the authors reflect a desperate need for listening and compassion, and acknowledgement of their own suffering and the violence they have suffered. The testimonies collected here, presented in the form of last wills, are a product of wartime writing and can be regarded as a form of "testimony that is not only a speaking of others in one's own voice, but also a giving voice to those others by responding to their demand for testimony" (Ballerio 2017: 12). This act of witnessing transcends the mere act of writing itself, as emphasised by the writer from Gaza Hanā' Aḥmad, who participated in the *Kitāb al-waṣāyā* with a text that read: "I never believed in what I wrote. I felt that words were insignificant compared to what I felt" (*Kitāb al-waṣāyā* 2024: 21). Consequently, the most eloquent expression of her sentiments was encapsulated in the very title of her text, which also served as her manifesto: "I want to survive" (*Kitāb al-waṣāyā* 2024: 20).

6. Conclusions

In his essay on writers reporting their experiences during the Great War, Stefano Ballerio addresses the question of the temporality of testimonial writing (Ballerio 2017: 13). The genre of reportage, when examined from the perspectives of its origin and destination, proves to be of particular interest due to its apparent oscillation between the two extremes of contingency and duration. On the one hand, reportage is linked to daily journalistic reporting; on the other hand, it soon becomes literature by extending its duration to the narrative dimension (Ballerio 2017: 13). The category of testimony

³⁴ The complete title of the collection is *Kitāb al-waṣāyā. Ṣahādāt mubdi'āt wa mubdi'in min Ġazza fī waġh al-mawt* ('The Testaments: Testimonies of Creative Men and Women from Gaza in the Face of Death'). The book is currently undergoing translation into English and is scheduled for publication in 2026 by Akoya, a UK-based publishing house.

³⁵ Namely, they are Yāsir al-Ġūl, Rif'at al-'Ar'ayir, Hanā' Aḥmad, Sa'id 'Abd al-'Azīz Abū Ġazza, Salīm al-Naffār, Amal Abū 'Āsī al-Yāziġī, 'Alī Abū Yāsīn, Najwa Ġānim, Liyān Usāma Abū al-Qumsān, Ḥusayin Ḥarzellāh, Ni'ma Ḥassān, Husām Ma'rūf, Mus'ab Abū Ṭaha, Sa'id Muḥammad al-Kahlūt, Yūsuf al-Qudrà, Nāṣir Rabah, and the young Mayār al-Jazzār.

belongs, as the author asserts, to those domains of experience where texts that last in time and traditions of writing and interpretation are generated (Ballerio 2017: 13).

Furthermore, when testimonies are collected and reported by a writer-witness, the phenomenon occurs whereby the reporter is not simply a detached observer. This occurrence can be attributed to the following reason: when a writer approaches a story, whether fiction or nonfiction, they employ many of the same techniques, of narrative, plot, pace, mood and dialogue.

In the context of the Arab world, the requirement for testimony and the maintenance of historical memory, chiefly through the medium of a counter-narrative, have been constant since the colonial era. However, these have become even more pronounced since the advent of the 21st century.³⁶ This is further compounded by the personal memories of the populations involved in the “life-making practices and relationships in deadly times and places” that Munira Khayyat refers to as “resistant ecologies” (Khayyat 2022: 211).

In the last two decades, for Arab authors, reportage appears to be a privileged means of producing literary works during a period of extreme peril and loss. The reportages discussed in this paper, whose authors are also novelists, testify to the need of these writers to find an alternative way to literary creation in order to explain the times in which they live. In particular, Rakhā’s and Riyāḥī’s reportages seem to be aimed at understanding the changes in the Arab world after the 2011 revolutions. It is in the reportage of war, however, that we find the best examples of this genre. In fact, war reportage, in its depiction of “the pain of other,” conveys to the reader a visceral understanding of the experience: “*this is what it's like. This is what war does. And that, that is what it does, too. War tears, rends. War rips open, eviscerates. War scorches. War dismembers. War ruins*” (Sontag 2003: 8).

References

Abou Marzouk, Samah Gomaa (v. Abu Marzouk, Samah Jumaa). 2019. “Negotiating the Intersection of Arabic and Anglo-American Literary Journalism: Exploring Possibilities, Challenging Canons.” PhD diss., United Arab Emirates University.

³⁶ In the last two decades, many Arab cultural institutions entrusted with the preservation of memory have suffered extensive damage. In April 2003, the Iraqi National Library and Archives (Dār al-Kutub wa al-Waṭā’iq), had been burned. In 2011, battles between protesters and government troops in Cairo led to the loss by fire of one of the great libraries of Egypt, the Institut d’Egypt. In 2014, Tripoli’s historic al-Sā’ih Library, one of Lebanon’s largest, burnt down and two-thirds of its 80,000 books and manuscripts were lost. In 2015 the library built by the Saudi writer ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Munīf was ransacked and vandalised in Damascus. In November 2023, the apartment next door to Palestinian poet Mu‘in Bsīsū’s son had been hit. He grabbed three of the bags with the most precious of his father’s papers, that have survived successive sieges across generations, and hurried down the stairs: once again, the apartment survived and so has the archive (al-Ḥalabī 2023).

- Abrahamson, David and Abusharif, Ibrahim N. 2012. "Literary Journalism in the Middle East: The Paradox of Arab Exceptionalism." In: *Global Literary Journalism: Exploring the Journalistic Imagination*, edited by Richard Keeble and John Tulloch, 23-38. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Abu Marzouk, Samah Jumaa (v. Abou Marzouk, Samah Gomaa). 2014. "Introduction to Arabic Literary Journalism: A Critical Study." *International Journal of Arabic-English Studies (IJAES)* 15: 65-76.
- Abu Saif, Atef. 2015. *The Drone Eats with Me. A Gaza diary*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press (e-book).
- Abu Saif, Atef (ed.). 2014. *The Book of Gaza. A City in Short Fiction*. Manchester: Comma Press.
- Abu Saif, Atef. 2024. *Don't look left. A diary of genocide*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press (e-book) [Italian translation by Orsola Casagrande: *Diario di un genocidio: 60 giorni sotto le bombe a Gaza*. Milano: Fuorisceña/RCS: 2024).
- Alareer, Refaat R. (ed.). 2014. *Gaza Writes Back: Short Stories from Young Writers in Gaza*. Washington, DC: Just World Books (*Gaza Writes Back*, translated by L. Lo Russo. Roma: Lo Russo: 2015)
- Alareer, Refaat (ed.). 2016. *Gaza Unsilenced*. Washington, DC: Just World Books.
- Amiry, Suad. 2010. *Nothing to Lose But Your Life: An 18-Hour Journey with Murad*. Doha: Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation Publishing (*Murad Murad*. Translated into Italian by Maria Nadotti. Milano: Feltrinelli: 2010).
- Bak, John S. and Bill Reynolds (eds.). 2011. *Literary Journalism across the Globe: Journalistic Traditions and Transnational Influences*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Ballerio, Stefano. 2017. "Scritture di testimonianza e Grande guerra." In: *I percorsi della grande trasformazione*, edited by Stefano Ballerio, Eleonora Belloni and Erica Grossi, 11-36. Milano: Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli.
- Baronti Marchiò, Roberto. 2011. "Journey without maps: il reportage narrativo." In: *Camminare scrivendo. Il reportage narrativo e dintorni, Atti del convegno (Cassino, 9-10 dicembre 1999)*, edited by Nicola Bottiglieri, 11-36. Cassino: Edizioni dell'Università degli Studi di Cassino.
- Bebawi, Saba and Diana Bossio. 2014. *Social Media and the Politics of Reportage. The Arab Spring*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bottiglieri, Nicola. 2011. "L'esperienza del viaggio nell'epoca della sua riproducibilità narrativa." In: *Camminare scrivendo. Il reportage narrativo e dintorni, Atti del convegno (Cassino, 9-10 dicembre 1999)*, edited by Nicola Bottiglieri, 7-47. Cassino: Edizioni dell'Università degli Studi di Cassino.
- Boynton, Robert S. 2005. *The New New Journalism: Conversations with America's Best Nonfiction Writers on Their Craft*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- Capote, Truman. 1966. *Cold Blood*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Diana, Elvira. 2012. "Nağīb Maḥfūz as a journalist: A forerunner of the Arab spring?" *La rivista di Arablit* 2 (3): 23-31.
- Didion, Joan. 1968. *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- El-Nahhas, Amany. 2021. "At the Intersection of Journalism, Literature, and Blogging: Negotiating Resistance in Riverbend's Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq." *Textual Turnings* 3 (1): 10-27.

- Euben, Roxanne L. 2003. "The Comparative Politics of Travel." *Parallax* 9 (4): 18-28.
- Faiṣal, Shukrī. 1960. *al-Ṣaḥāfa al-adabiyya wajha jadida fi dirāsāt al-adab al-mu‘aṣir wa tārīkhi-hi*. al-Qāhira: Ma‘had al-Dirāsāt al-‘Arabiyya al-‘Āliya.
- Ghanayim, Rīm. 2024. *Kitāb al-waṣāyā. Shahādāt mubdi‘āt wa mubdi‘in min Ghazza fi wajh al-mawt*. Bayrūt: Dār Marfa’.
- al-Ḥalabī, ‘Iṣmat. 2023. "Ḥiṣārūnā al-ṭawīl." *Mada Masr* 28-11-2023
<https://www.madamasr.com/2023/11/28/feature/طويل-حصارنا/ثقافة/> last accessed 13 January 2025
- Hamdy, Naila. 2010. "Arab media adopt citizen journalism to change the dynamics of conflict coverage." *Global Media Journal: Arabian Edition* 1 (1): 3-15.
- Hankir, Zahra (ed.). 2019. *Our Women on the Ground Essays by Arab Women Reporting from the Arab World*. London: Penguin.
- Hartsock, John C. 2016. *Literary Journalism and the Aesthetics of Experience*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Hartsock, John C. 2000. *A History of American Literary Journalism: The Emergence of a Modern American Form*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Keirstead, Christopher M. 2019. "Travel and Poetry." In: *The Cambridge History of Travel Writing*, edited by Nandini Das and Tim Youngs, 442-455. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kendall, Elisabeth. 2006. *Literature, Journalism and the Avant-Garde. Intersection in Egypt*. London: Routledge.
- Khayyat, Munira. 2022. *A Landscape of War. Ecologies of Resistance and Survival in South Lebanon*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Klemm, Verena. 2000. "Literary Commitment Approached through Reception Theory." In: *Understanding Near Eastern Literatures*, edited by Beatrice Gruendler and Verena Klemm, 145-156. Wiesbaden: Reichert.
- Leih, Nadia. 2021. "A Case Study: Mada Masr: A Progressive Voice in Egypt and Beyond." *Media and Communication* 9 (4): 275-285.
- Maḥfūz, Naḡīb. 1989. *Ḥawla al-dīn wa-l-dīmūqrāṭiyyah*. al-Qāhira: al-Dār al-Miṣriyya al-Lubnāniyya.
- Maḥfūz, Naḡīb. 1996. *Ḥawla al-‘ilm wa al-‘amal*. al-Qāhira: al-Dār al-Miṣriyya al-Lubnāniyya.
- al-Maḡṭarī, Buṣra. 2018. *Mādā tarakta warā‘ak? Aṣwāt min bilād al-ḥarb al-mansiya*. Dimašq: Dār Riyāḍ al-Rayyis (*What You Have Left Behind: Voices from the Land of the Forgotten War*. Translated into English by Sawad Hussain. London: Fitzcarraldo; *Tutto quello che abbiamo lasciato. Voci da una guerra dimenticata*. Translated into Italian by Francesco de Angelis. Milano: Luiss University Press: 2022).
- McIntyre, Lee. 2018. *Post-Truth*. Cambridge: The MIT Press (e-book).
- Mehta, Brinda. 2007. *Rituals of Memory in Contemporary Arab Women’s Writing*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.

- Mikhā'il Dunyā. 2000. *al-Ḥarb ta'mal bi-ğadd*. Dimašq: Dār al-Madā (*The War Works Hard*. Translated into English by Elizabeth Winslow. New York, NY: New Directions: 2005. London: Carcanet: 2006; *La Guerra lavora duro*. Translated into Italian by Elena Chiti. Genova: San Marco dei Giustiniani: 2011).
- Mikhail, Dunya. 2018. *Fī sūq al-Sabāyā*. Mīlānū: al-Manshurāt al-Mutawassiṭ (*The Beekeeper: Rescuing the Stolen Women of Iraq*. Translated by Dunya Mikhail and Max Weiss. New York, NY: New Direction Books; *Le regine rubate del Sinjar*. Translated into Italian by Elena Chiti. Roma: Nutrimenti: 2018).
- Muḥammad, Sayyid Muḥammad. 1985. *al-Ṣaḥāfa bayna al-tārīḥ wa al-adab*. al-Qāhira: Dār al-Fikr al-ʿArabī.
- Najm, Riḍā Muḥammad Fawzī. 2010. *al-Ṣaḥāfa al-adabiyya bi-Miṣr fī-l-niṣf al-awwal min al-qarn al-ʿišrīn*. Bayrūt: Maktabat al-Ādāb.
- Pannewick, Friederike and George Khalil (eds). 2015. *Commitment and Beyond. Reflections on/of the Political in Arabic Literature since the 1940s*. Wiesbaden: Reichert.
- Parise, Goffredo. 2007. *Guerre politiche*. Milano: Adelphi.
- Pepe, Teresa. 2019. *Blogging From Egypt: Digital Literature (2005-2016)*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Pepe, Teresa and Barbara Winckler (eds). 2022. *Media Transitions and Cultural Debates in Arab Societies: Transhistorical Perspectives on the Impact of Communication Technologies*. *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 15 (1-2).
- Pepe, Teresa. 2022. "Public and Private Diaries: The Ancestral Genres of the Blog in Egypt." In: *Media Transitions and Cultural Debates in Arab Societies: Transhistorical Perspectives on the Impact of Communication Technologies*, edited by Teresa Pepe and Barbara Winckler. *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 15 (1-2): 152-172.
- Perrella, Silvio. 2015 (1 ed. Milano: Rizzoli, 2003). *Fino a Salgareda: I movimenti remoti di Goffredo Parise*. Vicenza: Neri Pozza (e-book).
- Rakhā, Yūsuf. 2006. *Bayrūt shī maḥall*. al-Qāhira: Amkenah Books.
- Rakhā, Yūsuf. 2008. *Bū Ruqayba ʿala maḍaḍ*. Bayrūt: Riyad El-Rayyes.
- Rakhā, Yūsuf. 2009. *Shimāl al-Qāhira gharb al-Filībīn*. Bayrūt: Riyad El-Rayyes.
- Rakhā, Yūsuf. 2014. "Writing the North African Experience." 30 March 2014. <https://sultansseal.wordpress.com/2014/03/30/writing-the-north-african-experience/> (last accessed 15 October 2024)
- al-Riyāḥī, Kamāl. 2018. *Wāḥid ṣifr li-l-qatīl: al-kātib fī ṣūrat al-mujrim*. Mīlānū: Manshūrāt al-Mutawassiṭ.
- Ruocco, Monica. 2018. "Paysages et narration : du reportage à la fiction dans l'œuvre de Yūsuf Raḥā." In: *New Geographies: Texts and Contexts in Modern Arabic Literature, Proceedings of the 11th Conference of the European Association for Modern Arabic Literature (Euramal) (7-10 May 2014)*, edited by Roger Allen, Gonzalo Fernández Parrilla, Francisco Rodríguez Sierra and Tetz Rooke, 151-164. Madrid: Ediciones Universidad Autónoma de Madrid.
- Salonia, Matteo and Christian Mueller. 2022. "The Challenge of Curiosity During the Cold War. Representations of Asia Between Politics and Consumerism and the Reflections of Goffredo

- Parise in the 1960s.” In: *Travel Writings on Asia. Curiosity, Identities, and Knowledge Across the East, c. 1200 to the Present*, edited by Matteo Salonia and Christian Mueller, 261-290. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sadler, Neil. 2021. *Fragmented Narrative. Telling and Interpreting Stories in Critical Perspectives on Citizen Media*. London: Routledge.
- Sibilio, Simone. 2012. *Nakba. La memoria letteraria della catastrofe palestinese*. Roma: Edizioni Q.
- Sontag, Susan. 2003. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- VV.AA. 2024. *Lī yadān li-aktub: shahādāt min dākhil Ghazza*. ‘Ammān: Dār Tadwīn (Italian translation: *Ho ancora le mani per scrivere. testimonianze del genocidio a Gaza*. Edited by Aldo Nicosia. Roma: Edizioni Q; 2025).
- Yazbik, Samar. 2011. *Taqāṭu‘ nīrān: min yawmiyyāt al-intifāḍa al-sūrīyya*. Bayrūt: Dār al-Ādāb (Yazbek, Samar. *A Woman in the Crossfire: Diaries of the Syrian Revolution*. Translated by M. Weiss. London: Haus Publishing; 2012; *Passaggi in Siria*. Translated into Italian by Andrea Grechi. Palermo: Sellerio; 2017).
- Yazbik, Samar. 2015. *Bawwābāt arḍ al-‘adam*. Bayrūt: Dār al-Ādāb (*The Crossing. My Journey to the Shattered Heart of Syria*, translated by R. Ahmedzai and N. Gowanlock. London: Penguin; 2015).
- Yazbik, Samar. 2018. *Tis‘a ‘ašara imrā’a: sūrīyyāt yarwīna*. Mīlānū: al-Manshurāt al-Mutawassiṭ (Yazbek, Samar. *19 Femmes. Les Syriennes racontent*. Translated into French by Emma Aubin-Boltanski and Nibras Chehayed. Paris: Editions Stock; 2019; *Diciannove donne*. Translated into Italian by Antonella Fallerini. Palermo: Sellerio; 2019).
- Winckler, Barbara. 2018. “‘New Media’ and the Transformation of the Public Sphere in the nahḍa Period and Today: How the Advent of the Periodical Press and the Internet Have Affected the Arab/ic Literary Field. Analogies and Differences.” In: *New Geographies: Texts and Contexts in Modern Arabic Literature*, edited by Roger Allen, Gonzalo Fernández Parrilla, Francisco M. Rodríguez Sierra and Tetz Rooke, 27-64. Madrid: Ediciones de la Universidad Autónoma de Madrid.
- al-Zaqzouq, Muhammad. 2024. “Writing from the Vortex of War. Translated by Katharine Halls. *The Ideas Letter*, July 11 2024. <https://www.theideasletter.org/essay/writing-from-the-vortex-of-war/>
- al-Zaqzouq, Muhammad. 2024. “Io scrivo e rimango a Gaza.” Translated by Monica Ruocco. *Il Manifesto*, 31 luglio 2024. <https://ilmanifesto.it/io-scrivo-e-rimango-a-gaza>

Monica Ruocco is professor of Arabic language and literature at University of Naples “L’Orientale.” Her research focuses on the fictional and theatrical production of the Middle East and the Maghreb. For her activity as a translator, she received the National Translation Award of the Italian Ministry of Culture in 2015. She is the author of many books, including *Storia del teatro arabo dalla nahda a oggi* (‘History of Arab Theatre from Nahda to Today,’ Roma: 2010) and *La Sarah Bernhardt d’Oriente e prima attrice del teatro arabo* (‘Memoirs: The Sarah Bernhardt of the East and the First Actress of the Arab Theatre,’ Roma: 2021), as well as editor of *Esistenze: Voci delle drammaturgie arabe tra diaspora e rivoluzione* (‘Existences: Voices of Arab Drama between Diaspora and Revolution,’ Napoli: 2021), and co-editor of *Fiction and History: the Rebirth of the Historical Novel in Arabic* (Roma: 2022).

Monica can be contacted at: monica.ruocco@unior.it