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# words and worlds in syria: countering narrative silence

**BRIGITTE HERREMANS**

Syria has a long tradition of dissent and of artistic practices that challenge the state's monopoly on politics and culture in symbolic and indirect ways. That tradition flared up after the protest movement started in 2011, culminating in a surge in civil-society activism and creative production. However, the regime's violent repression of the protests and its persecution of dissidents forced most artists to flee the country. The creative outburst did not go unnoticed in the outside world: interest in Syrian novels, films and plays grew significantly. Artistic creations have in common is that they render vulnerability visible. In this article I will foreground how artistic practices, in particular in the literary domain, signal that humanity cannot be crushed and bear witness to the traumas and hopes of Syrians.

## REBELLING IN THE KINGDOM OF SILENCE

Since coming to power in 1970, the Assad regime has prevented the establishment of public spaces of contestation and expected its citizens to fit in the official narrative of the state-led revolution, promoting the well-being of its citizens. This has led to a

situation that anthropologist Lisa Wedeen described as follows: 'Every Syrian is versed in the fictitious representation of reality, this symbolic language, if only because all are subjected to a constant barrage of its rhetorical iterations.'<sup>1</sup> In response to the ever-present official narrative, Syrian artists tested the limits of what can be said and developed through aesthetic creations.<sup>2</sup> By relying on metaphor and code, artists created spaces where there was room for diversity and contestation. They managed to develop a hard-to-suppress counterculture in which different perspectives could exist alongside each other.

Long before the outbreak of the popular uprising, there was resistance against the dictatorial state. This resistance was reflected in a variety of artistic disciplines, with among others cartoonists, writers and film-makers denouncing authoritarianism in covert ways. Syrian documentary film has been political and dissident since the early 1970s, opening the path to the use of the camera to document the uprising that many film-makers had predicted, as they felt that popular resentment was growing.<sup>3</sup> Syrian cinema has touched upon thwarted national aspirations and citizenship with film-makers like Usama Muhammad, Nabil al-Malih, 'Umar Amiralay and Hala Abdallah. In his documentary *Al-Hayat al-Yawmiyyah fi Qariya Suriyya (Everyday Life in a Syrian Village, 1974)*, Amiralay criticized the government's failure to provide basic amenities to the poor. Despite the ban imposed by the regime on his film, the film-maker continued in the same critical vein.

1 Lisa Wedeen, Acting 'as If'. In: *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 40(1998)3, pp. 503-523.

2 Sune Haugbolle, Imprisonment, Truth Telling and Historical Memory in Syria. In: *Mediterranean Politics*, 13(2008)2, pp. 261-276.

3 Joshka Wessels, *Documenting Syria: Film-making, Video Activism and Revolution*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2019, Kindle location 221.

Dissident artists refuse the silence that was imposed and that rendered them voiceless. As American philosopher Rebeca Solnit argues: 'Silence is what allows people to suffer without recourse, what allows hypocrisies and lies to grow and flourish, crimes to go unpunished. If our voices are essential aspects of our humanity, to be rendered voiceless is to be dehumanized or excluded from one's humanity.'<sup>4</sup> In the documentary *Journey into Memory* (2006), Hala Mohammed travelled to the ancient site of Palmyra along with writers Yassin al-Hajj Saleh, Faraj Bera'qdar and Ghassan Jba'i. Between them, the three men had spent 40 years near the site, yet they had never seen it as they were taken blindfolded to the prison of Tadmur. In the documentary they rendered visible how they survived torture and ill-treatment through their steadfastness. In 2011 Yassin al-Hajj Saleh became one of the leading voices of the Syrian revolution, and he would feature in another documentary *Our Terrible Country* (2014), testifying about the dashed hopes of the revolution that would ultimately lead him into exile in Turkey.

Another striking example of artistic dissidence are the *musalsalat* (miniseries) that air during Ramadan, offering entertainment while criticizing issues such as corruption under the guise of humour. The ability to use humour to distance oneself from reality and reject submission is reminiscent of how French philosopher Albert Camus defined a rebel. 'What is a rebel? A man who says no, but whose refusal does not imply a renunciation. He is also a man who says yes, from the moment he makes his first gesture of rebellion. A slave who has taken orders all

4 Rebecca Solnit, Silence and Powerlessness Go Hand in Hand: Women's Voices must Be Heard. In: *The Guardian*, 8/3/2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/mar/08/silence-powerlessness-womens-voices-rebecca-solnit>.

his life suddenly decides that he cannot obey some new command.<sup>5</sup> Series, drama and comedy have provided some relief in dark times and reflected the rebellious spirit of Syrians. Lisa Wedeen evokes popular dramas such as *Di'ah dai'ah (A Forgotten Village, 2008-2010)*, which used parody to make fun of the Assad regime and of circumstances in Syria.<sup>6</sup>

#### REVISITING TRAUMA, NURTURING RESISTANCE AND EVOKING EMPATHY

For decades, tenacious authoritarianism shaped Syrian writing, as Syrian American poet and scholar Mohja Kahf observed. 'Syrian literature today is jittery with what it cannot say and that is its genius.'<sup>7</sup> Syrian literature became increasingly diverse in terms of content, orientation, technique and formal styles of expression.<sup>8</sup> Even before 2011, novelists such as Rosa Hassan Yassin and Samar Yazbek explored the taboos of the hegemonic state and openly challenged the violence and arbitrariness of the *mukhabarat*, the notorious security services.

Writers of so-called 'prison literature' have addressed the traumas of imprisonment and torture since the 1990s. They conveyed traumatic events, 'memories of a terrorized life under the rule of the Assad clan, when a wrong word might send one to prison or to the gallows', as Syria scholar miriam cooke noted in

5 Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, New York: Vintage, 1991, p. 9.

6 Lisa Wedeen, *Ideology and Humor in Dark Times: Notes from Syria*. In: *Critical Inquiry*, 39(2013)4, pp. 841-873.

7 Mohja Kahf, *The Silences of Contemporary Syrian Literature*. In: *World Literature Today*, 75(2001)2, pp. 224-236.

8 Max Weiss, *Who Laughs Last: Literary Transformations of Syrian Authoritarianism*. In: Steven Heydemann & Reinoud Leenders (Eds.), *Middle East Authoritarianisms: Governance, Contestation and Regime Resilience in Syria and Iran*, Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2013, pp. 143-165.

her seminal book *Dancing in Damascus: Creativity, Resilience and the Syrian Revolution*.<sup>9</sup> Bashar al-Assad's accession to power in 2000 led to an increase in the production of fiction and films on imprisonment as his presidency rekindled hopes of political liberalization.<sup>10</sup> However, many of these works were banned as they fundamentally undermined the legitimacy of the regime and established a link between past and present state violence.

A striking example of the pervasive impact of prison literature is Mustafa Khalifa's novel *The Shell*. Khalifa was imprisoned from 1982 to 1994 for his political activities as a member of the leftist opposition and was held without trial at various state security prisons, including the notorious Tadmur Prison. The protagonist in *The Shell* is a political prisoner, Musa, an atheist Christian mistaken for a radical Islamist. Musa is shunned by his fellow inmates and remains silent during his 12 years of incarceration. Before being published in Arabic, the novel came out in French in 2009 as Arabic-language publishers were afraid to print it. The novel remains a reference for Syrian activists and artists who relate to the experiences of the inmate who at times was tortured so badly that his only desire was to die. 'It was now death I hoped for! I wanted only death ... but even death was beyond my grasp.'<sup>11</sup>

Through their testimonies, writers such as Mustafa Khalifa,

9 miriam cooke, *Dancing in Damascus: Creativity, Resilience and the Syrian Revolution*, London: Routledge, 2017.

10 miriam cooke, *The Cell Story: Syrian Prison Stories after Hafiz Asad*. In: *Middle East Critique*, 20(2011)2, pp. 169-187.

11 Mustafa Khalifa, *The Shell*, 2008. Excerpt on: *Asymptote*, <https://www.asymptotejournal.com/nonfiction/mustafa-khalifa-the-shell/>, visited 18/3/2020.

Hasiba ‘Abd al-Rahman and Faraj Bera‘qdar inspired other victims to document their experiences and collect evidence of the state’s human-rights violations. Consequently, sharing memories of widespread suffering empowered many dissidents to write, paint and make moving images to transform trauma into resistance.<sup>12</sup> Resistance against the imposed silence also occurred in the field of (suppressed) commemoration. Despite the regime’s suppression of debates on the so-called *ahdath* (events) in Hama in 1982, the massacre by the Syrian Army quelling an uprising by Islamist militants, many writers have addressed the massacre.

In his novel *In Praise of Hatred*, Damascus-based writer Khaled Khalifa invites his readers to revisit the trauma that continues to haunt Syrian society and to examine the sectarianism ravaging society. He had the audacity to publicly challenge the official narrative, testing the limits of his freedom of expression. A couple of months after its publication in 2006, the book was banned in Syria and it had to be reissued in Beirut.

It is notable that Khalifa gave a human face to extremism, calling on his readers to demonstrate empathy. He upholds that the goal of literature is ‘to awaken tolerance when others are thinking of revenge or trading in the clichés used by warmongers’.<sup>13</sup> Khalifa made radicalization tangible by rendering the narrator’s radicalization process, her imprisonment and final foregoing of sectarian hatred. ‘By the end of that summer, hatred had taken possession of me. I was enthused by it; I felt that it was saving

me. Hatred gave me the feeling of superiority I was searching for. I carefully read the pamphlets distributed at every meeting with the other girls and memorized whole sections of them, particularly the fatwas charging other sects with heresy.’<sup>14</sup>

Writer Rosa Yassin Hassan also had the courage to address the regime’s terror, in crushing dissent and preventing its subordinates from starting afresh. Her novel *Hurrās al-hawā* (*Guardians of the Air*, 2009) concentrates on imprisonment while at the same time turning to the taboo subject of female sexuality.<sup>15</sup> The main character Anat is an interpreter in the Canadian embassy in Damascus, translating the testimonies of refugees seeking protection from persecution. She is three months pregnant and decides to quit her job as she can no longer bear their excruciating stories. She waits for her fiancé Jawad, who is imprisoned on account of his left-wing activism. But Anat is no modern Penelope and so she slowly detaches herself from Jawad; she wants to be free. Reflecting on her prescient novel, Yassin Hassan describes how ‘when one is trapped in life’s humdrum, the slightest breeze of freedom can provoke changes. Decades of accumulated frustrations have allowed the flame buried inside people to liberate themselves from the fear of the security services. The words *horya* (freedom) and *harara* (heat) have the same root in Arabic.’<sup>16</sup>

14 Khaled Khalifa, *In Praise of Hatred*, Oxford: Blackwells, 2012, Kindle location 1534.

15 Rosa Yassin Hassan, *Hurrās al-hawā* (*Guardians of the Air*), Beirut: Riyād al-Rayyis, 2009.

16 Rosa Yassin Hassan, Ah, vous voulez encore la liberté ? In: *Courrier International*, 21/9/2011, <https://www.courrierinternational.com/article/2011/09/22/ah-vous-voulez-encore-la-liberte>.

12 Sune Haugbølle, *Imprisonment, Truth Telling* [...], pp. 261–276.

13 Khaled Khalifa, quoted in the interview: *A Conversation with Khaled Khalifa*, 18/7/2011, Raya Agency, <http://www.rayaagency.org/2011/07/a-conversation-with-khaled-khalifa/>.

## A SHORT-LIVED CREATIVE REVOLUTION

The artists of the pre-2011 era paved the way for the development of open public spaces and the reinvigoration of the arts scene that followed the eruption of the protest movement. The start of the Arab revolutions in 2011 rekindled the hope that Syrians would not be condemned once more to collective silence. Tragically the regime's violent response and the rise of extremist groups forced most artists to leave the country. From 2011 onwards, the regime stepped up its repression, persecuting artists and destroying their artistic production. It framed the conflict as a fight against terrorism and jihadism, imposing its narrative in the outside world and silencing its victims once more. Furthermore, the rapid transformation of a popular revolution into a civil war and the emergence of ISIS have altered the outside framing of the conflict, shifting the focus from the struggle against authoritarianism to that against extremism.

This evolution has marginalized the attention for victims, shrinking the space for the nascent civil society and artistic scene. Activists and artists were increasingly confronted with what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak called 'epistemic violence', the marginalization of a group through discourse, in her groundbreaking article *Can the Subaltern Speak?*<sup>17</sup> Aside from the physical violence, artists struggle to counter this violence that risks obliterating their history and experiences and that erases their arts. Aesthetic representations enable them to gain agency, move away from the margins and shape the narrative of Syria's transformation and make other people listen.

17 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* In: Carry Nelson & Lawrence Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, New York: Macmillan, 1988.

Yet, even if it came at a terrible price, the discovery of a voice of one's own stands out as one of the main changes within the artistic field. 'The Syrian Revolution caused so many changes, taking us out of this tiny space where we are all the same, where we are very limited also inside of ourselves. Suddenly we were completely free to express ourselves', argues poet Ahmad Katlish.<sup>18</sup> As sculptor and art historian Nour Assalia notes: 'Artists liberated themselves from anything that could inhibit their artistic freedom. They found new ways to express themselves through social media and different new channels that the Internet opened up for them.'<sup>19</sup>

The ability to speak truth to power resulted from the evaporation of the fear that had pervaded people's lives for decades.<sup>20</sup> Novelist Dima Wannous turned this fear, and the fear of the fear, into a central theme in her book *Al-Kha'ifun (The Frightened Ones)*.<sup>21</sup> She deems that the revolution 'broke the wall of fear, although maybe it didn't destroy it totally. The fear was from everything—the regime, power, military, and even people—they used to be afraid of each other, suspicious of each other. The revolution isn't only against the regime, but against anything that creates fear. I grew up on fear, and my generation was a scared generation. My generation has memories of the Homs massacres, and around 50,000 to 100,000 people were dead or missing. Some are missing still today, and their families are still looking for them.'<sup>22</sup>

18 Skype interview with Ahmad Katlish, based in Cologne, 28/1/2020.

19 Skype interview with Nour Assalia, based in Paris, 11/2/2020.

20 Wendy Pearlman, *Narratives of Fear in Syria*. In: *Perspectives on Politics*, 14(2016)1, pp. 21-37.

21 Dima Wannous, *Al-Kha'ifun (The Frightened Ones)*, Beirut: Dar Al Adab, 2017.

22 IPAF-shortlisted Novelist Dima Wannous on 'The Condition That Precedes Fear'. In: *Arablit*, 5/4/2018, <https://arablit.org/2018/04/05/ipaf-shortlisted-novelist-dima-wannous-on-the-condition-that-precedes-fear/>.

Writers expressed their views in novels, short stories, testimonials, poems and theatre plays, experimenting with new forms, such as literary Facebook posts. Writer Mustafa Taj Aldeen Almosa confirms that the revolution completely opened the windows of the literary scene, transforming him as an author. 'Before the revolution, there was freedom hidden in my mind, and after the revolution it became a reality. Before the revolution I would not write about my religious convictions but afterwards and all the bloodshed, I became more courageous to talk about it. I had written critical texts against the regime but I did not publish them because I was young and unknown. All of that changed. I found the courage to write openly about these issues.'<sup>23</sup> In his essay *Smuggling Dostoevsky's Heroes out of Idlib*, he addresses the reader. 'Every Syrian who has fled Syria during the war has their own story, their own fantasies too, and I am one of them. Due to the magnitude of the tragedy I can no longer distinguish between fiction and reality. However, before you read my story, dear reader, I would like to ask you, are you a believer? You will answer yes, so I hope you do not die to save me, the infidel.'<sup>24</sup> Taj Aldeen Almosa, who came from Idlib, was forced to leave Syria but cannot separate himself from Idlib. Confronted with the destruction of his familiar environment, he feels the urge to narrate people's experiences, transforming them from statistics into real people.

Cinema and photography occupied a central space in this creative revolution because of their visual impact. Furthermore,

23 Skype interview with Mustafa Taj Aldeen Almosa, based in Istanbul, 12/2/2020.

24 Mustafa Taj Aldeen Almosa, Tarhib Abtal Dostoevsky min Idlib (Smuggling Dostoevsky's Heroes out of Idlib. In: *Sa'aduna 'ala takhallus min ash-sh'ura (Help Us to Get Rid of the Poets)*, Dar Nun, 2019, pp. 155-173.

these disciplines crossed the boundaries of art and documentation. Citizens engaged in artistic expressions took control of the imagery, creating their own images that they shared with the world mainly through Facebook groups and YouTube. Citizen activists and film-makers emerged all over the country, cooperating and establishing collectives such as the video art collective Abounaddara and the non-profit Bidayyat for Audiovisual Arts, supporting and producing documentaries and short films. They aimed to counter the war of images and humanize the conflict by telling stories of ordinary Syrians. Video art collective Abbounadara sees itself involved in a twofold fight, against the regime propaganda and against the outside framing of the situation as a conflict between the regime and extremist groups: 'The people of Syria are thus denied their diversity, reduced to playing extras in television reports, victims without names or voices.'<sup>25</sup> Artistic expression also helped to document international law violations, to foreground victims and challenge the failing international response.

The revolution and the ensuing civil war gave unprecedented impetus to Syrian independent video content and cinematography. According to visual anthropologist and Syria scholar Joshka Wessels, 'the arrival of Syrian-made documentary films on the world markets and festivals, and the enormous number of YouTube videos from Syria since the outbreak of the uprisings, have constituted a revolution in themselves. The inspired creative resistance transformed the way in which contemporary wars are observed and documented. Suddenly, war became an immersive experience. YouTube served long as the primary

25 Dork Zabunyan, Abbounadara. In: Documenta 14, <https://www.documenta14.de/en/artists/949/abounadara>, consulted 18/3/2020.

platform for user-generated content.<sup>26</sup>

Syrian feature documentary films firmly arrived on the international stage in 2014 and since then have blazed a trail at the international film festivals, culminating with three Oscar nominations for feature documentary for *Last Men in Aleppo* (2018) and *The Cave* (2020) by Firas Fayyad and *For Sama* by Waad Al-Kataeb (2020). Most of these documentaries focused on increasingly sidelined stories of the victims of the war, countering simplistic narratives of a failed revolution. This desire to tell the tale of the impossible revolution is poignantly clear in the documentary *Our Terrible Country* (2013), produced by Mohammed Ali Atassi and Ziad al-Homsi. Homsi followed the iconic dissident Yassin al-Haj Saleh, firstly during a dangerous trip to Raqqa, under control of ISIS, and later into a painful exile in Istanbul. The film shows al-Haj Saleh in the Damascus suburb of Douma, under siege by the regime. ‘What we see is the torture of a society, the generalization of torture over the whole Syrian society’, Saleh comments while walking in destroyed areas. ‘Is this the freedom you want? If we were able to choose, no. We would want a freedom that is chicer and less costly. But it seems that this is the price that was imposed on us.’

## TRUTH-TELLING THROUGH NARRATIVES

‘Since 2011 there has been a growing interest in publishing Syrian literature’, acknowledges poet Rasha Omran, who has lived in Egypt since 2011, after the regime forced her to leave Syria.<sup>27</sup> She has published several poetry collections, among

26 Joshka Wessels, *Documenting Syria* [...], Kindle location 5425.

27 Skype interview with Rasha Omran, based in Cairo, 11/2/2020.

which *Defy the Silence*, a trilingual Arabic-Italian-English edition that can be defined as an act of resistance, defying fear and incomprehension.<sup>28</sup> Omran sees art and literature as the sole memory of these events that will last in the future. ‘In the end, we as writers, painters, film-makers work in the artistic domain first and foremost to counter the attempts to erase us as persons, as Syrians from Syria, and in particular to counter the elimination of our “Syrianness”, our Syrian presence. It is an attempt to hold on, to devote ourselves to the memory.’<sup>29</sup>

Writers aspire to resist amnesia, signalling that humanity cannot be crushed. Syrian writer and academic Hassan Abbas argued that an important function of literature is to prevent forgetting. He depicts Rosa Hassan Yassin, Samar Yazbek and Manhal al-Sarraj as modern Scheherazades, rendering the uncensored history of people. But contrary to Scheherazade, who told stories to forget in *One Thousand and One Nights*, these writers tell stories in order not to forget.<sup>30</sup> Syrian writers engage in truth-telling as they produce a narrative memory. They contribute to a potential archive, encouraging public commemoration and articulating the possibility of a future.<sup>31</sup>

When the revolution started, Syrian novelist Samar Yazbek travelled through the country, collecting testimonies published in *A Woman in the Crossfire: Diaries of the Syrian Revolution*.

28 Rasha Omran, *Defy the Silence*, Hamilton: Hamilton Arts & Letters, 2018, [https://samizdatpress.typepad.com/hal\\_book\\_rasha\\_omran/hal-book-defy-the-silence-poetry-by-rasha-omran.html](https://samizdatpress.typepad.com/hal_book_rasha_omran/hal-book-defy-the-silence-poetry-by-rasha-omran.html), visited 18/3/2020.

29 Skype interview with Rasha Omran [...].

30 Hassan Abbas, *حكايات ضد النسيان: قراءة في بعض النتاج الروائي المعاصر في سورية*. In: *Alawan.org*, 8/12/2013.

31 Roger Bromley, ‘Giving Memory a Future’: Women, Writing, Revolution. In: *Journal for Cultural Research*, 19(2015)2, pp. 1-12.

Yazbek became what South African writer Nadine Gordimer calls the ‘witness writer’ who can produce ‘the intense awareness, the antennae of receptivity’, the meaning that cannot possibly be discerned from reporting the daily event.<sup>32</sup> Live narratives that spoke of atrocities became essential to give a human face to the suffering. ‘Somebody has to smash the narrative of this criminal regime with the truth of the revolution. This is a revolution and not a sectarian war, and my voice as a writer and a journalist must come out in support of the uprising, no matter what the cost.’<sup>33</sup>

It is inconceivable for Yazbek not to write about the victims. In *Al-Masha’a* (The Walker),<sup>34</sup> published in English as *The Blue Pen*, she tells a simple tale of a mute girl, Rima, who is unable to stop walking when she is given the opportunity to do so. Her mother used to tie her to a rope, constraining her in her movements. But one day, during a trip to her aunt, soldiers stop her mother and herself at a checkpoint. Unable to stop herself, Rima starts walking, endangering both herself and her mother, who is killed. This is the start of her descent into hell, but she refuses to let go of her desire to walk, to live and experience beauty despite the atrocities. This tale of destruction is one of the finest examples of how literature enables readers to immerse themselves in a different life, travelling from the individual trauma to the current trauma of a nation. It addresses the extreme vulnerability of people who, confronted with the annihilation of the world they had inhabited, are at a loss.

32 Nadine Gordimer, Testament of the World. In: *The Guardian*, 15/6/2002, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/jun/15/fiction.nadinegordimer>.

33 Samar Yazbek, *A Woman in the Crossfire, Diaries of the Syrian Revolution*, London: Haus Publishing, 2012, p. 230.

34 Samar Yazbek (2016), *Al-Masha’a, The walker*, Dar al-adab, Beirut.

Bearing witness to the plight of the voiceless, and giving them a voice became one of the strongest features of recent Syrian writing. Khaled Khalifa equally believes that he should be on the side of the victims. ‘The writer is the voice of the victims, we should remember that writers cannot live outside of their reality. For Syrian writers it is not possible to write about lovely lakes and beautiful things in their surroundings. We need to think about the way we want to reflect the reality, as we are the voice of the victims.’<sup>35</sup> In his latest novel *Lem yusalli ‘alayhum ahad* (*Nobody Will Pray for Them*), he touches on the persecution and massacres of the Assyrians. It haunts him that there has been so little historic research about these massacres and that some people still defend the Ottomans. ‘Similarly, the Syrian question will remain a topic of discussion for centuries. We as writers are a small part of an army that needs to destroy fixed ideas. Our first task is to change the perspective of the world on the Syrian question. There are a lot of facts that the world does not want to see as it is too preoccupied with other issues.’<sup>36</sup>

The disintegration of his country makes writing about the victims and their small, seemingly trivial stories all the more important to Khalifa. His novel *Death Is Hard Work* (2016) was inspired by a personal story. After having suffered from a heart attack in 2012, he wondered what would happen to his body if he were to die. He had heard that people buried their dead in their gardens as they could not transfer them to a graveyard. The book tells of three siblings’ perilous road trip through the war-torn country with their father’s corpse. Their father’s last wish was to be buried in the cemetery of Anabiya, a village in

35 Skype interview with Khaled Khalifeh, 7/2/2020.

36 Skype interview with Khaled Khalifeh [...].

the countryside of Aleppo, under rebel control. His son Bolbol regrets having made this promise to his dying father as the situation would make their mission quasi impossible. 'There were mass graves everywhere filled with casualties who'd never even been identified. No 'aza lasted more than a few hours now, even for the rich: death was no longer a carnival people threw in order to demonstrate their wealth and prestige. A few roses, a few mourners yawning in a half-empty living room for a couple of hours, someone reciting a sura or two from the Qur'an in a low voice ... that was all anybody got.'<sup>37</sup>

## ARTS IN THE SPACE OF WIDESPREAD DESTRUCTION

The outbreak of the violent conflict forced most artists to flee the country, fearing the repression of the regime, and later the violence of jihadist groups. A few critical artists managed to stay in Syria, despite their critical positions. Yet they paid a heavy price, as Khaled Khalifa testifies in the film *Exiled at Home*: 'Wandering around the streets alone. What kind of miserable life are you punishing me with? In streets empty of all but the corpses of my loved ones.'<sup>38</sup> Most of his relatives and friends have left the country, but unable to live elsewhere than in Damascus, he refuses to live in exile, in a void. He finds himself a solitary writer, 'one who no longer has anything to lose, having observed, at length, Syrians attempting to win back their country, then losing everything'.<sup>39</sup> Overall, the Syrian artistic scene has mobilized outside of its borders, forming a transna-

37 Khaled Khalifeh, *Death Is Hard Work*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019, pp. 6-7; aza is an Islamic mourning ritual where prayers are offered on behalf of the departed.

38 Lina Sinjab, *Exiled at Home*, 16/10/2019, <https://youtu.be/saWJsMwBak>.

39 Khaled Khalifeh, Living in a Void. In: *The Guardian*, 22/08/2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/aug/22/living-in-a-void-life-in-damascus-after-the-exodus>.

tional community with artists in neighbouring countries, and increasingly in European countries, notably Germany, France and the UK.<sup>40</sup> This experience had a profound impact, leading to what artists describe as a 'Syrian refugee industry' which can be essentializing.

Visual artist Sulafa Hijazi, who fled to Frankfurt in 2013 and later settled in Berlin, takes issue with the label 'Syrian artist'. She stresses that she does not want to belong to this industry.<sup>41</sup> Hijazi captures the violence in her illustrations in a sophisticated style, and renders her experiences of growing up in a militarized society and subsequently witnessing the disintegration of the country as the sound of weapons became dominant. 'Death became a fact of life in Syria. It became very normal, very common among people who lost relatives. Death was something we came to take for granted; we got used to dealing with the high murder rate simply as numbers. I tried to reflect the contrast between life and death in the illustration of a pregnant woman.'<sup>42</sup>

Increasingly, the artwork explored the violence ravaging Syrian society. 'People chanted slogans and songs calling for the overturning of the regime. They demanded a pluralistic democratic civil state under the authority of the law. There was beauty in that. And then, police shot bullets directly at the demonstrators whose funerals turned into new demonstrations with more

40 Cristina Cusenza, Artists from Syria in the International Artworld: Mediators of a Universal Humanism. In: *Arts*, 8(2019)2, <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts8020045>.

41 Eliza Griswold, Mapping the Journey of Syria's Artists: What Happens when a Culture Disperses? In: *The New Yorker*, 28/1/2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/mapping-the-journeys-of-syrias-artists>.

42 Sulafa Hijazi, Ongoing: An Artist reveals the Motivation. In: Malu Halasa, Zaher Omareen, Nawara Mahfoud (Eds.), *Syria Speaks: Art and Culture from the Frontline*, London: Saqi, 2014.

shootings and more victims. Their blood was now mixed into the soil of Syria. Now all that beauty is lost. It is drowned in the sea, disappeared into prisons, buried and turned into dust', ponders poet Rasha Omran.<sup>43</sup> 'I used to write about death, but from an abstract perspective. Now death for me is no longer abstract. I have seen youth killed before my eyes. Their blood stained my clothes. My memory holds the smell of their blood. I can watch the people of my country dying on television. Death is no longer abstract. It is a fact.'<sup>44</sup>

However, as a result of the focus on violence, the creativity of Syrians was overlooked. Many artists refuse victimhood and struggle against the 'invisibilization' of their work and their aspirations of personal freedom. As Syrian film director Waad Al-Kataeb stated originally, by means of the embroidery on the dress she was wearing during the Oscar nominations on 9 February 2020: 'We had the audacity to dream and we do not regret our struggle for dignity.' Syrian artists and activists refuse to be dehumanized, and fear that they will be condemned once more to the margins of history if they do not counter their assailants' attempts to erase their stories.

Ensuring that the creative production is not lost and that Syrians can connect with each other despite the fragmentation is a concern shared by many artists and civil society activists. Berlin-based visual artist and cultural activist Khaled Barakeh is devoted to reconnecting Syria's social and cultural fabric. With his online platform titled the SYRIA Cultural Index (SCI),

43 Rasha Omran, *Defy the Silence* [...].

44 Rasha Omran: 'Now Death For Me Is No Longer Abstract'. In: *Arablit*, 20/9/2018 <https://arablit.org/2018/09/20/rasha-omran-now-death-for-me-is-no-longer-abstract/>.

he wants to empower and connect Syrian cultural practitioners and to reach out to stakeholders in the international cultural scene. Graphic designer Sana Yazigi shares this passion for the preservation of Syrian artistic expressions. She was astonished by the enormous creativity that Syrians displayed: both established artists and citizens who experimented with artistic expressions. Yazigi wanted to pay tribute to this richness through the project 'Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution' and from 2011 onwards, together with a team, she started building an online archive of artistic revolutionary expressions. By early 2017, *The Creative Memory* had archived more than 25,000 expressions including slogans, sculptures, murals, graffiti, music, songs, paintings, poetry, posters, caricature, photography, publications, theatre, banners, videos, and even stamps. Organized chronologically as well as thematically, the site or virtual community follows the trajectory of revolutionary creativity.<sup>45</sup> 'We look at the role of arts in the political domain and base ourselves on these 11.000 documents to know what has happened. We managed to create a narrative, through this creativity we have written a parallel history.'<sup>46</sup>

'Words make worlds', claimed American poet Gregory Orr, referring to the Jewish tradition.<sup>47</sup> Through poetic language and acts, Syrian artists have summoned up a world where they can talk and write freely. Despite the fragmentation of the country, the demolition and the sheer impossibility to address this depavation in a meaningful way, this freedom has not been abol-

45 miriam cooke, Reimagining the Syrian Revolution. In: *ASAP/Journal*, 3(2018)2, pp. 269-278.

46 Skype interview with Sana Yazigi, 5 May 2020.

47 Gregory Orr, Shaping Grief with Language. In: *On Being with Krista Tippett*, 30/5/2019, <https://onbeing.org/programs/gregory-orr-shaping-grief-with-language/>.

ished. Writers address grief and trauma through lyrical, harsh or metaphorical language, writing their narrative back into the public realm, ensuring that victims are not relegated to the margins of history. Even if they cannot enjoy basic rights, they cannot lose the right to their own story.