


# Chapter 13

## Dissent and Revolt in Levantine Arab Poetry: Birds, Bodies, and Homeland

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The various nations and ethnic peoples of the Levant have suffered invasion, colonization, and occupation numerous times over the course of the last century, and there have been rigorous forms of resistance through poetry. Most notably, the symbols of birds, bodies, and homeland have figured prominently in the verses of the natives of this region and their descendants in their respective diasporas. Concerning the region's inhabitants or members of the diaspora, their physical bodies possess inextricable ties to the homeland, despite disparate distances either through forced expulsion or reluctant emigration. There will be focus on how the biological body, the mind within, and the environment that surrounds, including all the cultural, ethnic, and geographical factors becomes a body anthropology that shapes Levantine poets and their work. Levantine poetry showcases a symbiotic relationship, that what happens to one's homeland also happens to the bodies of its natives; likewise, what happens to the natives' bodies happens to the homeland.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Poetry as an artistic platform for resistance, revolt, and identity in the Middle East is not new; it dates back to the Sumerian civilization with the *Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgamesh* (trans. George, 2016), a work that begins with the discontent

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of the people of Uruk. Like this epic, the modern resistance poem can become a cultural beacon—a flag of freedom or protest waving in the breasts of a people. Quite markedly, this has been a motif of poets writing in Arabic for well over a century. The poems studied in the present chapter further operate as a crossing of borders. Each piece reimagines the boundaries between homeland and exile, body and landscape, self and collective. Levantine resistance poetry becomes a border text, where displacement and belonging are negotiated within the confines of the poem. Writer and translator Issa (2024) states:

From the earliest days of their dispossession, Palestinians have recorded their plight in poetry. There is a long tradition for this amongst Arabs who, since long before the birth of Islam, have considered poetry a diwan, a historical record. Unlike historiography, which Arabs are also renowned for, poetry is a mnemonic device that penetrates people’s consciousness, registers and shapes their affective state... Palestinians write poetry of resistance, enshrining poetry as both a diwan and a protest against oppression...Through poetry, Palestinians cultivate their political imagination and preserve their collective spirit. (para. 1)

This “collective spirit” is most notable in the propensity of the Arab speaking people to be inextricably tied to the land of their birth, and it will be further defined as a *body anthropology* that emanates from the poetry of the Levantine peoples or descendants thereof, written in Arabic and the languages of their respective, adopted nations. The language in these verses manifests a corporeal, psychological, and emotional relationship to the homeland, but this relationship also immortalizes a multidimensional world of love and trauma that includes the text of poetry alongside the topography of bodies and homeland.

No matter the time or place in which the poetry is written, no matter the way in which the Arab peoples are marginalized, dispossessed, or murdered, their identity forever intertwines with their homeland. The Palestinian Declaration of Independence (1988) even states: “The Palestinian people was never separated from or diminished in its integral bonds with Palestine. Thus the Palestinian Arab people ensured for itself an everlasting union between itself, its land and its history” (*Interactive Encyclopedia of the Palestine Question, 1988*). In the ensuing analysis beginning with Part I, I will focus on Levantine poetry of resistance, focusing on bird imagery as representative of possible escape, liberty, and aesthetics. For Part II, the focus centers on the relationship of hope and bodies, with the body anthropology motif highlighted and manifested by Levantine poets.

In Arab culture, poetry is the highest form of art, and poets are lauded as the best of humans. This is an ancient perspective and can best be referenced by the following anonymous story from oral tradition. There is an old tale (Anonymous, n.d.) from the Najd desert region of the Arabian Peninsula involving an orphan princess named Da’ad who, when reaching marriageable age, desires to choose her

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