

“Palestine at heart” for a Palestinian refugee writer in Amman

Dr. Sanaa Shalan - Amman, Jordan

By Anne Paq*

Dr Sanaa Shalan appears immediately as a strong, successful, articulate and proud young woman. Sanaa is a highly respected professor of Arabic literature at the University of Jordan. At only 27, she is a renowned writer who has won 32 awards, among them the Al-Shariqa Award for Arabic creativity for the story *The Nightmare* and the first Young Author Award of the Abd-Al-Muhsin Qatan Association for her short story collection *Aina Khader*.

But above all Sanaa is a Palestinian refugee. She has a promising successful career in Amman, but she does not forget where she comes from and she strongly speaks about her identity as a Palestinian.

When asked if she knows the story of her family, she promptly answers: *“of course, we know everything. Our grandfather told us about the house, where the keys are, how many rooms and how many chickens we had. We know it by heart because we consider these stories as sacred.”* One of her grandmothers recently passed away, but over the years she had continued to tell the story of the family to the younger generations.

Her family comes from Beit Nattif, a village located around 20 kilometres southwest of Hebron. Her grandfather was a carpenter, and now *“everybody in the family is fond of wood; some learned how to work it and my father is in the wood business.”* Her mother’s side of the family is from the same village: *“people used to marry from the same village so that the lands once returned will stay in the same families.”*

During the Nabka, in 1948, the village was ethnically cleansed and completely destroyed. There was some fighting and some of Sanaa’s family members were killed. As many refugees, they did not have time to take many of their belongings as they were convinced that they would go back after a few days.

Subsequently, the family came to Jordan, rented a piece of land in Madaba not far from Amman, and started to cultivate the land. *“Imagine that they were keeping some grains for their land in Palestine.”* Then they moved to Al-Karama camp, close to the Jordan Valley. But during the 1967 war, they were forced to flee once again because the camp was being shelled by the Israeli army so they went to Amman.

Sanaa was born in 1978 in Sweileh and grew up in Amman, among a family of 11 sisters and brothers, all of whom pursued higher education. At the early age of seven Sanaa started to write, and one of her teachers predicted that she would become a writer. At nine years old she wrote her first novel called *Unknown Steps*. Being already very well aware of her Palestinian identity, the subject of this story was the return to Palestine. She had a strong personality. She recalled how she spoke out when a high-ranking representative of UNRWA came to the school to give out some gifts. She protested in front of everybody and asked: *“how can you give us some gifts when you [the UN] are the ones responsible for our misery?”* She was slapped. She continued her education and developed her writing skills. At the age of 19 she published her first book and at 20 she won her first award. She specialized in criticism, novels, plays and children’s stories. She also has a regular column in the Jordanian daily newspaper *Al-Dustour*. In 2005, she was given the trophy of the Jordan University President for outstanding student in academia and creativity. At 26 she obtained her PhD in modern criticism and Arabic literature and began her work as a professor. Her career is a way to pursue her passion for literature: *“I am related to the language, it is my identity.”*



Depopulated village of Beit Nattif, 2007. (©BADIL)

Beit Nattif. Standing on a high, flat-topped ridge between two broad valleys, this ancient village was surrounded by olive groves and fields of corn, planted by the over 2400 villagers, in the valleys below. The village was attacked by the Israeli Har’el brigade on 21 October 1948 as part of Operation ha-Har, and its occupation enabled the army to block the Bethlehem-Ajjur-Beit Jibrin Road. All of its inhabitants were ethnically cleansed in the operation, and most reside in the refugee camps of Bethlehem (Dheisheh, ‘Azzah, ‘Aida). All of the buildings in the village were completely destroyed, with only rubble remaining, on which the Israeli colonies of Neliv ha-Lamed-He, Avi’ezer, Roglit, and Newe Mikha’el were built.



Sanaa receiving one of her 32 literary awards.

Sanaa has never been to Palestine. Nobody in her family has been able to, especially since a member of her family became a martyr in 1981 as he tried to enter Israel through the Golan Heights. Since then, none of her family members has been able to get an entry permit. As with most Palestinian refugees, they have all become “*persona non grata*” in their own country.

Even if she can not visit Palestine, Sanaa has Palestine at heart. She has become very active and been involved with Palestinian organisations. She has just finished writing a collection of stories for Al Qattan foundation, entitled *Aina Khader*, on the question of martyrdom. Next summer, she will visit the US to meet some other refugees and write their stories.

Together with another writer, she has built a website called “those who dance for emptiness” gathering resources on writers of Palestinian origin, and whose Palestinian origin is often unknown. Something similar happened to her. One time, Sanaa was invited to receive an award and the speaker declared that there was no

Palestinian writer in the gathering, she immediately stood up and said that even if she has a Jordanian passport, she is indeed Palestinian.

As a refugee she always feels like a second class citizen, “*when I travel I always have problems. They always put me aside and ask me more questions just because I am Palestinian. If I am treated that way, how is it for an ordinary person? It is really shameful.*” Even at the University of Jordan she cannot freely express herself and introduce herself as a Palestinian refugee, although she always finds indirect ways. She also strongly states, “*I am fed up with telling people that we have rights. Why do I have to waste my time defending myself as if I am a criminal? Why do two or three generations have to be wasted? Why should I get married and have kids if they have to end up killed by the Israelis? Why can't I live as other people?*” The Palestinian history and current situation affects her : “*when I think of the Nakba, it is painful. Before I used to feel sorry, but nowadays the situation is getting worse with all the killings; the organized and systematic killings of my people.*”

She does not believe in the current peace process, “*we have been talking with them [the Israelis] for many years, and we have nothing to show for it. The only peace will be when we will be able to return. The Palestinians should be able to form a viable Palestinian state and Israel should admit responsibility for all the crimes committed against the Palestinians.*” She thinks that despite the fact that many people are supportive of the Palestinians, the governments are not, “*all the countries will come to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the creation of Israel and nobody will stand with the Palestinian suffering.*”

But she still feels hopeful for the future. She hopes that she will be able to return. She refers to a Palestinian saying “*the soil of the land always craves its owner.*” Her hope also lies in the strength of the Palestinian people who all over the world keep their strength and their distinctive identity and always make a priority of developing and educating themselves, “*if they let us come back, we have everything in the community. We have qualified people to build Palestine again. We are ready.*”

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