

**The Resilience of the Palestinian Youth in the Face of Insurmountable War
Adversities: Modern Dramatic Study in the Play ‘Tennis in Nablus’**

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صمود الشباب الفلسطيني في مواجهة مصاعب الحرب التي من الصعب التغلب عليها: دراسة درامية
حديثه في مسرحية "التنس في نابلس"

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Abstract

As a playwright who is able to present the essence of Palestine and Palestinians, Ismail Khalidi offers insights on the fighting spirit of the Palestinians through resilience. In his play *Tennis in Nablus*, the British occupiers, through excesses, are determined to enslave the Palestinians and carve out a Jewish homeland out of Palestine. However, the patriotic fervour of the youth dares the might of the British Empire and that leads individuals to switching of allegiances, pay the ultimate sacrifice and rile up the populace for a revolt through incendiary writings. Khalidi has successfully blended historical facts to drive home the point that a revolt – individual or collective – demands an unwavering belief in the convictions held – a theme that is understudied. The play is called a tragicomicomedy as the dramatist seamlessly blends all the three genres as they epitomize the spirit of Palestine and the Palestinians, which is fluid. Furthermore, he depicts the complex behaviours of humans transitions according to the situations which either sharpen or blur human divisions.

Keywords: Palestine, freedom, revolt, identity, occupation, colonization, tragicomedy

الملخص:

يقدم إسماعيل خالدي، بصفته كاتبًا مسرحيًا قادرًا على تجسيد جوهر فلسطين والفلسطينيين، رؤى ثاقبة حول روح الكفاح لدى الفلسطينيين من خلال صمودهم. في مسرحيته "التنس في نابلس"، يُصوّر المحتلون البريطانيون، عبر تجاوزاتهم، على استعباد الفلسطينيين وإقامة وطن يهودي على أرض فلسطين. إلا أن الحماس الوطني لدى الشباب يتحدى جبروت الإمبراطورية البريطانية، ما يدفع الأفراد إلى تغيير ولائهم، وتقديم التضحيات الجسام، وتحريض الجماهير على الثورة من خلال كتابات تحريضية. وقد نجح خالدي في مزج الحقائق التاريخية ليؤكد على أن الثورة - سواء كانت فردية أو جماعية - تتطلب إيمانًا راسخًا بالمعتقدات الراسخة، وهو موضوع لم يحظَ بالدراسة الكافية. تُصنف المسرحية ضمن فئة الكوميديا السياسية التراجيدية، حيث يمزج الكاتب بسلسلة بين الأنواع الثلاثة، التي تُجسد روح فلسطين والفلسطينيين المتغيرة باستمرار. علاوة على ذلك، فهو يصور السلوكيات المعقدة للبشر في مراحل انتقالهم وفقًا للمواقف التي إما أن تزيد من حدة الانقسامات البشرية أو تظمسها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: فلسطين، الحرية، الثورة، الهوية، الاحتلال، الاستعمار، الكوميديا المأساوية

Introduction

A recipient of multiple awards since his university days, Palestinian/Lebanese – American playwright, actor, poet, screenwriter, and theatre director Ismail Khalidi has primarily focused on writings on Palestine and the Middle East. Through his works, he has taken upon himself the onus to highlight the struggles of the Palestinians and depict them in a hard-hitting manner. Through the vast range of Palestine issues that he has covered through his plays, he is considered to be an authority on them. The highlights of his dramas are his directness, and the telling of truths in the most effective manner. His notable plays include *Truth Serum Blues* (2005), *Tennis in Nablus* (2010), *Foot* (2016), and *Returning to Haifa* (2018), *Dead are my People* (2019).

The Aims of the Study

As resilience in face of adversities has several perspectives, this study will endeavour to understand the causal relations that lead to varied conflicts in different contexts. Also, it will highlight the forms of resistance offered by the Palestinians and their effects. To have better insights, it will reveal the underlying simmering tensions between the characters and investigate the self-interest dynamics between characters who differ in ideologies and beliefs, along with highlighting the presence of comedy in the darkest of situations.

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The Questions of the Study

- What are the circumstances that bring to the fore the resilience of the Palestinian youth?
- What acts of the youth are presented that can be defined as resilient?
- How effectively does Khalidi use the genres of tragedy, politics and comedy?
- How does the writer reveal ethnic, racial, and semitic differences?

The Significance of the Study

The study gains relevance due to its exploration of the resilience among the Palestinian youth against a Zionist state. That subject has been an integral part of modern history and literature. This study, through the play *Tennis in Nablus* incorporates all components that act as catalysts to the resistance offered by the Palestinians, a theme which is often overlooked. This study delves deep into it and along with the perspectives of the playwright, presents the unseen ongoing in the minds of the Palestinians in an analytical manner. The love and loyalty of the Palestinians towards their country that comes to the fore, in thought and action, when she is about to be ripped into two, is a part of contemporary literature in itself.

The Statement of the Problem

This play of Ismail Khalidi depicts the Palestinian side of the story on British occupation, the machinations of the Zionists, and the endeavours to free her. However, there is a severe lack of authoritative literature on it. Therefore, the need arises in the realm of literature studies, to provide an understanding that incorporates the theme of resistance. A thorough scrutiny that focuses on the internal and external conflict of the Palestinian youth that takes on the brutal force of the British Empire.

Methodology

The present study uses the qualitative research methods such as textual analysis, literature review, library method and analytical method to make an investigatory analysis of the selected play. These qualitative methods are selected after meticulously studying the play which has several elements that define resilience. Also, the contexts need to be taken into account to gain a better understanding of the messages that the playwright wants to send

across. Consequently, to understand the intricacy of the work so that its literary value can be highlighted through the analytical framework, textual analysis will be employed. To fathom and gain insights into the existing corpus on the themes under study, the method of literature review will be used. To gain scholarly insights, library method will be utilized. And the analytical method will be implemented to analyse existing literature to present an informed analysis.

The Resistance and the Resilience

To understand the resistance and the resilience of the Palestinians, it is imperative to understand the backdrop of the play. The play is set in 1939, a year in a period of immense upheaval in the history of the State of Palestine. That year marked the start of World II, the British were the administrators of Palestine, and the Jews were steadily migrating in large droves to Palestine from Europe. The Balfour Declaration of 1917 mandated a Jewish homeland that was to be carved out of Palestine. The Palestinians were fighting the British, and at the same time, lived in fear and uncertainty about the Jews making efforts to create a Zionist state. They fought tooth and nail to achieve success on both fronts. That armed uprising came to be known as the Arab Revolt. But for the Palestinians, it was resistance. And the most lethal ammunition they possessed in their arsenal was resilience. Ismail Khalidi has set his novel against that very backdrop. Being a Palestinian himself, the playwright has vividly described the dire situations of the Palestinians. However, primarily, he has depicted the spirit of the Palestinian Arab people with patriotism and the courage to put their lives on the line for the their homeland.

In the preface written by Khalidi and Naomi Wallace, they assert that the play “is a testament not only to the existence of Palestinians, but also the vibrancy, the diversity and the perseverance of Palestinian culture and identity and all it has to offer to the theater and to world literature.” (Khalidi & Wallace, 2015, p.15). Therefore, the dramatist has clearly stated that resistance is not only about protecting the entity of Palestine, but also the essence of the traits of the Palestinians. Through the characters of Anbara, Yusuf, Tariq and Hajj Waleed, Khalidi has underlined the most important aspect of their resistance – the identity of Palestine and Palestinians is invariably connected. The writings of Anbara under different pseudonyms, the armed struggle of Yusef, the monetary might of Tariq or the surreptitious involvement of Hajj Waleed, they all are offering resistance through resilience. Therefore, “a sequential understanding of the relationship between resilience and resistance in which prolonged acts

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of resistance in the face of a series of disturbances would lead to the necessity of developing resilient strategies. Alternatively, we might pursue the opposite approach and propose that expressions of resilience can be observed right after a shock and before strategies of resistance are deployed.” (Bourbeau, Ryan, 2017, p.4).

Consequently, resilience and resistance are interconnected. Ismail Khalidi has made those two traits as an inherent part of the characters of the play. That characteristic can be traced back in history since the inception of the struggles of Palestinians with the Israelites. The playwright endeavours to draw the attention of the audiences and the readers that continued resistance of the Palestinians has given birth to the trait of resilience in them as an innate characteristic. Moreover, the playwright has focused on the strong will of the Palestinians. The characters in the play know that their struggles to keep Palestine sovereign and free from the British rule may or may not succeed. There is hope in their hearts but it is not perennial. However, they know extremely well that what’s important is their need to act. That mind-set defines their resilience and their acts embody resistance. The play is built on the very foundations of the liberty of the Palestinians which has been forcefully taken away from them. The playwright being a Palestinian himself, understands the Palestinian traits of resilience and resistance in every sense of the word.

The Depiction of the Resilience of Yusef

How does one define the form of resilience that is most likely to accomplish goals? Especially, when one is fighting to preserve their homeland and wanting to save their people from getting annihilated? Khalidi, through Yusef, considers an armed unrest to be the most effective tool. As a result, “in the face of repression, protest movement members will over time conclude that nonviolence has failed and that violence is the way forward.” (Rød, Weidmann, 2023, p.9). Furthermore, the “malleability and proliferation of resistance” (Alqaisiya, 2023, p.6), depends on “struggles in the context of major political transformations or during authoritarian rule.” (Núñez, Dinas, 2023, p.2). The conflict that Yusef landed himself into, was complex from a political perspective and an act of revolt from the viewpoint of governance. But for Yusef, a Palestinian, it was plainly simple – his resilience would help in his struggle for the independence of Palestine. Though he was arrested and exiled, he wanted to bounce back by driving the British out of his country. Also, preserving the sovereignty of his country was paramount to him. Interestingly, Khalidi transformed Yusef onto what he became, through his wife’s fiery writings. Yusef took up arms by getting

influenced by words, and yet did not believe that words could provide a solution to his country's problems. The paradoxical situation that the playwright creates speaks volumes of how Yusef's contemplation on his wife's writing roused him to action, but convinced him the futility of words.

Therefore, Yusef's resilience can be attributed to his understanding of the situation of his country, and his actions to change it. The following dialogues in the play bear testimony to it:

Yusef: "Anbara, I was arrested and exiled because I fought. And I fought because they occupy us." (Khalidi, 2015, p.78).

Yusef: "Like I used to. But that life is gone Anbara. So as soon as I was released I went to work. The revolution can't wait—" (Khalidi, 2015, p.78).

Yusef: "Precisely. And with it I was able to borrow from the Nablus armory forty brand-new 1939 edition Enfield rifles, enough ammo for a month's campaign and a supply of dynamite to derail British trains." (Khalidi, 2015, p.82).

It is evident that Ismail Khalidi has emphasized on an armed struggle being the most effective method for a nation, and a country, to offer resistance to occupiers. The character of Yusef is fighting against all odds, with mighty enemies who have abundant resources of ordnance and wealth. Even so, he is resolute, determined and committed to his goal. The presence of adversity doesn't deter him and he doesn't waver. That is the essence of the Palestinian people that Khalidi has presented. Additionally, "within Arabic and specifically Palestinian culture, resilience can be conceptualised as a prerequisite to understanding and achieving 'Sumud', meaning that the individual has to be resilient in order to remain steadfast in the face of daily challenges and not to leave their place or position." (Marie, Hannigan & Jones, 2018, p.30). Also, "resilience is expected, admired, and romanticized, but rarely understood as a cost of survival." (Dader et.al., 2026, p.56). Hence, the resilience of Yusef, which took form of an armed resistance, has multiple facets to it. And each facet, was driven by a will to overcome his setbacks in his struggles against the British and the Zionists. That defined his resilience in the face of insurmountable circumstances.

Anbara's Tactics to Free Palestine Through Resilience

The responsibility of freeing a country does not lie only with men. Women too have to partake in that movement. Khalidi uses Anbara as the face of the Palestinian women. She is

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the catalyst behind her husband Yusef's revolutionary fervour. The playwright makes it amply clear through her talk with Yusef:

Anbara: "If I didn't write who knows if you would ever have become the dangerous revolutionary you are today." (Khalidi, 2015, p.84).

Anbara's resilience comes from her courage to keep on writing articles in newspapers under different pseudonyms to evade arrest. Even though the British have issued a warrant for her arrest, she keeps writing her intense and fiery articles. Her words have the power to awaken the Palestinians by stirring their patriotism. Though she is a woman in a male-dominated Arabic society, she finds ways to contribute to the struggle of her homeland's independence. The playwright has given the women of Palestine the respect and honour they deserve by placing Anbara as the centre of the revolution around whom everything revolves. For Anbara, resilience is her thought process which has the power to ignite the populace towards a revolution. It is not widely known that Palestinian women have "actively participated in the national struggle across Palestinian history; she was the mother, the captive, the activist and the martyr when she entered into the circle of martyrdom operations. When a woman voluntarily takes off her feminine dress and put on her war outfit, meanings become deeper and add new innovative colors to nature." (Banat, 2018, p.51).

Furthermore, in the play, Khalidi has made it known that Anbara prioritized her country over her husband Yusuf. After Yusuf escapes the British and comes home, she is very glad that he is back. But at the same time, she can't keep herself from talking about her country. Also when Lt. Duff barges into Yusef's house and arrests Yusef, Anbara is quick to draw a gun and hold it to Lt. Duff's head and is about to shoot him but stops on Yusef's say-so. Khalidi makes Anbara a lethal weapon that can be used in any situation. The manner in which the playwright has infused mental and emotional strength in Anbara, it can be said that it is the result of her resilience. Historically, Palestinian women have offered resistance to foreign occupation in more ways than one. Additionally, "her role was political and resistance, so she participated in the struggle against colonialism, and she sought to spread the Palestinian issue internationally by holding political meetings, conferences and seminars. Palestinian women resisted the British occupation (1917-1948)." (Menawi, 2024, p.353).

After Anbara learns that the mufti from Beirut wanted her to be "reined in" (p.141), and the British have issued a warrant against the writer, she takes up the offer of the Zionists. The

Zionists offer a large sum of money in return for Baybar (Anbara) to stop writing articles that fire people up. Interestingly, she accepts the offer, only to promote an armed revolution. Though it might seem that she betrayed her ideology, she, in fact, changed her method of resistance. This act of hers is an ultimate example of resilience. Her objectives are the same, even in the face of an existential threat. Therefore, “the fluid way in which Palestinian women devise and revise strategies and narratives of resilience reflects a dynamic responsiveness to both local and international events, forces and discourses.” (Kayali, 2025, p.791). Also, after she learns about Yusef’s hanging and her failed attempt to help him escape, she is stoic in manner. Ultimately, Palestinian “women have seized the moment of the emergence of multiple understandings and practices of resistance to formulate and live – albeit in different ways and degrees – their own more individual forms of resistance.” (Richter-Devroe, 2011, p.44).

Humiliation Fails to Break the Spirit of Resilience

Ismail Khalidi has depicted the inhumane treatment that was meted out to Palestinian prisoners through the game of tennis played between General Falbour and Lieutenant Duff. By making them ball boys for their game and chaining them at their feet, the British occupiers are erasing the self-respect of the indigenous people. The utter humiliation is meant to dehumanize them. The strategies of humiliation employed by the British were a part of the psychological warfare. Through them, they wanted to ingrain their superiority over the natives. The dehumanizing of the Palestinians is very well documented and verified. For example, “in surveying British military law and operational methods in Palestine in the late 1930s, it is clear that embedded in the official “system” of repression was a targeting of Palestinian civilians that was brutal and could lead to atrocities.” (Hughes, 2010, p.13).

The following dialogue in the play depicts the treatment the British colonizers administered to the natives:

General: “In Rhodesia and Tanganyika, Dougy, we’d march the Pygmy prisoners to our cricket matches where we’d have each one stand in as the wicket. Then, the batsman would miss on purpose so the bowler could really knock one right on the blackies’ jewels!” (Khalidi, 2015, p.127).

The only difference this time around was that they were playing tennis and Tariq jumps around the tennis court like a monkey to fetch balls. During the entire game, Yusef mocks

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Tariq for his subservient manner and his eagerness to please the British officers with his obsequious behaviour. The playwright has showcased the antithesis that exist between the two individuals. Both are Palestinians, but one is a poodle to the occupiers, while the other provokes and insults his captors. Though chained, the British have not been able to break the warrior spirit of Yusef. His constant jibes at the general and the lieutenant, depict the towering force of resilience in him. Humiliation and dehumanizing is a tactic that usually yields results because it makes the victim powerless. That treatment also gives birth to self-hatred in the victim. “humiliation is a demonstrative exercise of power against one or more persons, which consistently involves a number of elements: stripping of status; rejection or exclusion; unpredictability or arbitrariness; and a personal sense of injustice matched by the lack of any remedy for the injustice suffered.” (Leask, 2013, p.131).

Looking for Comedy in Tragedy: The Palestinian Way

What makes *Tennis in Nablus* a riveting play is the seamless confluence of tragedy and comedy. The play flows smoothly due to the reason that both the literary genres – tragedy and comedy – are blended in absolute proportion. The playwright neither loses track of either of the genres. Also, the courage to see the funny side of calamities and adversities, highlights the Palestinian spirit. The conversations between the characters reveal the presence of wit, sarcasm and tongue – in – cheek remarks that make Palestinians immune to adversities because “mattering and post-traumatic growth play a moderating role in mitigating the effects of traumatic events and improving psychological well-being among Palestinians.” (Bdier et al., 2025, p.5). They make their way through difficult times through laughter. And for Ismail Khalidi, laughter is a form of resistance. The playwright underlines the fact that light-heartedness is a sign of a clear mind which enables to think correctly. Also, historically, Palestinians have been accustomed to hardships and tragedies. However, they have been able to not let those tragedies bog them down. And they made it possible only through their lighter vein. The success of tragicomedy lies in the combination of tragedy and comedy which "are formally and emotionally dependent on one another, each modifying and determining the nature of the other so as to produce a mixed, tragicomic response from the audience."

(Foster, 2004, p.11).

Accordingly, the playwright has included the following hilarious interactions between characters, such as:

1. Mocking the weather of Britain:

Yusef: "Trust me, I know the Brits; I know precisely what they're about."

Anbara: "And what's that?"

Yusef: "They're after the sun."

Yusef: "They want to conquer everything south of their dreary little island in order to kidnap the sun and brighten the bloody place up a bit." (Khalidi, 2015, p.83 – 84).

2. Double Entendre:

Lt. Duff (Offstage): "Balls!!!"

(Tariq jumps up and runs for the ball but runs out of chain and falls flat on his face.)

"I said, grab the balls!"

(Yusef grabs his testicles emphatically.)

Yusef: "Is that what you had in mind sir?" (Khalidi, 2015, p.136).

3. Depicting a mental breakdown:

Hirsch: "My God, what have they done to you?"

Tariq: "They've made me a ball boy. I'm quite good at it." (Khalidi, 2015, p.155).

Also, the mix of realism, tragedy and comedy connects the audiences with the play and its characters in a very strong way. Khalidi has made an impact on the viewers and the readers by creating a humorous situation wherever he could. And due to that, the play becomes more realistic, just like life, in all its hues. Furthermore, tragicomedy makes even the most tragic of events sufferable. That is so because the presence of comedy doesn't only mean laughter. It signifies something deeper. It is a sign of overcoming tragedies and it also offers hope. More importantly, it helps to forget the tragedy for a brief time and also lessens its impact on characters. Khalidi has used tragicomedy in a very effective manner. It has made the characters unforgettable and portrays them as individuals who are tough, mentally and emotionally.

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Consequently, Khalidi has succeeded in getting his messages across through tragicomedy because of the way he sees life. The primary reason being, “modern tragicomedy must be seen as neither tragedy nor comedy but something else, something which stands in direct relation to both but which is markedly itself, different in its characterization, its action, (the working out of its plot), its tone, all of which reflects a different view of life.” (Reifield, 1976, p.9). And Ismail Khalidi has done exactly that. He has interwoven all those elements. And by doing so, he has added value to the play in terms of tragicomedy. Additionally, he has not deviated from his core theme of resilience in all the elements of the play which showcases his mastery as a playwright.

Conclusion

Tennis in Nablus is more than just a play, It is the depiction of the soul scarring situations that the Palestinians went through in their struggle for independence. Ismail Khalidi has brought to the fore the steely resilience of the Palestinians in the face of monumental adversities which were foisted on them by their enemies. The occupation of Palestine by the British, and the deviousness of the Zionists to usurp a part of Palestine to create their own homeland, made the Palestinians revolt. The play reveals the varied forms of resilience that are adapted by the Palestinians – from the might of the pen to the power of the sword. Also, the message that the presence of resilience marks the existence of adversities, is emphasized forcefully. Through the characters, Khalidi has depicted that they had very little means to fight a two-pronged battle, with the British and the Zionists. The play encapsulates the love that the Palestinians have for their homeland, their struggles against the foreign occupiers, and most importantly, the nature of the Palestinian people. Their sense of humour and wit, even in the face of despair, reveals their outlook – positive, cheerful and warm. Ismail Khalidi has blended history with literary genres of tragedy, comedy and politics. Finally, it can be said with certainty that at the heart of the play lies Khalidi’s love for Palestine, his Palestinian people and the traits they possess. And he knows, and makes it let known, that without resilience, Palestinians wouldn’t exist.

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