

Elias Khoury interviewed by Haaretz.
Translated from Hebrew by Yehuda Shenhav

The novelist Elias Khoury does not believe in the peace process.

Religious frenzy dominates the country, peace is still far away, and the Israelis need to experience defeat.

In an interview toward the publication of his book "White Faces" in Hebrew, the Lebanese writer Elias Khoury explains why rumors of a Nobel Prize do not occupy his mind, and what he learned from the books of S. Yizhar

Elias Khoury knows the Israelis much better than they know him. He knows well the literature and politics in Israel, while most Israelis look at the city of Beirut and the entire region only through the rifle. Although now, when we talk on the phone, he is in the United States, where he teaches a semester each year Arabic literature at New York University, but the rest of the time he spends in his hometown, Beirut.

His book "White Faces" is now translated into Hebrew by Yehouda Shenhav – Shrabani published by KM (edited by Hanan Hever). The English translation carries the title "White Masks" and I asked if he meant to wink to Franz Fanon's seminal book "Black Skin, White Masks." It turns out that the original name in Arabic is indeed "White Faces" and Khoury did not mean to imply Fanon, although he says there is always a conversation with Fanon "he is a character who played a major role in the consciousness of anti-colonial struggle. This was an essential discourse to the liberation of people. Then there is always a dialogue with him and the concept of liberation and how people should free themselves, but mostly it's a book about the special experience of the Lebanese civil war and the unique experience and special composition of various components of this war. The Palestinians are certainly central, but there were other elements and different perspectives that address the absurdity of this human experience."

Khoury was born in Beirut in fatal year 1948 to an Orthodox Christian middle class family. In 1967 he traveled to Jordan and joined the Fatah. He left Jordan after "Black September" in 1970. During the Lebanese civil war which broke out in 1975 he was active, was wounded and nearly lost his eyesight. When I ask what exactly happened there, he replies that it does not matter: "Of course it was a difficult experience but there are difficult experiences all the time and they require a price."

Khoury's name is frequently mentioned as a candidate for the Nobel Prize for Literature, but he dismisses the issue: "These are rumors and you should not take them too seriously. This is not an important issue. It can be important to the Lebanese and the Palestinians, perhaps, but it will not change anything and when you're writing you do not think about such things. It is unimportant."

“White Faces” was first published in Beirut in 1981. Khoury wrote it during the war when he was no longer a fighter.” I was working as a cultural editor in the daily newspaper Al Safir”, he says.” Before then I edited “Shuun Palestine”. At that time I was a writer and an intellectual. I think that intellectuals should participate. You can not be an intellectual without taking a stand when there is a national liberation struggle; and I feel all the time that I was part of this struggle. ”

In the book Khoury is trying to trace the wake of Khalil Ahmad Jaber , who was murdered and his body was dumped on a pile of garbage in the UNESCO area in Beirut. The novel is written in the form of a collection of testimonies collected by the narrator regarding the murder , and presents several points of view. Along the way it tells us the story of the Lebanese civil war.”

“These are strong testimonies about violence” says Shenhav – Sharabani . ” They keep talking about violence but testimonies are incomplete , and stories are non coherent. They resemble the stories of post- traumatic or survivors, survivors of rape, Nakba , or other catastrophes. Usually modern literature suppresses political violence. Violence is always below the surface, and Khoury puts it bluntly in the face.”

I ask Khuri how is life today in Beirut. He says that it is tough and very hard, sitting in a small country which is located at an important juncture in the region: “There is a delicate political structure which is very special , although I’m not sure that there is a structure at all, but still, there is. Beirut is a reflection of the area, it reflects the region. Currently living in Beirut means living on the edge of a volcano. You feel that at any moment this volcano may become active, and of course we are at the center of the tragedy in Syria on the one hand; and at the heart of the tragedy of the Palestinian on the other. We are surrounded by tragedies and we have our tragedies. This is a country which was destroyed twice. The city was almost completely destroyed with the Israeli invasion in 1982, and by its aerial bombing. There is still the feeling that survival is the main issue and survival gives meaning to life itself. ”

Khoury says that there is a need to find meaning to life during this survival struggle. You need to adapt to the situation of war and violence: “I’m very pessimistic. War will continue. There is no prospect of peace. Not only the Israeli Palestinians peace process collapsed, as we see, this peace is almost impossible; but peace in the entire region entered a tragic moment. This is an era of revolutions, which, I imagine will prolong. I guess it also disrupts the issue Palestinians, which was the source of this awful situation, at least in the countries surrounding Palestine – Lebanon, Syria and Jordan – that were under the Ottoman Empire and are going through a terrible nightmare since 1948. ”

Khoury says that the residents of this region undergo a long process of change and destruction that no one experience like that in the 21st century, “In this place there is so much trouble. I think that it will provide a valuable lesson about the importance of human dignity, peace and justice and we must learn this lesson. Yet, it is an enormously expensive lesson. ”

He said that the Israelis are not willing to learn this lesson at the moment “this terrible

dialogue, is very problematic." He argues that during "the peace process" Palestinians surrendered completely. Not only surrendered but rejected: "When you surrender and then rejected, what does that mean? This means that you do not want the other person around you. And when you push people to feel that their existence is under threat, as well as individuals and as a collective entity, it is a very a dangerous thing that will lead to catastrophe ".

Israelis, in his eyes, are not interested in peace and the peace process itself is a mere fiction: "Israeli society is not ready to leave the occupied territories. Israel goes through the same phenomenon which we see in the entire region: of religious madness which believes that the occupied territories are important, Rachel's Tomb, Jerusalem and all this messianic madness. Actually we are yet at the same moment, when Golda Meir said that there are no Palestinian people. "

He said that the Nakba did not take place in 1948 only, but rather is an ongoing process, "To talk about memories of the Nakba is misleading, since we live the Nakba, we have no time to remember because we live in the tragedy itself. Politicians say other things but I'm not a politician. Historically I do not feel that we can start anything serious unless the Nakba is stopped. That can be seen in Israel itself. With the Palestinians who live in Israel and you call them Israeli Arabs, since you don't like their name. You did not only take their land but also took away their names."

Does he see solutions in the horizon? He thinks that the Israelis should experience defeat "without an experience of defeat you do not become human. Let's talk about us as individuals, not nations or peoples. Individually if you do not feel the possibility of a defeat, you loose your sensitivity as a human being. You have a problem because all of us, as individuals, face the option of defeat at a certain moment. In Israeli society there is a feeling that they will not be defeated and this is megalomania of power. If the Israelis do not realize they can be defeated, they will not change, I'm sorry to say that. I come from a society which was defeated hundreds of times, so I know what I'm talking about. "

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And after all that, why did you agree for the translation of your book into Hebrew, and why did you agree to talk to me?

"I support the boycott, but I'm not boycotting individuals or newspapers. We boycott institutions, and I believe that it is good for the Israelis; it might make them more sensitive and aware. It is not the first time that a book of mine is translated into Hebrew. My novel, Bab al-Shams, was published in Hebrew in 2002 by Yael Lerer and Andalus which also published 'Yalu. In literature there are no limits. I also read and teach Israeli literature and it has nothing to do with the fact that I support the boycotting of Israel. "

Do you think that literature can change?

"I really do not know. Personally I think that many books have changed my life. Dostoevsky changed my life, 'The Stranger' by Albert Camus which I read at the age of 14 completely changed my life. Mahmoud Darwish's poetry changed my life. In this sense, literature has an impact on people. Literature also changes literature. We do not

only write literature, we also rewrite it. In every writer you find all the writers in the world and we are rewriting world literature . But as to politics? I do not know . I do not think that you're reading a book and going immediately to the revolution. But you are reading a book, and it enters your unconscious – then you feel closeness to the characters and then you actually write it again. The reader rewrites the book in his imagination. ”

Literature, he says, deals with the great questions of life, death and love. It is also the only place where we can conduct a dialogue with the dead: “This is a very significant experience that when we read a book, and we do not think if the author is alive or dead. He speaks to us and we speak with him. I think that this kind of dialogue is essential to our understanding of life and their meaning . Because life is meaningless, you know that, right? what we try to do with literature is to give meaning to the meaningless. I think that this is a great adventure. ”

Unlike many Israelis who do not know Arabic literature at all, Khouri is very familiar with Hebrew literature translated into English. He says that “*Khirbet Hizah*” by S. Yizhar overwhelmed him: “When I read it I had an incredible insight. Izhar tried to do something very deep. Truly this is the only novel written by an Israeli that does such a thing. Yizhar was a Zionist of course. He was a member of the Knesset, he was a Palmachnik, but as a writer he plunged deep into the tragedy to tell us that the Israelis have created their own Jews. He describes the Palestinians as Jews in a similar way to the descriptions of Jews in Europe. So now the Jews have their own Jews. This is a great insight.

This year, when I taught the text in class, we talked about literature as “going beyond”, not in the sense that it can be controversial, but in the deep essence of things. And Izhar gave us this essence. Not because he told the Israeli about their atrocities. Everyone knows about them (at least we that have experienced it), but his concept was to create the Jews of the Jews. And he got into it deeply in the text. It shows us that literature can take us, even without the author’s intention, into deep substantive issues; which political commentary, a sociologist or an anthropologist can not do. This is why literature is important. In this sense it is changing. ”

He points out to a big difference between Israeli and Arabic literature regarding mutual representation: ” Palestinian literature includes something that no one notice. Ghassan Kanafani published in 1969 a novel called ‘*The Return to Haifa*.’ At that time he belonged to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine by the leadership of George Habash. He was murdered because of it by the Israelis, and now it is clear because the Israelis have admitted it” he says ,noting that Kanafani’s book has a figure of a Jewish woman , a Holocaust survivor named Miriam , and Kanafani delves into it deeply . “In Mahmoud Darwish there is a Jewish character named Rita and she is human. It shows us how the Palestinians tried, even though they are the victims, to open up to their others, and to understand them. Not in order to accept, but in order to understand. They will never accept. They will compromise, but will not accept.

“But if you take modern Israeli literature like Amos Oz , AB Yehoshua and even Alon Hilu in his ‘*House of Dajani*’. How is the Palestinian represented there? Either he does

not speak because he is deaf and dumb; or he appears in the dreams of Hannah in *My Michael*. The Palestinians are only part of the geography, as in *Yizhar*, or in Oz's short story 'nomads and Viper'. In *Yehoshua* he is mute or infantile, like Naim in "The Lover". Even with David Grossman, who is the most open in the "Smile of the Lamb", the Palestinian character is crazy. No Palestinian who speaks the truth. This is a great question, why there are no Palestinians in Israeli literature and if they are, they are very marginal, or appear as shades. Just go read the Kanafani and how he writes about Miriam, to understand that being defeated makes you more human".

Israelis do not read Arabic literature

The translator of the book *Shenhav – Sharabani*, who is a professor in the Department of Sociology at Tel Aviv university, says that Israelis do not read Arabic novels. He says he bought the book in London, and felt that he had to translate it right away. At the time he had no publisher in mind, and without even knowing if he'll get an approval from Khoury in light of the boycott of Israel. Meanwhile, he translated another book by Khoury, "The Journey of Little Gandhi", to be published next year with the Xargol Publishing House.

"Since the end of Andalus, founded by Yael Lerer, who did the largest chunk of translating important Arabic literature, there is no interest in Israel in Arabic literature," says Shenhav – Sharabani. "You know how many Israeli Jews read Arabic? Only two percent. This is outrageous. And how many Palestinians in Israel speak Hebrew? 92 percent. What does it mean? that you live in place and you do not learn the language? This means that you are a tourist, visitor or a temporary resident. It shows that the relationship between the two languages are colonial. Otherwise it does not make sense."

Shenhav- Sharabani, one of the founders of the "Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow" started to translate from Arabic only a few years ago. He says that for him translation from Arabic is one of the main passages to his Arab-Jewish identity. He talks about his conflicted relationship with Arabic: "In my youth I really hated the language spoken in my home." Only ten years ago I returned to Arabic seriously, and with a high need to learn from scratch, including reading and writing. And now he has six new translations in order: "I love Hebrew even more since. The languages are so close, they are like twins."