

Study Guide - 1

Echoes: A Historical Afterword

by Nathalie Handal

I. About the Author

Nathalie Handal was born on 29 July 1969 in Haiti of Palestinian parents from Bethlehem. She was raised in Latin America, France and the Arab world, and educated in United Kingdom and United States; she is currently dividing her time mainly between New York and Paris. Her major poetry collections include *The Neverfield* (1999), *The Lives of Rain* (2005); and *Love and Strange Horses* (2010), *Poet in Andalucía* (2012), and *Life in a Country Album* (2019). She also brought out a collection of poems by Arab women titled *The Poetry of Arab Women: A Contemporary Anthology* in 2001. She is currently known as a noted French-American poet, playwright, translator, and editor.

II. About the Poem

In “Echoes: A Historical Afterword”, though the poet does not explicitly state the historical context, the poem appears to deal with Palestine-Israel conflict, considering the roots of the poet and her penchant to represent the exile and

other issues pertaining in her poetical works. In one of of interviews, ins response to a question on the issues related to Palestine, Nathalie Handal clarified that,

Every writer or artist has a way of inquiring into their darkness or the dark suspended around them—the visible and invisible, the loud and silent. I am originally from Bethlehem... permanent transience has been my reality... so that will inevitably at times transpire in my work.¹

Throughout the poem, the poet employs two pronouns, ‘you’ and ‘they’ to refer to Palestine and Israel respectively as conflicting political entities. Besides the pronouns, two other words, ‘truth’ and ‘reason’, recur in the poem; while ‘reason’ refers to the Israel’s point of view on an issue, ‘truth’ indicates the same issue as viewed from Palestinian side. The poem thus consolidates the two perspectives that make each side justify their stance in the continuing stalemate between these warring nations. It is apparent that the poet, being true to her roots, is siding with the ‘truth’ (or Palestine) thus dismissing ‘reason’ (or Israel) citing the continued aggression of Israeli forces on the Palestinians. The pertinent problems that undergo the binary scrutiny of ‘truth’ and ‘reason’ in the poem include killings on both sides, homelessness and exile of the Palestinians, their aspirations for repatriation, and the fact that

both the parties in the conflict belong to the same tribe. The poem arguably identifies occupation and violence as core concerns in the Palestine-Israel conflict.

The poem comprises six unrhymed couplets. The opening and closing couplets refer to the political killings on both sides. The poet seems to present that the Israeli aggression is justified by the deaths on their side by counter attacks on the Palestinians, and the continued aggression is thus reactions against the deaths on their side. The poet also indicates that there is a sustained effort to project the Palestinians before the international community as a threat, in an attempt to justify the violence unleashed against the palestinians. But the poet counters this view by bringing out the truth that there are human causalities on the Palestinian side, as well.

In stanzas two, three, and four, while referring to the exile of Palestinians, the poet juxtaposes the Israel's explanation of the forced exiles of Palestinians as voluntary, whereas the 'truth' is that the exile of the Palestinians are caused by the feeling of insecurity after the occupation of their houses by the Israelis. In other words, the occupation and of areas under Palestine has resulted in many Palestinians leaving their homes, and the houses left behind were occupied by the

Israelis. The poet further infers that the reasons for Israel's justification of their measures to prevent the exiles from being repatriated as a step towards safeguarding their tribe from the projected threat posed by the Palestinians.

While referring to the need to safeguard their tribe displayed by Israel, the poet sates the 'truth' that both the Palestinians and the Israelis belong to the same tribe, as Arabs. She even suggests that this fact is never talked about. Despite being members of the same tribe, the Israelis are presented to be treating the Palestinians as a threat in order to justify their killing of Palestinians.

The poem on the whole is the poet's perspective on the Israel-Palestine conflict, and it gives the impression that the conflict is unlikely to be resolved as long as the Israel justifies their acts of occupation and violence by showing Palestinians as a threat to their people's safety. Further, the poem identifies the crossfire, refugee crisis, the possibilities of repatriation of the exiled Palestinians as the core concern facing this conflict zone, and appears to present the poet's choice of siding with the 'truth' of her nation, as a resolve to be with the oppressed. As the title of the poem conveys it, the poem echoes the poet's reflections on the historical aftermaths of the long-drawn conflict that rendered even her own family 'homeless'.

References:

1. Majaj, Lisa Suhair. "Interview with Nathalie Handal." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 8.4 (2006): 612-617.

III. Comprehension Questions

1. How would you related the title and the poem?
2. What do 'they' and 'you' signify in the poem?
3. Explain the rationale behind the repetition of 'reason' and 'truth'.
4. Explain the lines: "The truth is they never let you back / The reason is they needed to protect their tribe"?
5. Consider "Echoes: A Historical Afterward" as a poem dealing with Palestine-Israel conflict. (Essay)

IV. For Ffrther research and study

1. Search on reliable encyclopaedias online for the terms, Canaanites, Intifada, with reference to Palestine / Israel.
2. Read about the history of Palestine- Israel conflict.

Prepared by

Dr. Anvar Sadhth V P
Associate Professor of English
The New College (Autonomous),
Chennai – 600 014. India
sadathvp@gmail.com