

**“Resistance Literature”: A Critical Reading of Barbara Harlow’s *Resistance Literature* (1987) and *After Lives* (1996)**

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**Abstract**

In her seminal study *Resistance Literature* (1987), Barbara Harlow drew attention to a body of literature that is written under occupation and with the avowed purpose of challenging it. Borrowing the concept from the Palestinian novelist Ghassan Kanafani (1936-72), who was the first to use the term “resistance” to describe a form of literature, Harlow drew attention to the theoretical lacunae and disciplinary resistance to this body of literature. In contradistinction with universalist notions of literature in Western literary and cultural studies, resistance literature is historically specific and temporally urgent. In 1996, Harlow supplemented her work with another study titled *After Lives: Legacies of Revolutionary Writing*. In it, she proposed a critical reading of cultural politics centered around three intellectuals- Ghassan Kanafani, Roque Dalton and Ruth First. While acknowledging the historical closure of theories and strategies of resistance envisaged in the works of intellectuals such as these, she identified a newly emerging arena for rearticulating of those critical interventions in human rights writing.

Following Harlow’s lead, my paper is an attempt to critically study a body of literature which in contradistinction to western literary and cultural studies (that tend to displace the political), emphasizes the political.

**Keywords:** *Literary Studies, Resistance Literature, Barbara Harlow, History*

In the preface to her seminal work *Resistance Literature* (1987), Barbara Harlow recounts a folktale that features in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, which explains how the tortoise came to have a cracked shell. The cunning tortoise had persuaded the birds to take him along to a feast hosted for them. All the birds gave him one feather each and agreed to take on new names for the occasion.



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The sly tortoise took the name “All of you” and, with this linguistic ruse, the best delicacies of the feast for himself. Outraged, the birds reacted by taking their feathers back and leaving the tortoise stranded in the air. Intending to teach him a lesson, the parrot agreed to deliver a message asking the tortoise’s wife to prepare a soft landing-place for him. But he told her instead to lay out every weapon the tortoise had in his house. The tortoise fell through the sky and upon a big pile of hoes, machetes, spears, guns and cannons and shattered the shell upon his back. Piece by piece the healer glued his shell together, and the cracks show to this day. In Achebe’s allegorical rendition, the tortoise is a colonial power which is articulate and uses language to subjugate and exploit the birds. Even the possessions in his house are largely arms, which are symptomatic of his imperial and oppressive nature. The birds remain at his mercy until one of the weakest among them, the parrot, well-known for mindlessly repeating what he has been told, makes a creative intervention and alters the colonial command. Achebe’s message is: “the language skills of rhetoric together with armed struggle are essential to an oppressed people’s resistance to domination and oppression and to an organized liberation movement” (Harlow xv).

### **Resistance Literature**

The folktale narrated above serves as a prologue for a body of literature that Harlow identifies and examines in her critical study. This is a body of literature that has emerged from national liberation struggles throughout the world in the decades following the collapse of European colonial empires. Building on the critical framework first laid out by the Palestinian thinker, Ghassan Kanafani, she calls it “Resistance Literature”. Ghassan Kanafani had used the term “adab al-muqawama” (resistance literature) in his book, *Resistance Literature in Occupied Palestine 1948 -1966* (1966), to refer to a corpus of literature that had emerged from parts of historical Palestine that the new state of Israel now occupied and that was produced under brutal conditions of censorship and repression. Kanafani makes a distinction between two kinds of literary production: literature written “under occupation” (*tahat al-ihtilāl*) and that written “in exile” (*manfa*). This distinction is of particular importance for studying “resistance literature” as it is premised upon few critical presuppositions. Firstly, “Resistance Literature” presupposes a “people” with a collective relationship to a shared land, identity or cause. Secondly, it presumes the existence of an “occupying power” which has either subjugated or driven out, - both in

Palestine's case - these people from their shared land. Literature, like other social productions, becomes "an arena of struggle" in Kanafani's analysis (2).

Harlow draws attention to Kanafani's disclaimer in his preface to *Resistance Literature in Occupied Palestine*, which serves as an important theoretical statement for the entire corpus of resistance literature. Kanafani makes two important departures from established conventions of academic study: an acknowledgement of a lack of sources, and a disavowal of academic objectivity. Kanafani noted that resistance literature of the Occupied Palestine was under severe Israeli repression and censorship, and hence difficult to access. The "lack of sources" gestures towards the specific historico-cultural context in which this new corpus of literature developed and which is the necessary theoretical condition for the genesis of any resistance literature. Written before a liberation movement has reached its fulfilment, it must therefore be written (or articulated) and circulated (or re-articulated) secretly in the face of great peril and brutal censorship. Kanafani writes:

The attempt to write a history of literatures of resistance is usually made, for reasons that are obvious (there is no need to get into their details), after the liberation. With regard to the literature of resistance in Occupied Palestine, it is necessary that the Arab reader in general, and the Palestinian reader removed from his home in particular, be constantly informed about it. It addresses them like the Arabs of the Occupied Territory. It proceeds with a similar set of motivations. Undoubtedly, it addresses the same elementary issues. (LROP 1948-66 7)<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, he forswears any pretense of academic objectivity or scientific dispassion:

No research of this kind can be complete unless the researcher is located within the resistance movement itself, inside the occupied land, taking his testimony from the place in which it is born, lives and is circulated: the lips of the people. (LROP 1948-66 8)

Kanafani's position finds support in the French philosopher Michel Foucault's analysis of presuppositions of objectivity and independence with "author" in the essay titled "What Is an Author?" Foucault argues that the function of the author is to "limit, exclude, choose" (159). This serves the "functional principle" by which fiction is impeded from "the free circulation, the free manipulation, the... free composition, decomposition and recomposition ..." (Foucault 159). The question of the author in "the privileged moment of individualization" is governed by a

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<sup>1</sup> All translations of excerpts from Kanafani's Arabic studies that are quoted in this paper are mine.

critical convention that presupposes a separation of the artist from the political conditions in which they write and the ideological milieu within which they work. This inherited division between culture and politics which Terry Eagleton calls “the stalest of Arnoldian clichés” has historically been deployed, Harlow argues, to suppress political conflict. In her second study, *After Lives*, she writes about the historical role of the separation between “culture” and “politics”:

The guardians of cultural preserves and political dominion must maintain the separation of culture and politics at least in so far as this separation underwrites their territorial elitism and ideological mystification whereby such ascendancy remains unassailed. The politicians must, for their part, be wary lest something called “culture” be wrested from the control of their servitors, whom they have appointed and whose services the state apparatus has again and again enlisted, and begin to function in mobilizing popular political opposition. The language of objectivity and transcendence cultivated by culture’s keepers has been designed to obscure its own antinomies, partisan positionings and the very sectarianism of the self/other divide. (20)

Kanafani has a position as a researcher, and his position is that of an advocate of his subject. It is a study that is extremely aware of the conditions of production of this new corpus of literature. It is these conditions of literary production that are, by obligatory acts of critical synecdoche, the object of his study. Kanafani defines these conditions as those of a “cultural siege” (*hisār thaqāfi*):

First: Essentially, a large section of the Arabs who remained in the Occupied Territory were in need of, by virtue of their social conditions, a kind of knowledge/ culture which would spawn a generation of writers and artists.

Second: The neighboring cities, to which the talented people from the countryside migrated, which used to previously open their windows and doors to them for learning, had turned into Jewish settlements that were forbidden and hostile to them.

Third: A wall of intentional cultural boycott rose against Arabic literature in its major cities. The Arabs of the Occupied Territory were cut off from modern currents and cultural exchanges between them.

Fourth: Exploitative military rule imposed on them a kind of literary production and circulation it desired. It was not in any way the kind of literature that the Arabs of the Occupied Territory wanted to produce.

Fifth: Restrictions on means of publication. From one side they were subjected to the surveillance of the government, and from the other side the Zionist financial lobby required them to publish something of the kind that really did not express what the Arabs of the Occupied Lands wished to express.

Sixth: Low proficiency of foreign languages among the Arabs of the Occupied Land, the countryside especially, led to an almost total severance from global production movements and their effects.

(*LROP 1948-66* 14-15)

As argued in the section above, resistance literature is context-bound and extremely aware of its historical time and space. This problematizes codes and canons of literature that have developed round the theory and practice of literature in Western academia (which includes traditional aesthetics of literature, with their demands for objective criteria that transcend historical circumstances through appeals to universality, posterity and the human condition, dehistoricizes the cultural productions of a people living under conditions of occupation, genocide, cultural genocide and colonialism). The Kenyan literary philosopher, N’gugi wa Thiong’o, finds such an aesthetic the “... basis of some European writers’ mania for man without history - solitary and free - with unexplainable despair and anguish and death as the ultimate truth about the human condition” (Thiong’o, *Writers’ in Politics* 76). Such an aesthetic subjects otherwise deeply context-dependent cultural productions to readings that necessarily dehistoricize them (for instance, Albert Camus’ *L’Etranger*, E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*, or Jonathan Swift’s works)<sup>2</sup>. Fredric Jameson calls such readings “strategies of containment” in his *The Political Unconscious*. N’gugi wa Thiong’o goes on to say that with such aesthetics every gain or loss against imperialism or colonialism is condemned (or neglected)

...in the name of abstract humanism, abstract universalism without seeing that free unfettered human intercourse is impossible within capitalist structures and imperialism: that true humanism is not possible without the subjection of the economy, of the means of production (land, industries, the banks etc.) to the total ownership and control by the people; that for as long as there are classes - classes defined by where or how the various people stand in relation to the means of production— a truly human contact in love, joy, laughter, creative fulfillment in labor will never be possible. We can only talk meaningfully of class love, class joy, class marriage, class families, class culture. (79)

This challenge to literary studies beckons us to organize literary categories differently. An organization in which literature is acknowledged both as a political and a politicized activity. In other words, “Literature” is participating in the historical processes of hegemony and resistance.

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<sup>2</sup> Sartre’s celebrated reading of Camus’ work doesn’t take into account the Algerian revolution which served as historical setting of the novel. Similarly, Forster’s novels are rarely read as an account of colonial India. Jonathan Swift’s works similarly are read without the long history of British oppression of the Irish.

To illustrate the argument further, Harlow quotes from José Carlos Mariátegui's 1928 essay "Literature on trial":

A literary, not sociological, theory divides the literature of a country into three periods: colonial, cosmopolitan and national. In the first period, the country, in a literary sense depended on the metropolis. In the second period, it simultaneously assimilates the elements of various foreign literatures. In the third period, it shapes and expresses its own personality and feelings.

Harlow summarizes the debate by saying: "Whereas the social and the personal have tended to displace the political in western literary and cultural studies, the emphasis in the literature of resistance is on the political as the power to change the world. The theory of resistance literature is in its politics." (Harlow Resistance Literature 30)

This necessitates that we shed critical reluctance surrounding political literature and subject it to critical investigation like other works of literature have been. Most of the writers and critics that Harlow quotes in her seminal study were members of different political parties or took active part in various resistance movements (Victor Jara, Walter Rodney, Pablo Neruda, Balach Khan, A.N.C. Kumalo, Sergio Ramírez, Steve Biko, Roque Dalton, Tawfiq Ziād, Mahmoud Darwish). It is no surprise then that most of these authors were at some point or another accused of partisanship. Ghassan Kanafani was himself a member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and served as its spokesperson. At the time of his assassination, he was the editor of *al-Hadaf*, the PFLP's weekly newspaper.

Nassar Ibrahim, who became editor-in-chief of *al-Hadaf* in 1994, wrote at length about the long shadow of partisanship on resistance literature. Ibrahim worked for four years in a position that Kanafani held at the time of his martyrdom. In his critical piece entitled "غسان كنفاني ليس قديسا ولا أيقونة جامدة، كان ثائرا يكتب للحياة!" (Ghassan Kanafani was neither a saint nor a rigid icon, he was a rebel who wrote for life!), Ibrahim called Kanafani "an organic intellectual" in Gramscian terms. An organic intellectual is one who consciously and decidedly leaves the spaces of "culture" to engage in the struggle to change class structures and systems that produce poverty, unemployment, occupation, exploitation, injustice and oppression in all their manifestations. The classes that do not have authority (in terms of cultural and institutional representation and dominance) develop their organic intellectuals under the aegis of a political party. A political party serves as the institution that provides the necessary conditions and aids to develop organic intellectuals. This is not to say that all organic intellectuals need to have party

affiliations but in conditions of extreme oppression, occupation and colonization, this is likely to be the case. Palestine is a textbook case of all three. Partisanship is the outcome of a people's struggle, not the condition of it. The intellectual is located in that struggle and hence likely to be partisan.

Motivated by ideas of universality and posterity, Kanafani's younger colleague, Faḍl al-Naqib denounced Kanafani's fictional writing as the next day's editorial column. The same critical reluctance was manifested by theorists like Frank Kermode and Rene Wellek in their refusal to take a work of literature as a document or case history of a life and its times.

Resistance literature draws attention to itself as a document of people's lives. It is then no wonder that there is an impulse towards the "vernacular" in resistance literature. One therefore finds Kanafani casting off his early education in French and writing primarily in Arabic. Or Edward Said taking a year off to work on his Arabic. One of the best-known theoreticians of the field, Ngugi wa Thiong'o dedicates his seminal work, *Decolonizing the Mind*, to "all those who write in African languages, and to all those who over the years have maintained the dignity of the literature, culture, philosophy, and other treasures carried by African languages" (iv). He writes in detail about his shift from English to Gikuyu as the language of his literary expression. The choice was mediated by necessity i.e., the necessity to include the audience in discussions of a play (*Ngaahika Ndeenda*) that had as its subject Kenya's anti colonial struggle and its on-going resistance against neo-colonialism. He says: "There was now no barrier between the content of their history and the linguistic medium of its expression." (45)

This beckons one to examine the historical specificity of resistance literature. It challenges transnational structures of domination. It, in turn, necessitates a certain view of history: history not as an event/thing unfolding towards completion by some immanent spirit (immanence of the colonizer). That is to acknowledge that each of the celebrated events of Western European History - the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the Bloodless Revolution of 1688 (and the American Revolution) - were propelled by temporally and spatially defined but changing (and changeable) sets of relations. To this one may subscribe works of historians like Howard Zinn, Eric Wolf and J. C. Scott.

In his essay "On National Culture", the psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon speaks of the perversion and at times the severance of the colonized from their pre-colonial history. He

says: “[...] colonialism is not simply content to impose its rule upon the present and the future of the dominated country. ... By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it” (18). For Palestinian historians and story-tellers, it was important to register their historical presence/past in the land that the Zionist claimed had been empty, and that they had not left their homes voluntarily. Kanafani does that by recounting events of the ’48 war, at times fictionally and at times through rigorous analyses of the events preceding it. *Returning to Haifa*, for instance, is notable for its dramatic description of the suddenness with which the town was cleared of its Arab population. It was, as the new historians of Israel would substantiate in the 1980s, really a matter of a few hours. In his other stories we get descriptions of some characters who fought the Zionist armies in ’48 and the primitive tools that they fought with, against a very-well equipped and trained Zionist army, and get a sense of asymmetrical war that brought catastrophe upon them.

Kanafani was probably the first to study the 1936 revolt against the British in a work titled *The 1936-39 Revolt in Palestine*. In the absence of national institutions or archives to study the revolt, Kanafani gathered information about it through interviews with the generation that participated in it. In a section titled “Background”, Kanafani examines the role of three sections of society (“workers,” “farmers” and “intellectuals”) during the revolt. Kanafani’s analysis of “intellectuals” when read in conjunction with resistance poets and writers of the Occupied Palestine of his later studies, gives a sense of the historical role that poets played in Palestinian society: “We do not know of a single Palestinian writer or intellectual in that period who did not participate in the call for resistance against colonial enemy” (27). He credits Abd al-Rahim Mahmud, Abu Salma and Ibrahim Tuqan for “laying the foundations of Palestinian resistance poetry, which later, under Israeli occupation, was to become one of the most conspicuous manifestations of the endurance of the Palestinian masses.” (31)

By reconstructing a revolutionary moment in Palestinian history, Kanafani disproved two Zionist myths. First, he proved that Palestinian society was capable of united resistance and were not meek, defeated people who simply left their homes. Secondly, his work helped understand how, unlike what the Zionists claimed, Palestinians had been at extreme disadvantage in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. Writing about the aims of the study, one of Kanafani’s fiercest critics and friend, Fadl al-Naqib says that it “sheds a bright light on the nature of the Palestinian movement



in the past, present and foreseeable future” (*My trans.* 31). Kanafani has been substantiated by both revisionist historians of Israel (such as Ilan Pappé) and Palestinian historians (such as Ibrahim Abu-Lughod and Rashid Khalidi) who helped to reconstruct historical Palestine and the extended moment of its colonization.

This sense of history writing (or rewriting) is no different from what occurred in national liberation movements of earlier decades and the generic utility of historical novels in the period. It is not difficult, therefore, to anticipate problems of formal confusions that much resistance literature invites upon serious inspection. Harlow acknowledges the problem while explaining the construction of her book.

Harlow restricts herself to the examination of certain “representative aspects” of resistance literature, and anticipating the theoretical dilemma of conceptualizing “resistance literature” she stays away from any attempt in that direction. This aversion to any theorizing about resistance literature is inherent in aversion to theorizing in “resistance” itself. By conceptualizing resistance, one is likely to risk the same institutionalization and unity that resistance resists in the first instance. Shedding light on resistance of resistance to theory, Howard Caygill begins his seminal work *On Resistance: A Philosophy of Defiance* by saying “Resistance was one of the most important and enduring expressions of twentieth century political imagination and action and one ever more important in the struggles of the present century. And yet, despite the proliferation of text dedicated to resistance remains strangely unanalyzed and indeed resistant to philosophical analysis.” (6) This resistance is necessary lest one risks emptying it of the very capacity to resist. Caygill takes the example of the French Resistance in 1943 when instances and organizations of resistance were united into a structure formed according to the functions of military resistance which he calls the “Resistance” (against small-lettered disparate instances of “resistances”). Although he says that unification of both concept and institution was tactfully necessary (and will probably be necessary in certain contexts), “the tormented history of the French Resistance and its posterity exemplifies the dangers of disarming resistances in the name of a Resistance, and the perhaps unavoidable subordination of its centripetal activities and initiatives to a centralized military and/ or political logic.”(6) He quotes from Derrida to argue resistance as “the limit at which analysis falters and breaks off.” (7) Caygill explains further by saying, “A philosophy of resistance has itself to

resist the pressure of concept-formation, of reducing the practices of resistance to a single concept amenable to legitimation and appropriation by the very state-form that it began by defying.” (6)

Foucault, the other famous French philosopher of the twentieth century, finds resistance by the side of power. Caygill draws from one of the Foucault's last interviews in 1984, to summarize: “The term is identified as ‘an element of the strategic relation that is power’ and is recognized as ‘always relying on the situation that it combats’. Yet as a peculiar condition of possibility of both power and defiance, resistance remains intangible: without it there is no power, but exactly what, when, where and how it remains resistant to analysis, but only if the latter is understood as a juridical model of analysis.” (7) The alternative model that Foucault proposes for analysis of power and resistance, argues Caygill, is of military or strategy in terms of relations of force. Foucault's works are contextually bound to institutions of the Western Europe, where institutions operate like in battlefield but are not in battlefield. In historical junctures of occupation and settler colonialism the model is historically is not similar but exact.

Resistance is etymologically derived from Latin word “stare” which means to come to a stand or cause a stand. It in turn is related to ancient Greek word stasis which as Nicole Loraux argued in his work *The Divided City: On Memory and Forgetting in Ancient Athens* occasioned the invention of democracy and politics. In Arabic the term muqāwamah مقاومة comes from trilateral root word formed by Arabic letters ‘ق’ qāf, ‘ا’ alif and ‘م’ mīm. The root word “قام” qāma is an intransitive verb which has two cluster of meanings attached to it. The first is “to stand up”, “to rise”, “to depart” or “to get up”. Second is “to lie”, “be located” or “be situated”. The trilateral root word “قام” qama is modified by insertion of the vowel “و” into a four lettered verb قاموا qāwama which add a sense of collective action. The word “muqāwamah” relates to the first cluster of meanings but (due to its roots in modified verb) has an added meaning of the action being done collectively. It is therefore not just standing/rising/ getting up but standing/rising/getting up with one another. The action is adverbial with firmness or immovability, and it therefore, doesn't mean just getting up or rising up collectively but doing so with adamancy. It therefore gives a sense of blocking or stopping something. Historically, the term muqāwamah was used in warfare to denote resistance or defence against the enemy. Barbara Harlow drew attention to the prevalence of the word mu'arāḍah معارضة (which has a

literal meaning of confrontation, opposition, or resistance) in the Arabic world. Mu'āraḍah is also the designation given to a classic Arabic literary form which involved composing a poem along the same rhythm and meter as a precursor poem. The translation of Arabic word for resistance mu'āraḍah into Arabic word muqāwamah gives a literary-critical implication to the idea of resistance. Against singular acts of confrontation mu'āraḍah, muqāwamah suggests popular and organized resistance to colonial occupation or imperialist oppression.

### **Conclusion:**

A decade later, Harlow supplemented her work *Resistance Literature* with *After Lives: Legacies of Revolutionary Writing* (1996) where she proposed a critical reading of cultural politics centered around three intellectuals- Ghassan Kanafani, Roque Dalton and Ruth First. She acknowledged that the contribution of each of the three in strategies and theories of resistance “are at once closed and critically re-articulated by the dramatically transformed states of political affairs out of which the writers emerged and to which they contributed in the crucial decades of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s.” (5) This rearticulation is found in emerging body of human rights literature. *Resistance Literature*, a body of literature that is un-objective, historically and contextually specific and political, has in the neo-liberal world reformulated its concerns in the human rights writing.

Harlow quotes Article 3 of Universal Declaration of Human Rights as one of the epigraphs of her book *After Lives*. This serves as a preface to an argument that she lays out later by recounting human rights activist Malcolm X's efforts to subject racial oppression in America to the international accountability. Democratic struggles within a democratic state that seeks redressal within the existing institutional structures of a nation-state falls short of the practices of resistance that implore a hearing from an entire human community. In his Rochester speech of 16 February 1965, Malcolm X admonished the other civil rights leaders for their hesitancy in calling for the international accountability:

All nations that signed the charter of the UN came up with the Declaration of Human Rights and anyone who classifies his grievances under the label of “human rights” violations, those grievances can then be brought into the United Nations and be discussed by people all over the world. For as long as you call it “civil rights” your only allies can be the people in the next community, many of who are responsible for your grievance. But when you call it “human rights” it becomes international. And then you can take your troubles to the World Court.

You can take them before the world. And anybody anywhere on this earth can become your ally. (Requoted from Harlow, *After Lives* 18)

Palestinians have increasingly invoked human rights and Geneva Convention in their attempt to form international solidarity as manifested in their most potent political expression of recent times, the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement. In the concluding section of her *After Lives: Legacies of Revolutionary Writing* titled as “New Geographies of Struggle”, Barbara Harlow encapsulates this development: “What was once written as “resistance literature” is discovering still other, alternative narrative possibilities in the paradigmatic contradictions on the grounds of human rights’ reporting.” (154)

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