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"نُعلِّم الحياة، سيدي": مقاومة شعرية لمحو الهوية ونزع الإنسانية

"We Teach Life, Sir": Poetic Resistance to Erasure and Dehumanization[*]

د. عاصم يوسف: حاصل على درجة الدكتوراه في التفاعلات الثقافية بين الشرق والغرب في الصناعة السينمائية الأمريكية والبريطانية، من جامعة السلطان مولاي سليمان للاداب والعلوم الإنسانية ببني ملال، المغرب

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الملخص:

تُعدّ قصيدة رفيفة زيّادة الشفوية "نُعلِّم الحياة، سيدي" نقدًا قويًا للصور المُجرّدة من الإنسانية والمُنزَّعة من سياقها التي تُقدَّم بها القضية الفلسطينية في الإعلام الغربي. فمن خلال صورها البلاغية القوية ونبرتها الحادة الصريحة، تستعيد القصيدة الفاعلية الإنسانية وتُعبّر عن الكرامة في مواجهة التهميش السياسي، عبر رفض اختزال حياة الفلسطينيين في مجرد أرقام وإحصاءات. وعليه، يحلّل هذا البحث العناصر البلاغية في القصيدة، مثل التفاعل بين السخرية والتكرار والتناص، لإبراز دورها كشكل من أشكال المقاومة الثقافية. كما يسلّط الضوء على تأكيد زيّادة لصوت "التابع" ومقاومتها لبُنى الهيمنة العالمية التي تدعم مفهوم "الآخر". ويضع التحليل القصيدة ضمن إطار الفلسفة ما بعد الكولونيالية، مبيّنًا كيف يمكن لها أن تعزّز التعاطف، وتفكّك الصور النمطية، وتُحفّز التفكير النقدي حول تحيّز الإعلام والظلم العالمي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المقاومة الثقافية، ما بعد الكولونيالية، التمثيل الإعلامي، نزع الإنسانية، الصوت التابع، القضية الفلسطينية، الخطاب الشعري

Abstract:

Rafeef Ziadah's outspoken-word poem, "We Teach Life, Sir" is a potent critique of the dehumanizing and decontextualizing depictions of the Palestinian struggle in Western media. Through its powerful imagery and blatantly aggressive tone, the poem reclaims agency and expresses humanity in the face of political marginalization by opposing the reduction of Palestinian life to mere statistics. Thus, this research paper analyzes the poem's rhetorical elements, including the interaction of irony, repetition, and intertextuality, to highlight its role as a kind of cultural resistance. Ziadah's assertion of the "subaltern voice" and her resistance to global power structures that support Otherness are highlighted in the interpretation, which situates the poem within the framework of postcolonial philosophy. This research paper also analyzes the poem to show how it might foster empathy, dispel preconceptions, and provoke critical thought about media bias and global injustices.

Keywords: *Cultural resistance - Postcolonialism - Media representation - Dehumanization - Subaltern voice - Palestinian cause - Poetic discourse*

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Introduction:

In contemporary discourse, poetry serves a purpose that goes well beyond aesthetics; it is an essential tool for both political participation and cultural survival. For Adrienne Rich[1], "Poetry is the eternal voice of those whom history would silence; it resists erasure by inscribing humanity where oppression seeks to void it." This viewpoint presents poetry expression as an act of defiance, a way to combat systematic dehumanization and historical forgetfulness, as well as an artistic endeavor.

Rafeef Ziadah[2]'s outspoken-word poetry, "*We Teach Life, Sir*" stands out as a powerful example within this critical framework, directly addressing the dehumanizing and simplistic narratives about Palestinians that are promoted in Western media. In this respect, Ziadah's art exposes the deep absurdity inherent in having to defend one's own humanity by challenging the basic premise of a journalist's desire to "humanize" her people. Hence, this accomplishes a dual act of specific critique and universal resonance. For this, the analysis pursues three interrelated goals in order to properly deconstruct this function. It first looks at how the poem aggressively challenges media narratives that conceal Palestinian subjectivity and asserts a resilient, life-affirming agency, so directly fighting erasure and dehumanization. Second, it examines the particular poetic devices Ziadah uses to enhance the work's emotional and intellectual effect, turning individual testimony into a collective hymn. Therefore, these techniques include strategic irony, the persistent refrain, "*We teach life, sir*," and visceral imagery. Third, it situates the poem as a subaltern voice that questions dominant power dynamics and constructs of Otherness by placing it within well-established theoretical frameworks of media studies and postcolonial critique.

The poem must, however, be placed within three crucial contexts in order to fully comprehend its significance: the ongoing Palestinian struggle against media bias, which frequently reduces complex human experiences to

[1] **Adrienne Rich (1929–2012)** was an influential American poet, essayist, and radical feminist thinker whose work centers on politics, gender, power, and the ethics of language.

[2] **Rafeef Ziadah** is a Palestinian spoken word poet and academic. Born in a Lebanese refugee camp in 1979, her family was originally from Haifa and Jaffa. She is known globally for her powerful performance poetry about life under occupation, most famously the 2008 piece "We Teach Life, Sir." She holds a PhD in Politics and is a Senior Lecturer at King's College London, where her research focuses on political economy and the Middle East. Her work consistently blends activism with art, advocating for Palestinian rights.

stereotypes or statistics; postcolonial theories regarding subaltern speech and the reclaiming of narrative authority; and the global power dynamics that create and maintain conditions of Otherness. This argument, indeed, supports Rich's idea of verse as an eternal voice against silence by showing how Ziadah's work transcends its immediate context to serve as both a particular political intervention and a universal testament to the role of poetry in inscribing humanity where it is most fiercely contested.

1) Palestinian Struggle and Media Representations

Rafeef Ziadah's, "*We Teach Life, Sir*" openly addresses the fundamental act of narrative violence that is the systematic misrepresentation of the Palestinian cause in the mainstream Western media. Actually, Western media coverage has often functioned within a colonial framework, portraying Palestinians as anonymous victims or faceless threats rather than as a people with historical rights and political agency, as academics like Edward Said[1] have long contended. This discursive strategy, which Poole and Richardson refer to as a "process of dehumanization through abstraction," successfully erases the lived reality of occupation and dispossession by reducing complex human experiences to sterile numbers or cycles of violence without context (117).

Media narratives that frame the conflict via this simplified lens legitimize the political marginalization of the Palestinian people by reproducing what Greg Philo and Mike Berry refer to as a "structured absence" of Palestinian voice and historical context (184). Ziadah's poetry fills this representational hole by directly addressing the deep hypocrisy ingrained in a media infrastructure that dehumanizes a populace before requiring them to perform their own humanity for consumption. Through questioning what she is requested to prove and, consequently, the power dynamics that make such a request essential, her sardonic repeat of the journalist's inquiry exposes the structural inequity of the encounter.

Thereby, Ziadah's poetry resists the abstraction of the media both by reclaiming narrative authority and restoring the specific, human details it erases. She uses poetry as a weapon to create a communal identity characterized by resiliency and life-affirming defiance, defying the call for a

[1] **Edward Said (1935–2003)** was a Palestinian-American scholar, literary critic, and public intellectual. He is best known for his groundbreaking book *Orientalism* (1978), which critically examines Western representations of the "Orient" and their role in imperial power.

sanitized "human interest" narrative. In a word, "*We teach life, sir*," the main refrain, is a potent rhetorical inversion that declares an enduring cultural and political vitality while rejecting the media's obsession with death and victimhood.

The function of what anthropologist Julie Peteet refers to as "cultural resistance," in which artistic practices become essential for "maintaining identity, dignity, and a sense of history" under situations of erasure, is consistent with this act of narrative reclamation (45). Moreover, Ziadah's striking images helps to re-inscribe the historical and material background that media coverage sometimes misses, from the "concrete roots" of refugee camps to the everyday survival rituals. By doing this, her outspoken-word performance goes beyond simple description to become an "act of transfer" that preserves lived experience and collective memory against official silence, as performance studies expert Diana Taylor puts it (2-3).

As a result, the poem functions as a powerful counter-narrative that challenges both particular media representations and the larger epistemological frameworks that uphold Palestinian otherness, demonstrating the importance of storytelling as a site of ontological resistance and political struggle.

2) *The Dehumanization and Reduction of Palestinian Narratives in Western Media*

The demeaning depiction of Palestinian existence in the mainstream Western media is a cohesive discursive regime that is meant to justify their political extinction rather than a collection of discrete editorial errors. In order to conceal the structural violence of occupation, this representational framework systematically enacts what critical media scholar Teun A. van Dijk refers to as the "ideological square," a tactic that emphasizes "Our good things" and "Their bad things" while de-emphasizing "Our bad things" and "Their good things" (267). This portrayal's mechanics are complex and reinforce one another. First and foremost, there is a widespread reduction to statistics in which people are reduced to abstract numerical data. In a different but related context, the social theorist, Hannah Arendt, observed that this quantification produces a "condition of superfluousness" in which people are deprived of their distinctive narratives and intrinsic worth, turning them into mere units in a somber tally that viewers are trained to accept without moral shock (457).

Yet, a strict binary framing of aggressiveness or victimization complements this notion. In fact, Palestinians are portrayed in a Manichean logic that provides only two subject positions: the irrational, nameless aggressor or the passive, pitiful victim who lacks political will and history. According to the communication professor Deepa Kumar, this false distinction effectively denies Palestinians a proper stake in their own liberation fight by preventing the creation of a narrative of "rightful resistance" or contextualized political agency (134). Consequently, a systematic decontextualization of their fight, in which events are isolated from the lengthy history of settler colonialism, displacement, and military occupation, exacerbates this denial. More than that, the ensuing media narrative portrays a bewildering loop of "violence" without justification, subtly normalizing Palestinian suffering as an unavoidable, albeit regrettable, aspect of the environment rather than a condition created by politics.

Hence, the implicit demand for humanity's justification is the most pernicious example of this discursive violence. The fundamental assumption that Palestinians must demonstrate their humanity for a Western audience—an expectation that Ziadah's poetry so masterfully parodies—presupposes that it won't be covered by the media. It shifts the burden of evidence to the oppressed, resulting in what philosopher Judith Butler refers to as a "differential allocation of grievability," a prerequisite for violence that establishes whose losses are considered worthy of mourning and whose lives are recognized as fully human (24). Indeed, artists like Rafeef Ziadah begin their involvement in opposition to this complex representational foreclosure. By employing the artistic medium of poetry to restore context, complexity, and an unbowed humanity, their work rejects the constrained scripts provided by mainstream media, revealing not just the injustices that exist on the ground but also the narrative injustices that allow them to continue.

3) Role of Statistics and Decontextualization in Erasure

In Western media coverage of Palestine, the use of statistics and decontextualization serve as complementary methods of epistemic violence that combine to create a politically neutral and sanitized narrative. A critical alienation occurs when casualties, home demolitions, or displacements are reduced to numerical facts. Consistent with the historian, Patrick Wolfe, "statistics are people with the tears wiped off." This process deprives significant human loss of its emotional, social, and cultural significance by

turning it into an administrative metric (388). As the sociologist, Stanley Cohen, contends in his work on ***States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering (2001)*****,** this abstraction is not a neutral act of reporting but rather a discursive technique that permits "psychic numbing" in distant audiences, enabling them to acknowledge facts while remaining detached from their moral implications (22). Thereby, a hollow calculus that is unable to portray the extent of human destruction is left behind when the individual story, the face, and the name—the very components that elicit empathy and demand ethical recognition—are methodically eliminated.

To put it in another way, systematic decontextualization reinforces this numerical abstraction structurally. Uprisings and military attacks seem like irrational or inevitable eruptions when they are described as isolated outbursts of "clashes" or "violence," detached from the ongoing reality of occupation, blockade, and settler colonialism. For the media researcher Greg Philo, this framing produces a "historical vacuum" that absolves strong actors of accountability and makes Palestinian political agency either pathological or undetectable (189).

Obviously, global incomprehension is the outcome of this dual abstraction. International publics view the Palestinian situation as a far-off and perplexing tragedy, a "cycle of violence" with no apparent cause or potential solution, which justifies political inaction. Rafeef Ziadah's, "*We Teach Life, Sir*" explicitly challenges this created separation. Her poem serves as a purposeful textual and performative intervention against what the visual culture expert, Ariella Azoulay, refers to as "the imperial condition of viewing," which is the habit of seeing tragedies without understanding the historical power dynamics that give rise to them (11). By reintroducing the human voice, the familial bond, the cultural practice of "teaching life," and the historical weight of ongoing Nakba, Ziadah's work dismantles the abstracted media narrative piece by piece and calls for a form of engagement based on contextualized empathy and political recognition rather than detached statistics.

4) Postcolonial Theory and the Subaltern Voice

The discursive stakes of Rafeef Ziadah's, "*We Teach Life, Sir*" can be critically examined by engaging with postcolonial theory, particularly Gayatri Spivak's fundamental investigation of subaltern agency. The political daring of Ziadah's poetic intervention is highlighted by Spivak's

assertion that the subaltern—the individual situated outside the circuits of hegemonic power and representation—is structurally "unable to speak" inside dominant epistemic regimes (104). For Spivak, this incapacity stems from the systemic foreclosure of a hearing rather than from literal silence; the subaltern's speech is either rendered inaudible or, when it is registered, is unavoidably translated and appropriated by the very institutional and intellectual systems that profit from her marginalization. This dynamic is demonstrated in the Palestinian context by the Western media's combined strategy of suppressing genuine narratives and insisting on a carefully constructed performance of "humanization" that adheres to predefined, frequently victim-centered clichés. The academic scholar, Bell Hooks, refers to this as "talking back," a speech act of defiant self-narration directed at an authority that denies it legitimacy (5), Ziadah's poetry explicitly addresses this dilemma. Therefore, Ziadah's art functions as a performative counterpoint to Spivak's somber diagnosis. It is an artistic and strategic attempt to create a place for subaltern enunciation that is resistant to appropriation. The poem's relentless refrain, "*We teach life, sir,"* and its aggressive, sardonic tone serve as a rhetorical reclaiming of agency. It rejects what Homi K. Bhabha states to as the archetypal poles of otherness, which are the two subject positions commonly assigned within colonial discourse: the helpless victim or the menacing militant (101). Rather, Ziadah expresses a multifaceted subjectivity characterized by tenacity, pedagogical continuity, and an unwavering resolve to live. This expression is consistent with the endeavor that the postcolonial critic, Hamid Dabashi, refers to as "liberation hermeneutics," in which artistic output serves as a tool for asserting an independent historical awareness and "writing back" against imperial narratives (8). Certainly, the poem changes the epistemological footing by emphasizing the Palestinian voice as the independent subject of its own story. It questions not just media portrayals but also colonial history and global power structures that, as Spivak's work clarifies, are based on the subaltern's approved silence.

As a result, "*We Teach Life, Sir"* becomes more than just a poem; it is an intentional act of epistemic disobedience, a representation of the subaltern speaking on her own terms and demanding a hearing for a narrative of resistance and existence that dominating structures actively seek to obfuscate.

5) Conclusion:

Rafeef Ziadah's poem, "*We Teach Life, Sir*" is revealed as a significant act of cultural and epistemological resistance when examined via the intersecting frameworks of media critique, postcolonial theory, and the politics of representation. It is a direct response to the dehumanizing practices of Western media coverage, which consistently erases Palestinian subjectivity and historical agency through statistical abstraction, decontextualization, and binary framing. By violently re-inscribing the humanity that these narratives want to erase, Ziadah's art transforms the poetic realm into a place where political disobedience, collective memory, and lived experience come together.

The poem uses powerful rhetorical devices, such as sarcasm, refrain, and visceral imagery, to undermine the need for performative suffering and instead affirm an identity based on fortitude and a steadfast dedication to life. Furthermore, Ziadah's poem represents the transformative potential of "speaking back" within Gayatri Spivak's theoretical concern with the subaltern's ability to speak. It offers a voice that asserts its own authoritative narrative ground rather than one that is filtered through hegemonic translation, challenging the structural silence imposed by colonial and neocolonial power dynamics.

By doing this, it resonates as a worldwide testament to the strength of art in battles against injustice, transcending its particular setting. To crown everything, Adrienne Rich's claim that poetry is the timeless voice of the voiceless is supported by, "*We Teach Life, Sir*." It shows that the poetic word is still a vital instrument for reclaiming history, inscribing humanity, and calling for a more equitable and compassionate interaction with the world even in the face of erasure. The poem ensures that the subaltern does not just talk but is heard by enacting resistance rather than just describing it.

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