

**Ibrahim Taha:  
2016. The  
Fourth Dimen-  
sion: Semiotic  
Debates with  
Palestinian and  
Arabic Literatu-  
res. Nazareth:  
The Arabic  
Language  
Academy**

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Until recently, literary criticism among the Palestinian minority in Israel was dogmatic and ideological and did not meet the ethical standards of true literary critique. Rather, it was nourished by the ideological activities of the political party frameworks of that minority, mainly the Communist Party (RAKAH) and its newspaper *al-ittihād* (The Unity) and magazine *al-ghadd* (Tomorrow). The critique focused on praising the literary works for the author's intentions rather than for qualities of the literary text itself. Conversely, it would purposefully crush a work of literature because of the personality of the author or his political or ideological affiliations. I do not believe that this kind of literary criticism did justice to the texts that developed during the national and social struggle of this minority. This book by Ibrahim Taha attempts to address key questions concerning such literary criticism: what is the current state of the field? What key changes has Palestinian literary criticism in Israel undergone? Given the scarcity of literary criticism, how can one balance between the number of literary texts and methodical academic literary criticism?

Taha's book is a serious attempt to take a critical look at Palestinian literature in Israel in particular and Arabic literature in general, using methodical and scientific tools

mainly involving the understanding of semiotic clues. I believe that the main importance of this book lies in understanding the Palestinian literary text in Israel by understanding the general literary work typical of that text. Unlike many other Palestinian critics, Taha emphasizes the dialogue between the text and the reader and the clues the text offers to enable the reader to reach a profound understanding of its hidden meanings.

Taha's book is panoramic in nature and contains an anthology of articles he published in the Israeli Arabic press from the 1980s to 2016. It relates directly to the works of 17 Palestinian and two other Arab authors. In addition to the preface, in which he lays out his theory of literary criticism, he provides three general articles: "The Politics of Palestinian Literature in Israel", "The Dialectical Connection between the Narrative Text and the Reader", and "The New Literature Curriculum in Arab Schools in Israel". Apart from the article on author Rāwiya Burbāra, Taha Rawiya Barbara, Tāha does not engage with the works of fourth-generation Palestinian writers; rather, the book focuses on the works of second- and third-generation Palestinian writers living in Israel. Because of this, I do not believe that the book truly reflects the current experi-

ence of Palestinian literature in Israel (which was not its intention, anyway). It focuses on the mainstream literature of the national Palestinian minority in Israel and does not discuss its formerly marginal works, which have now become part of the literary center for this population.

In this context, it is important to note the theoretical preface that Taha devotes to the state of literary criticism within the Palestinian population in Israel. This preface differs from the articles themselves, since it pertains to the current state of Palestinian literary criticism. Taha believes there is a serious problem with the quantity and quality of Palestinian literary criticism in Israel, even though the literary texts offer us both quality and quantity. However, it is the problem of reading and critiquing that hampers the development of this literature. In this important preface, in a manner that is a rather too personal for my taste, Taha emphasizes the need for a critical text to accompany and guide the literary dynamic among the Palestinian population in Israel. Unlike other critics, he warns against letting literary criticism continue to be a kind of political and ideological “getting even”, which can empty the cultural movement of its depth and aesthetic and social context.

The book's title is indicative of what makes it unique. It also indicates its theoretical underpinning: the overall semiotic theory with its four dimensions: the writer, the text, the reader, and the historical diachronic context (p. 12). The semiotic debate in this book covers the profound and temporary contextual vertical and horizontal directions, but each approach stresses a different dimension. Taha's analyses stress the qualitative facet of the work, in other words, how the author created the various meanings in his work. According to Taha, this can reveal not only the meaning, but also some of the author's mentality and thinking. For Taha, under the influence of semiotic theory, the text is merely a mutual exchange between sender and recipient built up on the basis of markers and symbols, as well as indexical, linguistic, and expressive acts alongside general cultural and civilizational codes (343).

The author's aim in this book is to make it easier for the reader to access articles spread across various newspapers and journals in order to look at the development of Arabic Palestinian literature in depth and trace its development over a relatively long period. Thus, the articles in the book reveal different approaches, sometimes because of the amount of time

between their writing. In the earlier articles written in the 1980s, there is plentiful evidence of the broad Russian formalist and structuralist approach. In contrast, in his later articles, Taha analyzes the works using the semiotic approach that highlights the strong link between the work's meanings and the tools used to shape it. This is clearly expressed in the article about the story by Egyptian author Idrīs: Yūsuf 'Idrīs “Ḥālat Talabbus” (Caught Red-handed) (Taha 401-414).

Two things I feel are missing from this book, that could supplement its academic orientation. The first is a reference list containing all the bibliographical items he used, and the second is an expanded index containing most of the people and issues he discusses. Nevertheless, Taha's book fills a void in Palestinian literary criticism in Israel and presents a serious critique based on scientific tools and structured theories that unearth the ensemble of meanings in the literary text. Taha's critical and close reading of the text is profound and looks at Palestinian writings in comprehensive and interdisciplinary contexts. Taha's reading does not separate Palestinian writing from world literature and treats it outside the local parameters within which it was created.

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The book offers the Arab reader in Israel and elsewhere a broad picture of Palestinian literature from a viewpoint of extensive personal involvement. The articles not only reflect textual knowledge, but also first-hand knowledge of the emergence of Palestinian literature in Israel. The writer is not only a full professor at Haifa University, but is also personally involved in organizing conferences on Palestinian literature and supervises MA theses and PhD dissertations dealing with this literature. Moreover, he is a member of many Ministry of Education committees working to advance Arabic language and literature in Israel. Furthermore, he is also a member of public committees and journals dealing with Palestinian literature. This involvement in Arabic Palestinian literature in Israel is also clearly evident in the scholarly articles in this book, which not only deal with Palestinian literature drily and from a distance, but also experience the literary process in general, thereby truly reflecting the cultural experience of the Palestinian minority in Israel.

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