

## Abu Adel, the opener

By Oula Jomaa

"Ah, my brother Abu Adel, he was the one who opened the camp. He was the first one, and it was an iron gate, he dragged it himself... He opened the gate, and the first person passed through, and others followed behind", says Hajjeh Halima Dalal, telling this story repeatedly. Every time she delves into a topic about Palestine, about the Nakba, and about displacement in all its stages reaching its final destination, refuge in al-Jalil camp in Baalbek, she diverts the conversation to this specific story. She proudly tells it over and over again, never tiring from repeating it, or intertwining it with every discussion related to Palestine. Everytime she tells it, she emphasizes her words even more, raising her voice as if she were delivering news of liberation and victory: "Yes, my brother Abu Adel was the one who opened the door, I swear to God."<sup>1</sup>

I truly wonder and ask myself: what is the psychological state behind this story? What is the true feeling? What exactly is the reason for her pride and admiration for this great opening? And I don't mean to diminish the significance of this event, nor do I intend to belittle it, yet what confuses me in her story is the contradiction between what I expected as a feeling associated with such an entry and such a beginning of a life in refuge, and what I saw in the eyes of the Hajjeh, and what I heard in her prideful voice. Is it a hidden feeling, with its surface contradicting its core? Or is it a fabricated and false feeling in which the soul deceives and distracts itself from its own helplessness, sorrow, and brokenness?

I think about Abu Adel, the opener, opener of the refugee camp, opener of refugees' lives... And I wonder, how did he feel at that time? And how is he now? I wonder, did Abu Adel know, when he opened the gate to the camp, that he was opening a prison for us and them, and that this prison's verdict is still postponed until now? And we don't know until when.

I don't know the feelings of Hajj Abu Adel when he opened the camp gate, but as I write now and contemplate, and engage my imagination and try to put myself in his place, I see him from the inside and from the outside, and I try to picture: what could those feelings have been? Were they feelings of joy, of pride, and admiration like those of his sister? Or were they feelings of sadness and disappointment? Or were they feelings of reassurance and relief from those days, weeks, and months they spent, after leaving Haifa, going through all the stages of displacement, until they reached our current prison, a respite from fear, hunger, fatigue, from illness and loss, the loss of spirit, and land, and identity.

While I try to visualize this scene of opening and entering, a passage by the poet Mahmoud Darwish comes to mind. He says:

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<sup>1</sup> Halima Mahmud Dalal, born in 1944, Haifa-Palestine, interview dated 18/11/2022, Al-Wafa House of the Elders - al-Jalil camp, Nakba Archive interviews

“And they searched his heart, but could only find his people  
And they searched his voice, but could only find his grief  
And they searched his grief, but could only find his prison  
And they searched his prison, but could only see themselves in chains.”

I believe that in every moment, the Hajj's heart was saying, "my people, my people, my people," as he led them, as if he were the leader of this march, as if salvation rested in his hands. He says "my people" because he feels what they feel, because he knows the extent of the hardship, difficulty, and sadness that he and his people have experienced. His only concern was to provide them and himself with shelter.

When they searched for his voice, they could only find the sound he memorized from the first time he opened the gate, and it was the sound "trrrrrr." His tragedy inhabited each one of his days because he could not forget this eternal sound in his mind, this sound that followed him all these years and became a part of his life, like an alarm clock... Reminding him every day of the first moment of refuge.

If we are to talk about joy and happiness, or about false pride and boasting, I don't think these are emotions worth mentioning or discussing. I see them merely as desperate and futile attempts in Hajjeh Halima's conversation, attempts to overcompensate for one's loss, to avoid talking about the feeling of humiliation, and to replace it with false pride. But it doesn't hurt; it's like any other attempt, it's like us, trying to escape confrontation, the confrontation with the reality of feelings, especially back then, when these were feelings of weakness and helplessness. I saw this sorrow and brokenness, and this bitterness in the eyes of Hajj Abu Adel when I watched a video excerpt of him speaking about the refugee experience. I saw a tear in the corner of his eye trying not to fall, out of embarrassment, and I witnessed this painful pang and I heard this pang that you hear in the rattle of their voices, every time we talk to any one of them about their Nakba, which resembles our own Nakba in the way it feels, but not in the way it looks.

And this is how I know, with certainty, that the camp was a prison for us and for them, in that we were all restrained by the most trivial things, the simplest ones and the most complex ones too, and that these restraints lay siege to us as they do to them. And that we're searching for any outlet, any valve, any reason or justification to hold out some hope... The hope for return, the hope for freedom, the hope that our hands will be released from all these shackles, the hope that these sounds will be erased from our memory.

Abu Adel the opener is not the only one haunted by sounds, they pursue and inhabit all of us, and they have become as such, sounds that describe us, sounds that resemble our past, sounds that inhabit our present, sounds that have become a part of our existence.

Another sound also haunts Hajj Rajab al-Masri, a sound he still tells us about after years have passed. I think we should develop a new neuroscientific theory, specifically for Palestinians: it's

that their strongest sense is the auditory sense, and that it's the most closely related to emotions, consciousness, and perception. We Palestinians perceive our identity through the eternal sounds within us, this is how we define who we are, who we were, who and how we should be.<sup>2</sup>

Going back to Rajab al-Masri, there was a squeaking sound that pursued him for over sixty years, it wasn't like Hajj Abu Adel's squeaking gate, but rather the sound of a lock that the Zionists firmly enforced on Rajab al-Masri's shop. He, too, became another opener, reopening his shop, reclaiming his rights through force. He broke the lock with a "zardiyeh", a type of tool he compared to a "banseh", and he moved in there to live with his wife, telling her: "Go inside, when the officer comes to arrest me, go inside, and if they say get out, you'd better not comply, you'd better die there." She replied, "okay." Later, the British officer came to scold him, saying: "How dare you occupy a shop on the main street?" Rajab replied: "This shop is mine, it belongs to me." They took him to prison, kept him in custody and then brought him before the judge. "They put me in a cage in front of the judge." After an intervention from the charity organization Rajab was a member of, the judge requested from them a sum of 100 pounds (one theft after another, after the theft of the shop, the land, and the country). Rajab was released after paying bail and guaranteeing good behavior for six months.

For a landowner to pay the price for his own land, once, twice, and a thousand times over, to pay it with his own money, self, and family, with his body and his soul. To see the country getting divided before his eyes, to see it distributed among others, to see those who stole it hold him accountable for his ownership of it, for his livelihood in it, for his sustenance from it, for his very existence within it. Despite all that, he says: "No compromise, no surrender. It's either us or us or us, and no one else but us, we are the only sons of this land. No one else will sacrifice their lives, their children, and their families for its stones."

I try to put myself in Rajab al-Masri's place, if the occupier had prevented me from accessing my source of income, extorting money from me to assert his ownership over my property, closing all doors, entrances, and exits on me, if he had stolen my hopes and dreams, if he had robbed me of my freedom, if he had put me in a cage and imposed his terms on me, how could I possibly muster the strength to stand in front of this occupier, looking him in the eye, shouting and saying this is my right, my property, this is my freedom, and this is my land?!

Let us imagine together: you invest your time, effort, and lifespan to have a few walls that provide shelter for your soul. These walls become like your children, your rightful share that you worked hard for and exhausted yourself for. Then a thief comes and violates you, expels you from these walls, and deprives your soul of tranquility. Afterwards, he negotiates with you, offering to share some of it with you in exchange for money that never satisfies his insatiable greed. Once again, you pay for your own ownership only to share it with the thief. And then, the

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<sup>2</sup> Rajab Eid al-Masri, born in 1918, Gaza - Palestine, Nakba Archive  
<https://libraries.aub.edu.lb/poha/Record/4401>

scenario repeats itself: the thief steals, the thief negotiates, the owner pays, the owner takes a share of his ownership and then he is robbed of it once again.

This is not just the story of Rajab al-Masri alone; it is the story of all the people of the land. It is the story of all those whose lands, dreams, and hopes were stolen. It is the story of the Palestinian who remained on the edge of waiting, holding onto one hope he never abandoned, even though it weighs heavily on his chest, yet it remains lighter for him than surrender and acceptance.

This is the true Palestinian, the true son of the land. And I don't mean for my words to glorify all of my people nor to exclude any of them. I know there are traitors and sellers among them, but when this trait befalls them, they are no longer part of us. Those who have sold their land are no longer part of us; those who have bought their land are from among us. Rajab al-Masri is part of us, and so is anyone who holds the land dearer than money, than self, than child. The seller and the traitor are not part of us. Rajab al-Masri remembers those who sold, and he sings what the records used to echo about everyone who sold their land, whether knowingly or unknowingly:

"You sold your land, what did it benefit you?  
The heritage of your father and ancestors  
He told her, I did not know this broker  
Whose heart consumes with fire  
Would encircle me and make me sell the land  
Burning my destiny to the ground  
His wife tells him:  
The treacherous brokers have no honor or religion  
They made us sell our lands... Palestine, the cradle of prophets."

Rajab al-Masri continues his story: "This record was sought after by the Jews, they paid money for it and they broke it."

Those are their politics; what they cannot steal, they destroy.

I'll keep going about Rajab al-Masri, he and his family were displaced from Haifa to Gaza after people were forced to flee, to save their lives and the lives of their children. Initially, Rajab had left his wife and children in Gaza and spent most of his days in his shop in Haifa, visiting his family two days out of every month until he couldn't anymore, when calamity befell all the people of Palestine. He and his family were forced to flee on boats to Lebanon with hundreds of others. "They were hovering above us, and we were on the shores of the sea and them above us, we left because of the Jews. Who leaves their home and abandons it?!"

He speaks about this phase of displacement, once again referring to Haifa, wishing this discussion about Haifa could go longer and stop there. But there was nothing more left to say about Haifa except these words: "Oh, how we grieve Haifa, our land, it was paradise, oh, what a shame, our hearts break for Haifa and all of Palestine."

The discussion about Haifa ended with the final glance, with the moment of departure. "From Gaza, a boat took us, exiled, and threw us somewhere between Saida and Sur, they threw us in the night. The boat also passed by Haifa, but we didn't pick anyone up, Haifa was all gone, everyone left... They took it, they occupied it." Rajab al-Masri says that they considered the shop, the house, and all of Haifa as absentee properties and claimed everything. What remains of it exists only in the eyes of Rajab al-Masri and in his memory. Absentee properties of those present, properties that haunt them like ghosts, like the sound of the camp's gate that haunts Hajj Abu Adel.

Life went by, a new life, and Rajab al-Masri was never again the owner of any land he set foot on since his last date with Haifa, his beloved. I had always wondered how someone who lived through the Nakba and lost what they lost during it, could keep living after the Nakba, and have a new life, a different life, a life with its share of happiness and sorrow.

I think I have the answer now, I think I found it thanks to Rajab al-Masri, thanks to Abu Adel the opener. It's the survival instinct, and we Palestinians have mastered it to the extent that it is no longer just an instinct, it has become a goal, an end, and a necessity.

In reality, we're not given the choice to either continue life or stand still. To live and build a new life for yourself is not an option or a negotiable decision. It is an imposition, a duty, a solution, and your only way to go, and no one will excel in it as you do.

As a Palestinian, you must abandon your human weakness and helplessness, your sensitive feelings, or at least hide them and ignore their existence. You must understand that they hinder your ability to survive, for you were born to remain. You were born because you have a land that was stolen from you, and it is your duty to reclaim it. You were born because you have rights that have been violated, and it is your right to reclaim them. You were born to live, to remain, to renew the generations, to return, and to live.