

## Optional Reading: Middle Eastern Society Through Literature

The field of literature in the Middle East has often been a political and cultural battleground. Most of the region's best-known writers have stood in opposition to their governments. Many have been imprisoned for their work. At the same time, literature has reflected the larger tensions of the region. Writers have played an important role in shaping the struggle between traditional values and Western liberalism. They have often served as a voice for the powerless and the forgotten.

In this section of the background reading, you will have an opportunity to sample the work of Iranian, Israeli, Palestinian, and Turkish writers. As you read, identify the values and viewpoints that come across most strongly.

### Aboud's Drawings by Ghodsi Ghazinur

Ghodsi Ghazinur (1943-) is a widely-read author of children's literature in Iran. She is also skilled at addressing mature themes through the eyes of children.

*Aboud's Drawings* is told from the perspective of Morteza, a poor boy living in Tehran, Iran's capital. The story is set in the early stages of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88). While Morteza, his little brother Mostafa, and his friends are playing with cardboard weapons and fireworks in their neighborhood, Iran is experiencing mounting casualties at the battlefield and suffering from increasingly deadly rocket attacks. In the following excerpt, the reality of war intrudes on Morteza's innocent game.

After my brother fell asleep that night, I got to work. I found a piece of cardboard, drew a picture of a J-3 gun, cut the picture out in the dark with a pair of scissors I took out of my mother's sewing box, then I took the half-ready gun to my room and painted it black with a magic marker. It turned out

perfect. My brother cried his eyes out when he saw my gun the next morning. My mother who had lost her patience with him bought him a squirt gun, but my brother kept on crying that that was not a gun and that he wanted a gun and my mother, not knowing what was going on, ignored him. Eventually she got disgusted and started beating him. I felt so sorry for him that I had to rescue him from her, in spite of the fact that he was an enemy, and make him understand that a handgun was as good as any gun in a war...

That day my older brother informed us that he was joining the army on Monday. My mother looked at my father. My father's hand, holding a cigarette, started trembling. They acted as if it were the first time they had learned it. I sat by my brother and said, "Brother, are you going so you can fight the enemy?"

He caressed my hair and said, "Yes."

"With a real gun?" my younger brother asked enthusiastically. My brother smiled bitterly. My younger brother went on gleefully, "We're fighting, too. In the alley. But our guns are fake."

I glared at him but it was too late. I expected my older brother to scorn us, to say that instead of engaging in nonsense like that we should be studying. But he gently said, "Sweet Mostafa! No one really wants to be in a war. You are too young to know what war is, otherwise you wouldn't be playing a 'war' game."...

A few days later a new boy appeared in our neighborhood. He was our age, with a dark complexion and curly hair. We soon found out that his name was Aboud. Akbar was the first to meet him....

When we went to the alley the next day, we found Akbar and Aboud waiting with the rest of the guys. Akbar introduced him to us. When Aboud saw the sacks in our hands and guns on our backs, he asked, "What are these for?"

“For the ‘war’ game.”

He lowered his head and remained silent.

“Why don’t you join us?” Ali asked.

“No, I don’t want to play.”

“Why?” Ali asked in an exaggerated tone.

“Because war isn’t a game.”...

The next morning we went to the alley as usual. We hadn’t finished setting up our sandbags yet when Aboud appeared. He was holding a big roll of cardboard under one arm. Everyone exchanged curious glances. I decided to act as if I hadn’t seen him, but before we had a chance to discuss it among ourselves he came and stood in the middle of our circle and said, “Good morning, brothers!”

His tone was so friendly that everyone’s attention went to him.

“Since I left you yesterday, I have been working on this. I worked on it all day so I could finish it in time to bring it today.”

And he opened the roll. On the extra-large piece of cardboard, there were several pictures of war, each scene neatly drawn. On the top of the sheet he had written in bold black print, “The Damned War.” A scene showing bomb explosions appeared on the right-hand side. Aboud had drawn pictures of wounded birds on the edge of the scene, writing underneath the picture, “This is what war is all about.” On the left-hand side there was a picture showing a few small children staring sadly at a demolished house. The words underneath the picture read, “This used to be Zaer Abbas’s house.”...

We gazed at the pictures for a few moments.

“Who was Zaer Abbas, Aboud?” Jafar asked.

“Mahmoud’s father,” Aboud answered, squinting. “Mahmoud was a friend from school. An explosion destroyed their house. When my friends and I arrived at the scene, they had closed the alley off, preventing us from getting near the bombed house. The only thing we could find out was that none of the inhabitants had survived. They lifted the

restriction in the afternoon after they removed the corpses. I walked toward the house. Mahmoud’s sneakers were tossed outside and lay on a mound of dust next to his sister’s plastic doll with its missing hands and eye sockets filled with dirt. I wanted to scream. I wanted to knock my head against the wall. All my memories of Mahmoud came alive in my mind: the days we used to set fire to car tires during the [Islamist revolution] uprising; the afternoons we used to spend playing soccer; the days we used to go to the river bank and sprinkled bread scraps for the ducks and the fish. Now Mahmoud is dead. The river is contaminated with bodies of ducks and fish killed by bombs, and it stinks. There’s not a single bird left. The explosions have scared away not only the people but also the birds.”

“Where did they escape to?” Mostafa asked.

“God knows. They’ve become refugees, too,” Aboud said. Then he fell silent.

## The Lover by Abraham B. Yehoshua

Abraham B. Yehoshua (1936- ) explores the contradictions between the idealism of early Zionism and the reality of Israeli society. His novels find drama in the everyday experiences of Israelis, probing the anxieties and tensions that have emerged since Israel’s triumph in the 1967 War.

*The Lover* examines Israeli life in the mid-1970s from a variety of perspectives. Dafi, one of the book’s main characters, is a 15-year-old student who is beginning to question the civic values of her country. Like many teenagers, she struggles to break free of the rules and expectations that are likely to define her life. Dafi expresses her rebellious spirit by challenging the authority of her parents and teachers. She also falls in love with a young Palestinian mechanic who works in her father’s garage. In the following excerpt, she recalls the loss of a teacher killed during the October War of 1973.

**W**e of class six G of Central Carmel High School lost our math teacher in the last

war. Who would have guessed that he'd be the one to be killed? We didn't think of him as a great fighter. He was a little man, thin and quiet, starting to go bald. In the winter he always had a huge scarf trailing behind him. He had delicate hands and fingers that were always stained with chalk. Still he was killed. We worried rather about our P.E. teacher, who used to visit the school from time to time during the war in uniform and with his captain's insignia, a real film star, with a real revolver that drove all the boys mad with envy. We thought it was marvelous that even during the war he found the time to come to the school, to reassure us and the lady teachers, who were wild about him. He used to stand in the playground surrounded by children and tell stories. We were really proud of him and we forgot all about our math teacher.

On the first day of the war he had ceased to exist for us, and it was days after the ceasefire that Shwartzzy [the school principal] suddenly came into the classroom, called us all to our feet and said solemnly, "Children, I have terrible news for you. Our dear friend, your teacher Hayyim Nidbeh, was killed on the Golan on the second day of the war, the twelfth of Tishri. Let us stand in his memory."

And we all put on mournful faces and he kept us on our feet for maybe three minutes, and then he motioned with a weary gesture that we shouldn't stand, glared at us as if we were to blame and went off to call another class to its feet. I can't say that we were all that sorry at once because when a teacher dies it's impossible to be only sorry, but we really were stunned and shocked, because we remembered him living and standing beside the blackboard not so long ago, writing out the exercises with endless patience, explaining the same things a thousand times. Really it was thanks to him that I got a pretty good report last year because he never lost his temper but went over the same material again and again. For me someone only has to raise his voice or speak fast when explaining something in math to me and I go completely stupid, I can't even add two and two. He used to make me relax, which was boring, it's true, deadly boring. Sometimes

we actually went to sleep during his lessons, but in the middle of all this drowsiness, in the cloud of chalk dust flying around the blackboard, the formulas used to penetrate.

And now he was himself a flying cloud.

Naturally, Shwartzzy used his death for educational purposes. He forced us to write essays about him, to be put into a book which was presented to his wife at a memorial ceremony that he organized one evening. The students that he'd taught in the fifth and sixth grades sat in the back rows, in the middle the seats were left empty and in the front rows sat all the teachers and his family and friends, even the gym teacher came especially, still in his uniform and with his revolver, although the fighting had ended long ago. And I sat on the stage where I recited, with great feeling and by heart, the poems that are usual on these occasions, and between the poems Shwartzzy preached a fawning and flowery sermon, talking about him as if he was some really extraordinary personage that he'd secretly admired.

And then they all went and stood beside a bronze plaque that had been put up by the entrance to the physics department. And there, too, somebody said a few words. But those we didn't hear because we slipped away down the back steps.

Shwartzzy was a quick worker. In Israel they hadn't yet finished counting the dead, and he'd already got the memorials out of the way.

## Wild Thorns by Sahar Khalifeh

Sahar Khalifeh (1941- ) is a keen observer of Palestinian society in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Her writing exposes the psychological wounds suffered by Palestinians living under Israeli occupation. At the same time, Khalifeh lays bare the disunity and weaknesses of her own people.

*Wild Thorns* tells the story of Palestinian youth growing up in the West Bank in the 1970s. The main character is Usama, who

has returned home after working in the Persian Gulf as a translator. Usama has joined the Palestinian resistance movement and is committed to blowing up the buses that transport Palestinian workers to jobs in Israel. But Usama is torn when he learns that many of his cousins and neighbors work in Israel. Eventually, he goes forward with his mission, but both he and one of his cousins die in the attack. In the following excerpt, an exchange between two Palestinians—one a poor bread seller and the other an affluent businessman—illustrates for Usama the strains and compromises of daily life in the West Bank.

Usama strolled along the narrow muddy streets. The discordant cries of the street peddlers vying with one another assaulted his ears. Meat, fruit and vegetables; the bread seller's cart was piled high with loaves made "inside," in Israel.

"Fresh bread! Hurry up! Come and get it, folks! Hurry! Fresh bread! One pound a loaf! A loaf for a pound! Only one pound!"

An elderly man with a red fez set firmly on his head passed by. He picked up one of the long loaves, squeezed it and then put it back. The bread seller shouted, "But it's fresh, sir. I swear it's fresh!"

The man walked away, gesturing, as if to say, "Fresh indeed! You dare to sell their leftovers here!", and disappeared down an alley.

Usama watched the scene angrily. Even our bread! The idea infuriated him.

A well-dressed young man now approached the bread seller and asked in an aggressive tone, "Where's it from?"

Upset by the question, the bread seller looked around furtively to see if other potential customers nearby might have heard. "It's just bread," he said.

Sensing from the well-dressed young man's expression that an attack was imminent, he repeated defensively, "Now look, sir, this is just bread. Does even bread have a religion and a race? This is top-quality bread—it's worth its weight in gold!"

The young man picked up a loaf; it was stamped with Hebrew letters. And it was as dry as the trunk of an old olive tree.

"This bread's from inside!" he said angrily. "And it's stale too! Disgraceful."

This was clearly not the first time the bread seller had heard this. He responded to the challenge immediately. "Yes, sir, it's from inside," he agreed. "And where else would it be from? It's all from inside, sir. Everything! Why not just move on and let me try and earn my living?"

"What you're doing is a disgrace," the young man repeated disdainfully.

The repeated insult now brought an angrier, more voluble response. "A disgrace, is it? They called it disgraceful when I took a job 'inside.' So I stayed home like the women, and they called that a disgrace! And here you are in your fashionable trousers and smart shirt, all nicely pressed, telling me it's a disgrace. Look, friend, we're not the first to work with them. While we were still wandering the streets of Nablus looking for bread to eat, your kind were running around Tel Aviv looking for companies to award you franchises so you could sell their products. Isn't that true now, sir? Tell me if it's true or not."

He grabbed a loaf of bread and waved it in the young man's face, flecks of angry spittle landing on the loaves. "Well, is it true or false?" he shouted. "Answer me, in the name of our faith, answer!"

The young man was gazing at the peddler dumbfounded, his heart beating fast, his expression shocked and imbecilic. Getting a grip on himself, he suggested defensively, "Well, couldn't you sell Arab bread?"

The bread seller threw the loaf back onto the cart and began to move off, leaving the young man still holding the loaf he'd first picked up. When the cart had moved a few paces away, the young man followed, still clutching the bread, and shouted, "Hey, wait, take this back."

The peddler stretched out a hand and grabbed it. "Okay, give it here," he said fierce-

ly. “Let someone else buy it. It’s clear you’re from the upper class. Give it here. Working-class people buy quietly, without making a long song and dance about it.”

## Civilization’s Spare Part by Aziz Nesin

Aziz Nesin (1915-1995) was one of modern Turkey’s most popular writers. His novels and short stories often poked fun at the snags in Turkey’s modernization process. Nesin’s sharp wit frequently provoked criticism from Islamic leaders and conservative politicians.

In *Civilization’s Spare Part*, the main character, Hamit Agha, is a victim of the mechanization of Turkish agriculture. The short story is set in a rural coffeehouse, where Hamit Agha is explaining to his fellow villagers how the purchase of a tractor has led him to financial ruin. Hamit Agha recalls that his daughter and son-in-law, both of whom are teachers, and his son, who had learned to drive in the army, badgered him to sell his oxen and buy a large tractor. They argued that the tractor would do the work of ten men and save him money. Instead, the tractor suffers one mechanical problem after another. In the following excerpt, Hamit Agha recounts his history of troubles with the tractor.

The winter had set in. We pushed the tractor into the stable and tied it to the post where the oxen used to be, while a tumultuous snowstorm was sounding on the roof. Meanwhile, friends, the bank loan and the installment at the equipment office came due. We had no money.... We borrowed money to pay the first installment at the office.

We reached summer in the middle of all this. We made for the field. Just then it went bang, and crash, and stopped. What is the problem with this damned thing? No one knew. We brought out the expert from the office. Didn’t he say its cogwheel was broken? “Sell us another cogwheel,” we said, and he said no.

“Since this cursed thing has no cogwheel, why do you cheat us poor people?” “Well,” he

said, “if you buy another tractor, then you can use its cogwheel.”

Look around at our neighbors’ fields. It’s the same story. A tractor body lies in everyone’s fields. Everywhere you look are chains, tractor treads, and piles of iron....

Then, gentlemen, wouldn’t you know it? The installment was due. The second notice came. For the sake of our honor, sirs, we sold another ten-donum [about 2.5 acres] field. A screw fell out—500 hundred liras [Turkish currency]. A thousand liras for a part the size of your finger. A bolt come loose—1,000 liras. Its chain breaks. Spare parts couldn’t be found. A patch here, a patch there. That blessed tractor started to look like my trousers. While it plowed the ground, it shook all over like someone who has malaria. Everywhere in our field one can find a screw, a belt, an iron bar, a shaft, or a chain. It was as though the filthy thing had sprinkled its seeds in the field.

They said that our assemblyman whom we elected from the Democrat Party was in town. I went to him. “What will happen to us?” I asked. “Does a tractor the size of an elephant stop dead because of a part the size of a nut?...”

What could he say? He talked for a long time. I couldn’t understand very much. “How did people live in the past, in the Stone Age? Now it’s the Iron Age, that is to say, the age of the Democrat. Civilization and the country are turning into iron,” he said.

I said, “What you’re saying is all very well. You brought this civilization, but where is its spare part? Come with me and look at the field. Our civilization is in pieces. It lies there like a corpse. Isn’t there a smaller one than this? If this miserable thing hits something it doesn’t move, if you say ‘giddap’ it doesn’t start up, and if you say ‘whoa’ it doesn’t slow down.”...

Just then another installment notice arrived. Let me tell you something. The sighs of the oxen have affected me. How tearfully that yellow ox wept when he was sold to the market! How sorry I was!

To make a long story short, I sold every field and paid off the whole debt. Then I called to my daughter and son-in-law. I took my wife and the boy out to the wreck. "Either we repair this calamity of God's or I'll put the yoke on you, drive you like oxen, and plow the farm," I said. They worked on the engine, kicked it once, twice, tore off and reattached a strap, tightened a screw, and put something else in place of the fragile cogwheel whose bolt was loose....

Then, gentlemen, I could see that it wouldn't work. I gathered my son, daughter, son-in-law, and wife. "Come on, folks," said I, "let me show you how to repair this thing." I picked up a sledgehammer. I drove those people of mine before me like a flock of sheep.

We came to the wreck. I struck the steering wheel and said, "Take that, you 20th century." I struck the engine and said, "Take that civilization." I struck the driving wheel with the sledgehammer and said, "Take that. This is your spare part." I swung the sledgehammer again and again. Suddenly I saw that my wife was shouting. "Help! My husband has gone crazy!" My daughter ran, my son-in-law ran, and my son ran the hardest. I threw away the sledgehammer and started down the road. I came straight here, gentlemen. I'm still sweating....

What a relief! I escaped from the accursed, foul thing. A thousand thanks to God. It's as though I've been born again.