Book Review: A Memoir-Novel of Tadmur Military Prison


By Shareah Taleghani

In 2001, following the release of several hundred political prisoners, the Syrian government ordered the closure of its most notorious detention center—Tadmur Military Prison. Located in the desert near the ancient site of Palmyra and originally built by the French Mandate authorities, Tadmur has been described as a "kingdom of death and madness" by Syrian poet Faraj Bayraqdar and the "absolute prison" by dissident Yassin al-Haj Salih. The abject conditions of torture, daily degradation, and arbitrary execution which prisoners experienced there were the subject of intense scrutiny by both international and local human rights organizations throughout the 1980s and up until its doors were finally closed almost eight years ago. The site of a massacre of suspected members of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1980, Tadmur, according to a 2001 report by Amnesty International, was and is "synonymous with suffering".

In the recent proliferation of contemporary Syrian prison literature, most narrative accounts of prisoners' experiences of surviving the conditions of Tadmur have been circulated in the form of testimonials and memoirs. Aside from a website dedicated to testimonies of former Tadmur prisoners, Muhammad Salim Hammad's prison memoir *Tadmur: Shahid wa-Mashhud [Witness and Witnessed]* recounts in linear and chronological fashion his experience of detention and torture at the prison as a suspected member of the Muslim Brotherhood. Faraj Bayraqdar's own poetic prison memoir *Khiyanat al-Lugha wa al-Samt [The Betrayals of Language and Silence]* (2005) dedicates an entire chapter to what he calls "Tadmuriat"—brief, disjointed fragments of descriptions of terrifying events and moments he witnessed while detained at the infamous prison—moments that appear to escape the possibility of representation because they are "beyond surrealism".

Mustafa Khalifa's recently published work *al-Qawqa’a [The Shell]* (2008) is one of the first novels dedicated to the story of a detainee's imprisonment in Tadmur. Detained himself from 1982 to 1994, the author presents the story of a seemingly apolitical protagonist who returns to his homeland after studying film in Paris and is arbitrarily
detained. Musa is arrested upon arriving at the airport, brutally tortured at an interrogation center of the military security service, mistakenly placed with detainees who are members of or suspected members of the Muslim Brotherhood, and then sent to the "desert prison". He will not learn what precise crime he had been accused of until close to the time of his release. Like many prisoners, Musa discovers and masters the skill of oral composition and memorization. He has no paper and no pen. But throughout his detention, in his mind, he composes his diaries, memorizes them word by word and sentence by sentence, and retains each entry in his memory until he is eventually able to record them on paper after his release. Except for the very beginning, the novel is composed of these dated entries—some just a day or two apart and some separated by several months. Each entry contains parenthetical observations—editorial comments or additions that the narrator makes to his own memorized composition, seemingly at a later point in time.

Musa is never sentenced by a court, and he is never placed on trial, but he will spend twelve years in the desert prison. He is however, sentenced to silence by his fellow detainees, when he is overheard telling his torturers that first, he is a Christian and then declaring himself an atheist and therefore in no way affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. Ostracized completely by the rest of the inmates in his mahja' (dormitory or communal cell), he describes himself as withdrawing into his shell. The subtitle of the novel is "diary of a secret observer" (yawmiat mutalassis). Musa is constantly "peering" or "creeping out of" his shell; he listens attentively, meticulously observes, and diligently records all of the horrors he witnesses in the prison. From the beginning of his enforced sojourn in detention, his life is threatened not only by the brutality of daily forms of torture and degradation, but by the Islamist extremists in his cell who believe that he should be executed as an unbeliever. Rescued and then protected by the moderate pacifist Shaykh Darwish and a physician who treated the wounds afflicted by his torture, Dr. Zahi, he nonetheless remains isolated for ten years. No one will speak to him because he is impure—this silencing imposed not just by his jailors but by his fellow inmates mimics the muting of thousands of political prisoners who passed through Tadmur and other sites in Syria's infamous carceral archipelago who have never been able to tell their stories.

Nonetheless, Musa speaks through his diary, and in doing so, he introduces his reader to a gruesome lexicon of torture and detention. He tells of the "reception" the prisoners receive upon their arrival to the prison: each is forced to drink the putrid filthy water from a sewage drain. Those who resist are beaten to death. Those who drink are treated to more torture or "hospitality" as the guards call it. Day after day, the torture continues. Daily activities can bring arbitrary death. He describes the "breather" or break where prisoners are routinely whipped, lashed, and beaten. He recounts how prisoners were not allowed to raise their eyes towards their jailors. He recollects the warden coming into the cell and randomly executing fourteen of his cellmates because of a threat he received in the outside world. He witnesses the weekly execution and trials of inmates in the courtyard through a tiny hole he discovers in the wall of his communal cell. He also methodically describes daily aspects of prison life—surviving the baths, illicit prayers, the confining, airless dimensions of the mahja', the brutal shaving of prisoners heads and faces, the secret forms of communication between prison cells, the innovative modes
prisoners use to treat the sick and wounded when deprived of medical care, and the myriad forms of resistance that detainees develop despite the ever looming threat of death.

Musa will remain in complete isolation from his cellmates for ten years. After nearly a decade, he is once again confronted by an extremist calling for Musa’s trial, judgment, and execution by the other prisoners; finally, he breaks his silence and vocally confronts his would-be executioner. From that moment, he becomes intimate friends with Nasim—an inmate who was detained as a hostage due to his brother's affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood. Like others, Nasim will eventually suffer a breakdown; his dissent into madness occurs when three brothers are executed after their father was promised that the youngest would be spared. Abruptly, in twelfth year of detention, Musa is transferred from the prison back to the military interrogation center. He learns that his influential uncle has been attempting to obtain his release. But before he is actually freed, he will be interrogated in three different branches of the security services because he refuses to confess to belonging to any political organization, to write a thank you letter to the Syrian president for his release, or to renounce involvement in politics.

After his release, Musa returns to his family home that he inherited from his father and lives with his niece and her family. Despite family pressure to marry and to work, he does neither. He isolates himself from the world around him. Eventually, he learns that Nasim as well as others he was imprisoned with have been released. Nasim, however, has never recovered from his breakdown, and takes his own life in front of Musa after a brief reunion of former cellmates. At the end of the novel, there is no sense of celebratory liberation for Musa. Instead, noting that he has never truly been released from prison, he describes himself as having lost the ability to communicate, as perceiving an insurmountable abyss between himself and all others, and as carrying a grave within himself. Rather than creep out of his "shell" to watch and record what is happening around him, he remarks: "I do not want to look outside. I close its holes in order to turn my gaze entirely to the inside, to me, to my self".

Narrated in stark, simple language, the basic plot of The Shell, along with the framing device of a prison journal, will be familiar to readers of prison literature. Khalifa's direct, documentary style lacks elements of formal experimentation seen in other recent works of Syrian prison literature such as the fragmented, stream of consciousness narration in Hasiba 'Abdalrahman's prison novel Al-Sharnaqa [The Cocoon] (1999) or Malik Daghastani's Duwar al-Hurriya [The Vertigo of Freedom] (2002). However, the absence of experiment with form in the text does not detract from impact of the narrative on the reader. The history of Tadmur Military Prison, the stories of the human lives detained and lost inside its walls, are still in the process of being written, and Mustafa Khalifa's The Shell marks a significant contribution to the beginning of that process.

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