

“Women’s Voices from Gaza”, Dr. Anat Matar, Tel Aviv University, 20.7.2025

Introduction

Hello everyone, and welcome to “Eyes on Gaza” — our daily gathering that blends protest with learning. Hard as it may be to grasp, the hunger and starvation in Gaza — which we’ve already heard about in previous talks in this series — are worsening, reaching even more catastrophic levels, as our speakers have warned. The voices and images reaching us today from Gaza, especially from women, are unbearable. Our guest today, Dr. Anat Matar, a philosopher and activist from Tel Aviv University, will add a historical dimension to the story of Gaza’s women and present a special project. Thank you, Anat, for joining us. I’ll just remind everyone that Anat will speak for about eight minutes, and then we’ll leave a little time for a short discussion. Anyone wishing to ask a question is welcome to write it in the chat, and I’ll read it aloud to her. Thank you again, Anat.

Talk

With pleasure. I would say, honestly, that my topic is actually rather pleasant compared to the horrors around us. I’m going to speak about something that can’t really be summed up in a single headline. But I’m not going to talk about women in Gaza in general — rather, about a book series, to present it to you, and to spark your interest in it. The series is called *Women’s Voices from Gaza* (<https://ualbertapress.ca/search/?series=womens-voices-from-gaza-series>) and I’ll speak about the editors and so on later. I don’t want to waste time on that right now, but we may come back to it.

The series is published by the University of Alberta Press, and so far three books have come out — I’ll introduce them in a moment — and a fourth is due next year. Each volume truly presents the voice of a woman from Gaza, of blessed memory. They have all passed away, some quite recently. The interviews were conducted 15 or 20 years ago, mainly by Ghada Ageel, a friend of mine — and, as I said, we’ll talk about her — and Barbara Bill. Some of the time they worked as part of an oral history project: they simply listened, letting the women speak, and the series is edited with great delicacy, almost not edited at all. You simply hear the woman speak, in her own style, about her life, the emphases she wants to make, and so forth. In other words, a very light editorial touch.

The first volume is *A White Lie*, and I’ll focus mainly on it today. I won’t go too deep into it just yet, but the woman interviewed — and effectively the author — is Madeeha Hafez Albatta. The second book is *Light the Road of Freedom*, by Sahbaa Al-Barbari — whose name means “the comrade.” She had another name too, but she was known as “the comrade” because she was a communist. I might have time to say a few words about her as well. The third book is *Come My Children*, by Hekmat Al-Taweel. The fourth, *I Can Do Anything*, has not yet been published, so I haven’t read it. The other three are simply wonderful, and they share some very important common themes I want to highlight right from the start.

The authors are feminists — each in her own way. Each, in mapping out her story and claiming the authority of “oral history,” overcomes not only colonialism and anti-colonialism, Egyptian rule, and Israeli rule, but also male rule. This is a very strong thread running through all three volumes.

Let’s go through them one by one for a moment. The first, as I said, is Madeeha Hafez Albatta (1924–2011), a Muslim woman. As I started to say earlier about class awareness, all three women

— in different ways — are very conscious of class issues. Two came from relatively well-off families — “came from money,” as one might say — as you can see on this photo, I think, from Madeeha’s expression, and they married men of some standing. This is significant in her case.

The communist, Sahbaa Al-Barbari (author of *Light the Road of Freedom*), I don’t know exactly when she passed away (1932–2012?). What’s interesting is that she was, among other things, the deeply devoted wife — and this comes through strongly in the book — of the famous Palestinian poet Muin Bseiso. The third, *Come My Children*, is by Hekmat Al-Taweel (1922–2008). I have no photo of her, but I do have one of the Al-Taweel family home, destroyed in October 2024. The unpublished book, *I Can Do Anything*, is by Um Baseem Al Kafarneh (1937–2009). I couldn’t find her photo either, but I did find one of Bassam Muhammad Al-Kafarneh, aged five, killed recently in Gaza, part of a memorial project. Many members of the Al-Kafarneh tribe have been killed. One is very well-known to you — I chose not to show his picture. He was a skeletal figure, seen lying in bed, nothing left of him but bone; he has now passed away.

A White Lie, the first volume in the series, by Madeeha Hafez Albatta, begins with her birth in Khan Younis in 1924. She came from a devout Muslim family and remained so. Much of her story revolves around her attempt to navigate class consciousness, anti-colonial awareness, and the search for a place for a woman within that framework. She comes across as a very strong woman who stands her ground. The book is titled *A White Lie* because it begins like this: “A white lie changed my life. Without it, I’m sure my life would have been just another example of most Palestinian women’s lives at the time: children, cooking, keeping house. But I had the ambition to go beyond that.” She explains that she wanted to study in Ramallah and advance her education — something rarely available to girls of that era. The story begins under the British Mandate, when a man from the British Department of Education, a Mr. Farrell, visited her school and asked several students to recite poetry. She was chosen and read beautifully, impressing him greatly.

Quoting from her account: “After I finished, the inspector patted my shoulder and asked my name. I said, ‘Madeeha Sheikh Hafez Albatta.’ ‘Ah,’ he said, ‘so that’s why you’re so clever — the daughter takes after her father.’ Then the inspectors left the school. Immediately, I had the idea to convince my father to let me study at the women’s teachers’ college in Ramallah. When I got home, I asked if the British inspector had visited the boys’ school, where my father was headmaster. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘and then he came to your school.’ I asked if he had returned to the boys’ school afterward. My father said no, he had come to them first, then to us. ‘I’m sure they went back,’ I lied to him, ‘and when they couldn’t find you, they asked me if I planned to study at the teachers’ college in Ramallah, because I’m very good. But the teacher stepped in and said you were very strict and wouldn’t allow me to go, because Islamic law forbids a woman to travel alone without a male escort.’ The British inspector then said he’d heard Sheikh Hafez Albatyta was a very educated man, and that in Ramallah there were no male teachers at all — even the janitor was forbidden to enter the building — only Muslim women were there. ‘Really? Is that what he said?’ my father asked. ‘Yes!’ I lied again, and he promised to reconsider. Then he gave me permission to study in Ramallah.”

I see I’m out of time, so I’ll leave you with that as a teaser. We can discuss whatever you’d like, and perhaps I can read a few more passages if you’re interested.