

NEWSELA

Syrian poets bear witness to violence: "There's nothing civil about a war"

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Omar Offendum, 30, a Syrian-American rapper, poses for a portrait in Los Angeles, California, where he lives, Oct. 9, 2012. Photo: Jay L. Clendenin/Los Angeles Times/TNS

The words are bound in blood and speak of graves and broken bones.

The poetry coming out of the Syrian civil war echoes with nostalgia, bombs and betrayals. It tells of families torn apart by the war and of boys who resist with rifles. It is the verse of the forgotten who struggle to survive among violent madmen and ruined cities, as they become refugees without homes.

Grandmother's Shattered Orchard

The poems flow in slipstreams of syllables, beats and rhythms. Poems are composed by writers, doctors, mothers, activists and Syrians who live abroad who are all compelled to write about the suffering in their ancestral land.

Poet Amal Kassir summons the shattered orchard on her grandmother's farm. Her poem "My Grandmother's Farm" describes a farm taken over by a violent "tyrant."

My grandmother knows Syria better than anyone.

It is the arthritis living in her knees.

She had a farm whose dust she knew by name.

... And the tyrant,

The dirt is waiting for him.

Like the rest of us,

He will learn his grave,

Feel the weight of the entire country on his chest.

"The World Had Betrayed Us"

Kassir is a 20-year-old Syrian American college junior. She and her family lived in Syria from 2002 to 2005. Now Kassir travels the world drawing attention to Syria through rallies and slam poetry performances. She carries a book bag and wears a hijab, a headscarf worn by some Muslim women. When Kassir reads poetry, her voice sounds both youthful and wise.

The war has "captivated all of my poetry," Kassir said. For Kassir, poetry is powerful because "you can compare the color of a pomegranate to the color of blood on the ground. There is color and scent and sound involved."

Years of relentless conflict and human rights abuses have at times silenced her verse. She could not write for nine months because she felt incredible sadness and that "the world had betrayed us."

"Poetry Is A Witness"

Since the Syrian revolution began in 2011, more than 200,000 people have been killed. More than 4 million refugees have spilled from Syria's borders and at least 7.6 million others are displaced and homeless inside Syria. The war has spun into a confusing game of air strikes, attacks, rebels and Islamic fighters. The future of Syrian President Bashar Assad is uncertain.

"Poetry is a witness," said Mohja Kahf, an Arab American poet and professor. She praised the work of Syrian poet Khawla Dunia, an activist.

Dunia became known for her Facebook posts on the difficulties of women and people who vanished in Syria's prisons.

"Fate Ruled By A Dumb Rifle"

One of Dunia's poems is called "Sniper":

*Finger that does not rest
Limb that leans on fate,
a fate ruled by a dumb rifle, and you
Have you known who I am?
Who taught you what you are doing to me?
This moment which joins us:
your eye,
a bullet,
and me
It is this moment, then,
that unites us.
It divides me from my dream
and gives you your name,
Sniper.*

"Silenced For A Very Long Time"

Syria's bars and markets have long echoed with storytellers and poets, including Adonis, regarded as one of the best Arabic poets of the 20th century. Many writers and intellectuals were persecuted by Assad's government. Political debate and conversations were muffled or disguised until the Arab Spring uprisings, anti-government protests and rebellions that swept across the Middle East in 2011.

"We Syrians had been silenced for a very long time," said Ghada Alatrash, the daughter of a former Syrian ambassador. She now lives in Canada and translates poetry from the war zone into English. "But in new language since the revolution, something powerful was articulated...I saw a lot of courage. There was nothing to lose."

One of the most powerful voices from inside Syria is Najat Abdul Samad, a doctor. "When I am overcome with weakness, I bandage my heart with women's patience in adversities," she writes in a poem Alatrash translated. The final line reads: "I bandage it with the outcry: 'Death and not humiliation.'"

The vigor of the revolution's early days, however, has been sapped by years of bombs, quickly dug graves, and the feelings many Syrians have that their nation has been cut off by the rest of the world and turned into a land of barren fields and wars without clear purpose.

A Rapper's "Crying Shame"

Writing has become "little glimpses" of the disasters "that are taking place on the Syrian ground," Alatrash said. "Now, it's sons going off to war and not returning. It's become more real."

This brutal scene is conjured in Syrian American hip-hop artist Omar Offendum's songs.

Offendum's new song, "Crying Shame," speaks to how mind-numbing the war has become:

Now they say Syria's confusing

Can't decide which of the sides

They really should be choosing

Here's a thought:

How 'bout you recognize we're all losing

And there's nothing civil about a war

Where kids are stabbed to death and mothers smothered on a kitchen floor.

Offendum delayed the release of an anti-government song until his family members escaped from Syria. "I had to hold my tongue for a long time," he said. "I couldn't release a song like that without their blessing."

Quiz

- 1 Poetry is a powerful medium for communicating experiences.
Which excerpt from the article BEST supports the main idea above?
- (A) Poet Amal Kassir summons the shattered orchard on her grandmother's farm. Her poem "My Grandmother's Farm" describes a farm taken over by a violent "tyrant."
 - (B) Now Kassir travels the world drawing attention to Syria through rallies and slam poetry performances. She carries a book bag and wears a hijab, a headscarf worn by some Muslim women.
 - (C) The war has spun into a confusing game of air strikes, attacks, rebels, and Islamic fighters. The future of Syrian President Bashar Assad is uncertain.
 - (D) Political debate and conversations were muffled or disguised until the Arab Spring uprisings, anti-government protests and rebellions that swept across the Middle East in 2011.
- 2 Which answer choice provides an accurate and objective summary of the article?
- (A) Poetry currently provides the best coping strategy for Syrians living under the conditions of war.
 - (B) Syrians have turned to poetry as their preferred way to convey the experience and emotion of life during the civil war.
 - (C) Syrians are using poetry to express the experience and emotion of living in the midst of civil war.
 - (D) Poetry, though effective in expressing the experience and emotion of war, will not be able to end the conditions of war.
- 3 What is the relationship between the introduction [paragraphs 1-2] and conclusion [the section "A Rapper's Crying Shame"] of the article?
- (A) The introduction describes the poetry currently coming from Syria, then the conclusion describes the conditions that gave rise to poetry in Syria.
 - (B) The introduction presents several of the themes of Syrian poetry, then the conclusion revisits the theme of "bombs and betrayal" referenced in the beginning.
 - (C) The introduction describes the war in Syria, then the conclusion analyzes whether poetry can have a positive impact on the conditions in Syria.
 - (D) The introduction presents the concerns addressed in Syrian poetry, then the conclusion shows how one poem is meaningful to a Syrian family.

- 4 Read the sections "Grandmother's Shattered Orchard" and "The World Has Betrayed Us".

Select the paragraph that represents a major shift in the article's development.