

ESSAY

On the Palestine Question: Roald Dahl, Harold Pinter, and others

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On Saturday, February 15, 2003, I was part of a 15 coach convoy from Portsmouth to London, UK. Under the leadership of the late John Molyneux, we made the trip to join the anti-war rally in London's Hyde Park which, according to the BBC, was attended by a million, and according to the organisers, by two million people. As a student of English literature, I was especially enthusiastic about the speech at the rally given by Harold Pinter, whose play *The Birthday Party* (1958) I had read during my student days at the University of Dhaka.

A few years later, in 2006, Pinter was among a group of prominent writers, including Arundhati Roy, Noam Chomsky, Tariq Ali, and Toni Morrison, who had signed a letter to expose a blatant media hypocrisy during a flare-up of tensions between Israel and Palestine. It included the following message: "Each provocation and counter-provocation is contested and preached over. But the subsequent arguments, accusations and vows, all serve as a distraction in order to divert world attention from a long-term military, economic and geographic practice whose political aim is nothing less than the liquidation of the Palestinian nation."

On June 24, 2006, Israeli forces had kidnapped two Palestinians—a doctor and his brother—from their home in Gaza. The day after, on June 25, 2006, the Palestinians abducted the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit in a cross-border raid, which prompted Israel to launch airstrikes and push into Gaza. The signatories of the letter pointed out that dominant media outlets regarded the kidnapping of Gilad Shalit as "an outrage", whereas the day-before abduction of the two Palestinians was "scarcely reported anywhere, except in the Turkish press".

The current flare-up of troubles in Israel and Palestine began with Hamas' October 7, 2023 attacks on the former. In disproportionate retaliation, Israeli air and ground forces have violated all international norms and have so far killed more than 14,000 Palestinian men, women, and children, and demolished innumerable infrastructures in Gaza, including residential blocks, hospitals and schools. As a result, Gaza is littered with dead bodies and burdened with unclaimed orphans whose parents and near relatives have been murdered. Needless to say, Israeli settler violence and killing in the West Bank have gone unabated.

The Israeli government failed to protect its citizens on October 7,

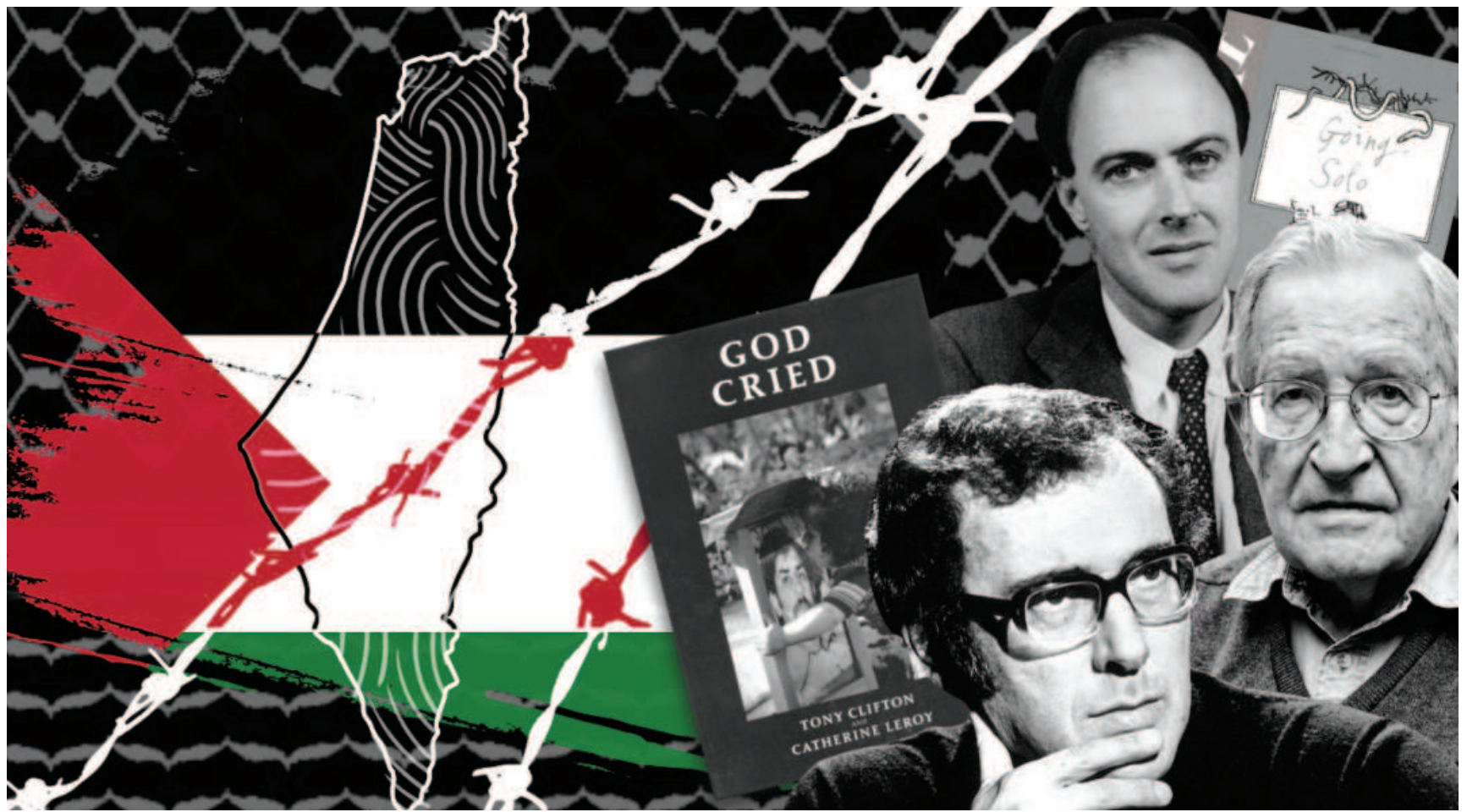


ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

"Never before in the history of man has a race of people switched so rapidly from being much-pitied victims to barbarous murderers. Never before has a race of people generated so much sympathy around the world and then, in the space of a lifetime, succeeded in turning that sympathy into hatred and revulsion."

2023 and, perhaps in order to divert public attention from that failure, it has gone on a long and genocidal bombing and killing spree in Gaza. The common understanding of the term "self defence" involves protecting oneself and others in one's own territory. However, Israel's decades-long belligerent actions have conflated defence with offence—often with genocidal consequences in Palestine. It kills Palestinians and demolishes their houses and other infrastructures with abandon and impunity, violating all rules of engagement (ROE).

Israel and many of its supporters have kept reiterating the condemnable Hamas attacks of October 7, 2023. They want the rest of the world to ignore the deaths and destruction in Gaza perpetrated by Israeli forces and to believe that the problem started on that date. In order to delve deeper into understanding when and how this problem first started, I took to the pages of literature and came across works, including Roald Dahl's memoir *Going Solo* which was published in 1986.

Earlier in January 1983, another book titled *God Cried* was published. It is co-authored by the Australian

journalist Tony Clifton and the late French war-photographer Catherine Leroy. Both of them covered the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon and recounted in the book the siege of West Beirut, and how Palestinians and their Lebanese allies gave their lives to defend it.

Towards the end of the invasion, in September 1982, Israeli forces besieged the Palestinian refugee camp Shatila and the adjacent neighbourhood of Sabra in southwest Lebanon. They provided cover for the Lebanese Maronite militia group Phalange to carry out massacres, mainly against Palestinian refugees who had fled death and ethnic cleansing in 1948 when Israel was established in the land of Palestine. According to an Al Jazeera report from September 16, 2022, in "43 hours, from 6pm on Thursday 16 September, until 1pm on Saturday 18 September", the Israeli-backed militia killed between 2,000 and 3,500 Palestinian refugees and Lebanese civilians.

The first Arab-American US senator, the late James G. Abourezk, wrote a review of *God Cried* which was published in the *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* on October 3, 1983. In his review, Abourezk states:

"Clifton makes a significant point, which I happen to agree with, and which I have made a number of times in discussing the Israeli invasion. The massacres at Sabra and Shatila drew attention away from the larger crime committed by the Israelis in its grossly inhumane butchery all during the summer [in 1982]."

Abourezk regards *God Cried* as "a document which will rekindle the anger of those who read it—anger toward the Israeli war machine and all those who supported it and made excuses for the horrendous slaughter which it wrought on the people of West Beirut. Everyone will find a page or a story or a photograph in *God Cried* that will adhere in his or her brain forever, and there is practically no limit to those in this book."

The "anger" to which Abourezk alludes had found expression in an earlier review of *God Cried*. Written by Roald Dahl and published in the August 1983 issue of the British magazine *Literary Review*, the essay titled "Not a Chivalrous Affair" begins with these sentences:

"In June 1941 I happened to be in, of all places, Palestine, flying with the RAF against the Vichy French and the Nazis.

Hitler happened to be in Germany and the gas-chambers were being built and the mass slaughter of the Jews was beginning. Our hearts bled for the Jewish men, women and children, and we hated the Germans. Exactly 41 years later, in June 1982, the Israeli forces were streaming northwards out of what used to be Palestine into Lebanon, and the mass slaughter of the inhabitants began. Our hearts bled for the Lebanese and Palestinian men, women and children, and we all started hating the Israelis. Never before in the history of man has a race of people switched so rapidly from being much-pitied victims to barbarous murderers. Never before has a race of people generated so much sympathy around the world and then, in the space of a lifetime, succeeded in turning that sympathy into hatred and revulsion."

This is an excerpt from the essay "On the Palestine question". Visit The Daily Star and The Daily Star Books website to read the full essay.

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BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Keep your secrets close and your tech support closer

Review of *'The Square'* (Sphere, 2023) by Celia Walden

FARAH GHUZNAVI

Addison Square is one of those hidden enclaves where well-heeled Londoners tuck themselves away to create bubbles of "civilised life" from which they can exclude the riffraff surrounding them in the mega-city they call home. Of course, much like our own capital Dhaka, what goes on behind closed doors in such exclusive neighbourhoods is often far from civilised.

And in this story, nobody knows that better than 50-something Colette, sometimes dismissed as "the geek" and the "IT woman" by her customers. She services the tech needs of several of the residents in this upmarket location and in other similar areas, but lives somewhere rather less impressive herself.

Colette's access to her clients' private lives—in an indirect but very real way—reminded me of the IT guys (and I think for most of us in Bangladesh they are almost always still guys) whom many people have on speed dial. While discretion is a watchword for such individuals, and necessarily so given the nature of their business, I have managed to glean—from personal conversations with my tech guy—just how many strategic matters he knows about his clientele!

The IT person has a role in the average professional's life that is some unholy mixture of friend, confidant, essential worker, and father confessor. From what I am told, one of the most frequent issues that comes up in Bangladesh relates to the use of x-rated sites that the internet has made easily accessible in private homes worldwide.

According to one of my IT guys, he has had to extricate more than one of his customers from the consequences of an ill-advised download, or otherwise reckless online tourism. Because of this, he now knows more about this person's "tastes" than he would ever want to, which is a rather uncomfortable thing to think about—even for me, just



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

hearing about his experiences second-hand, and even after he was very careful not to give away any identifying characteristics of the individual concerned.

That does not appear to be as much of a problem for Colette, who lives in a country where social sanction of this kind is an issue of far less concern. Her work is also made easier by the fact that Colette likes most of her clients in Addison Square.

Some more than others, of course. After all, who could feel friendly towards the repulsive Adrian, married to the intelligent, long-suffering Emilia? Not only does the man regularly address Colette as Lynette or Yvette, his predatory behaviour also marks him out as a poster child for the rationale behind sexual harassment policies.

But things in this tight-knit group are about to get a shakeup. When a young, glamorous French-Moroccan woman named Leila moves into the area, she leaves no-one unaffected by her arrival. Least of all Colette.

Leila is standoffish and very conscious of her attractive exterior. She does, after all, take extremely good care of it! Having already achieved significant success as a dancer in well-known music videos, Leila is also—surprise, surprise—a social media influencer.

To his wife Emilia's horror, Adrian swiftly and all too predictably becomes preoccupied with Leila. Without his wife's knowledge, he starts dangling potential opportunities for Leila to work in TV, in a transparent attempt to lure her into his orbit. As an agent, Adrian does have an extensive network of contacts in the sector, but are his offers of help genuine?

After Leila contacts Colette privately, asking for her help with a stalker on social media, the IT expert's first suspect is Adrian. It is evident from the pictures that have been posted of Leila that the stalking is being done by one of the Addison Square residents, since only those living in this gated community have access to the garden where the younger

woman has been intrusively filmed in one such instance.

Clearly, something is broken when it comes to the social contract in this wealthy area. Nevertheless, the techie initially turns down Leila's request to help her identify the sleazebag involved because it would require Colette to abuse her privileged access to the neighbours' computers.

It is only after Colette accidentally views a chat thread on an online bulletin board about the forthcoming neighbourhood party, that she realises how almost all of her clients see her as a pathetic nerd with no life of her own. Unsurprisingly, this changes not only Colette's view of her own place in this community, but also of the people who live in Addison Square, including those whom she had previously considered to be friends.

It is always good to get a handle on the key characters early with this kind of an ensemble cast—especially as there is an interesting subplot here featuring some of the children. Nevertheless, the author does a good job of utilising all the characters to play their parts in her novel, since the effectiveness of the book is closely tied to successfully pulling off the interweaving

Meanwhile, although Sylvia, an older woman, is flattered to have glamorous Leila seeking out her company, tensions quickly develop between the newcomer and some of the other residents, such as Guy and Zoe

Mulligan, whose apartment sits just below Leila's. Still, no-one expects things to end in murder. Not in this postcode...

Celia Walden has done a terrific job of creating an entertaining storyline, with several good subplots involving the various people living in The Square, as its inhabitants like to call it.

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There are a couple of major twists in this novel, along with several minor ones. One of the former took me entirely by surprise, because it turned the nature of this story on its head. It's rare to find a book that has original things to say about the common trope of a neighbourhood that guards its secrets carefully, but *The Square* delivers well on that front.

Handling the multiple strands of the plot with impressive skill, Walden neatly pulls everything together at the conclusion, gifting us quite a few surprises along the way. I loved this book. It is clever, engaging storytelling that will keep the reader absorbed throughout.

Farah Ghuznavi is a writer, translator and development worker. Her work has been published in 11 countries across Asia, Africa, Europe and the USA. Writer in Residence with Commonwealth Writers, she published a short story collection titled Fragments of Riversong (Daily Star Books, 2013), and edited the Lifelines anthology (Zubaan Books, 2012). She is currently working on her new short story collection and is on Instagram @farahghuznavi.