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Thu Mar 13, 2025 12:00 AM

Last update on: Thu Mar 13, 2025 06:51 PM

<https://www.thedailystar.net/books-literature/news/terrible-beauty-born-gaza-and-west-bank-3846561>

‘A terrible beauty is born’ in Gaza and West Bank

Pre-occupation Palestine had, to use Anglo-American poet WH Auden's words, "marble well-governed cities" full of "vines and olive trees." But Israel and its allies have turned it into "an artificial wilderness"



PHOTO: COLLECTED

The Easter Rising of 1916 against British rule in Ireland has both political and literary significance. It marked one of the foundational moments in European history that led to the liberation of the Irish state six years later. WB Yeats's famous poem "Easter 1916" gives the rebellion a literary expression that transcends political and geographical boundaries.

Through the uprising, the Irish rebels took the British coloniser as well as the people of Ireland by surprise. It was planned so furtively that even a close observer of Irish politics like Yeats was unaware of what was going on among the rebels. They sought to free their country from centuries-old British colonial rule.

Yeats thought that the Easter uprising was premature, and its unpredictability and suddenness initially shocked him. Later he surmounted his shock and reservations about the revolt and composed the poem to commemorate the heroism and sacrifice of the rebels.

In the Easter armed rebellion, about 1600 members of the paramilitary group Irish Volunteers (now known as the Irish Republican Army or IRA) in addition to 200 fighters of the more radical organisation the Irish Citizen Army took control of several key points in Dublin on Monday, 24 April, 1916. The General Post Office (GPO) in the city was the epicentre of the insurrection.

Initially the British colonial government was unprepared and suffered casualties, but later it deployed additional soldiers eventually totalling about 20,000 against roughly 2000 Irish freedom fighters. On the whole, the British response to the uprising was brutal, cruel and ruthless. By Friday, April 28, 1916, the armed struggle was crushed and the fighting ended the next day. Nearly 500 people including civilians, rebels, British troops, and police officers were killed. Within a couple of weeks, the British government put to death 15 of the key rebel leaders by firing squad.

The steadfastness and determination of the rebel leaders and the manner in which they were killed galvanised retrospective support for the uprising and garnered public sympathy for them. Like many others, Yeats was ambivalent about the Easter rising and had mixed emotions about its leaders. But the rebels' commitment to the cause of Irish liberation and their resolute conviction that the country they loved needed their support changed Yeats's perception of them.

In "Easter 1916", Yeats repeats the phrase "a terrible beauty is born" to refer to what the rebels did for their country and the cost that they paid. The inhuman savagery of the British was terrible, but the selflessness and bravery that the Irish revolutionaries demonstrated were most beautiful.

Yeats's elegant oxymoron of "a terrible beauty" can be extended to the situation in Palestine. Most people passionate about the cause of Palestine had conflicting feelings when on October 7, 2023, a group of Palestinians launched a surprise attack on apartheid Israel, their long-term oppressor. Global sympathy was divided, and Israel received comforting words from many world leaders.

However, Israel's indiscriminate killings of Palestinians in Gaza and continued settler terrorism in the West Bank, and finally over a yearlong livestreamed genocide in Gaza shifted public sympathy in favour of the victims of Israel's aggression. People of the world have watched the unspeakably sickening cruelty of Israel and its backers and undoubtedly horrifying devastation that the Zionist genocide has left in Gaza.

Pre-occupation Palestine had, to use Anglo-American poet WH Auden's words, "marble well-governed cities" full of "vines and olive trees." But Israel and its allies have turned it into "an artificial wilderness." Gaza is now:

"A plain without a feature, bare and brown,
No blade of grass, no sign of neighborhood,
Nothing to eat and nowhere to sit down."

During this time and previously, Palestine has been a battleground between some of the most powerful nations and some of the poorest and most vulnerable people on earth. Again to borrow Auden's words, against their oppressors, defenceless Palestinians

"could not hope for help and no help came:
What their foes liked to do was done."

Israeli government and its allies have killed tens of thousands of Palestinians children, men and women, demolished their houses, destroyed their schools, colleges, and universities, turned their hospitals to rubble, killed doctors who treated them, butchered journalists who told the world about their ordeals, murdered teachers who taught their children and assassinated aid workers who stood by them in their difficulty. Israel and its allies perpetrated all the above and many other atrocities against Palestinians to break their will to resist. But the genociders have been defeated by Palestinians' willpower, strong resolve and formidable opposition to foreign occupation.

Without any support from the rest of the world, vulnerable Palestinians stood up to powerful nations that have continued providing arms and ammunition and diplomatic support to Israel, especially, Gazans have remained steadfast and resilient in the face of barbarity and evil that epitomise the behaviour of their oppressors.

Despite military superiority, Israel and its Euro-American allies have not been able to break the courage of Palestinians and their urge for resistance. Against the sadistic and bellicose behaviour of the Israeli administration and its sophisticated

weaponry, Palestinians are armed with an enormous dose of courage and spurred by love for their land.

The land that has been littered with blood and dead bodies of Palestinians bears a strong testimony that it belongs to those who are ready to die for it and not to those who have come to destroy it. Every injured Palestinian child and bereaved parent declare in unison that Palestinians will continue to live and die in their land and their source of strength is not modern, hi-tech weapons but truth and moral rectitude.

Most Palestinians who live in Gaza and the West Bank have their roots in cities in what is now Israel. They or their ancestors were uprooted from their homes when the Zionist state was established. Even before the post-October 7, 2023 genocide, Gazans were already living in a condition that commentators regarded as Israel's open-air prison or the world's largest concentration camp. By making life in Gaza increasingly unbearable in pre-during-and post-genocide periods, Israel and its backers seek to ramp up their ethnic cleansing project. Thus, Palestine's "casual comedy" is still in play.

Every time we open the newspaper or turn on the news channel, we see scores of Palestinians are butchered or buried in their homes which Israeli bombings have turned into mountains of rubble. Using Yeats's words, we tend to ask:

"O when may it suffice?"

Palestinian homes that now look like demolition sites were once inhabited by men and women along with their old parents and young children. Their homes were bombed while they were inside them. We now see only the rubble, debris and ruins of destroyed buildings. But how was the experience of those who were living there with their families during the horrifying moments of the bombings?

We are required to raise the level of our psychological adaptability even to imagine the frightening sounds, fallen pieces of concrete, and dust in the midst of which Palestinians regularly die or survive with significant bodily impairments and other devastating outcomes. When houses are bombed and reduced to heaps of debris, how do their occupants and people around feel?

The patience and resilience of Palestinians in the midst of genocide and decades-long human rights violations tell us about the beauty of their "hearts" which have been "enchanted to a stone" of single-minded devotion to Palestinian liberation. This resonates with what Yeats said about the freedom-loving Irish:

"Too long a sacrifice

Can make a stone of the heart."

By daring to stay put in the face of death and destruction, for decades Palestinians have been affirming their love for their land and confronting injustice with dignity and resilience. Conversely, the ugliness and hypocrisy stored in the hearts of their oppressors are exposed out there for all to see.

While the global conscience is continuously challenged by Israeli aggression, inhumanity and intolerance, as in 1916 Dublin, "a terrible beauty is born" in present-day Gaza and the West Bank.

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