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The Pen Against the Bullet: Refaat Alareer and the Spirit of Cultural Resistance in Gaza

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Abstract

This study investigates the cultural resistance embodied in the literary and academic contributions of Palestinian writer Refaat Alareer (1979–2023) as a potent response to the ongoing Israeli occupation of the Gaza Strip. It situates literature within an existential framework of defiance, positioning Alareer as a prominent voice within the broader tradition of Palestinian resistance literature—from Ghassan Kanafani to contemporary figures. While Palestinian resistance literature has been widely examined, scholarly engagement with Alareer's literary and pedagogical practices remains scarce, despite the global recognition he received following the 2023 republication of his poem If I Must Die. This research addresses this gap by exploring how Alareer integrated creative writing, oral heritage, and critical pedagogy as tools to counter colonial narratives and preserve Palestinian identity. The significance of the study lies in presenting one of the first comprehensive academic accounts of Alareer's intellectual legacy, thereby contributing both to the documentation of Palestinian cultural history and to the theoretical expansion of resistance literature as a field of inquiry. The research is guided by a central question: how can literature serve as an effective tool of resistance under conditions of protracted siege, systemic violence, and attempted erasure? Methodologically, the study employs a descriptive–analytical approach and discourse analysis to examine Alareer's cultural and political responsibility, situating his work within postcolonial theory and the wider field of resistance literature. The findings reveal that Alareer's work transcends mere documentation, constituting a counter-discourse that dismantles colonial misrepresentations and affirms Palestinian identity across linguistic and cultural domains. Ultimately, the study underscores the enduring power of cultural expression as a means of survival, solidarity, and resistance in Gaza.

Keywords: Palestine, Gaza, Palestinian literature, resistance literature, cultural resistance, occupation and identity, Refaat Alareer.

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Mermiye Karşı Kalem: Refaat Alareer ve Gazze'deki Kültürel Direniş Ruhu

Özet

Bu çalışma, Filistinli yazar Refaat Alareer'in (1979–2023) edebi ve akademik çalışmalarında somutlaşan kültürel direnişini, Gazze Şeridi'nde devam eden İsrail işgaline güçlü bir yanıt olarak incelemektedir. Çalışma, Alareer'i Ghassan Kanafani'yi günümüz yazarlarına kadar uzanan Filistin direniş edebiyatı geleneğinin seçkin temsilcilerinden biri olarak konumlandırmaktadır. Filistin direniş edebiyatı geniş ölçüde incelenmiş olsa da, Alareer'in edebi ve pedagojik uygulamalarına yönelik akademik çalışmalar yetersiz kalmıştır; bu durum, 2023 yılında *If I Must Die* adlı şiirinin yeniden yayımlanmasının ardından kazandığı uluslararası ilgiye rağmen geçerliliğini korumaktadır. Mevcut araştırma, Alareer'in yaratıcı yazarlığını, sözlü kültür unsurlarını ve eleştirel pedagojisini, sömürgeci anlatılara karşı koymadaki etkisini ve Filistin kimliğini muhafaza etme aracı olarak nasıl bütünleştirdiğini inceleyerek bu alandaki boşluğu doldurmayı amaçlamaktadır. Çalışma önemi açısından; Alareer'in entelektüel mirasına ilişkin en kapsamlı akademik değerlendirmelerden birini sunmakta olup, bu sayede hem Filistin kültürel tarihinin belgelenmesine hem de direniş edebiyatı alanının genişlemesine katkı sunmaktadır. Araştırma, şu temel soruya dayanmaktadır: Uzun süreli kuşatma, şiddet ve yok etme girişimlerine maruz kalan bir toplum üzerinde edebiyat, etkili bir direniş aracı olarak nasıl işlev görebilir? Yöntem olarak betimleyici–analitik bir yaklaşım ve söylem analizi kullanılarak, Alareer'in kültürel ve politik sorumluluğu incelenmiştir. Çalışmaları, postkolonyal teori ve daha geniş direniş edebiyatı alanı içinde konumlandırılmıştır. Elde edilen bulgular, Alareer'in eserlerinin salt belge üretiminden öteye geçerek, sömürgeci temsilleri sorgulayan ve Filistin kimliğini dilsel ve kültürel çerçevede karşı söylemler oluşturduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Sonuç olarak çalışma, Gazze'de kültürel ifadenin yalnızca bir sanatsal üretim biçimi değil, aynı zamanda hayatta kalma, dayanışma ve direnişin sürekliliğini sağlayan temel bir direniş pratiği olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Filistin, Gazze, Filistin edebiyatı, direniş edebiyatı, kültürel direniş, işgal ve kimlik, Refaat Alareer.

Introduction

Literature has historically constituted a vital site wherein the oppressed articulate their grievances, reclaim suppressed identities, and resist hegemonic systems of power. This dynamic assumes particular urgency in the Palestinian context, where storytelling emerges not only as a vehicle of cultural continuity but also as an existential strategy for survival under settler-colonial domination. From the revolutionary prose of Ghassan Kanafani to the digital poetics of contemporary voices, Palestinian literature has consistently aligned itself with the imperatives of justice and liberation.

Within this continuum, the present study explores the literary and pedagogical praxis of Refaat Alareer—a writer, educator, and public intellectual whose life and work exemplify the convergence of narrative and resistance. Accordingly, this study poses the following central question: How does Refaat Alareer's literary and pedagogical work constitute a form of cultural resistance under protracted siege? This inquiry guides a critical examination of his creative corpus, teaching practices, and public discourse, seeking to

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illuminate how narrative functions as both an ethical and strategic response to structural violence and epistemic erasure.

To situate this analysis, one must first consider the historical and political terrain from which Alareer's intellectual production emerges. Born and raised in the Gaza Strip—a geography subjected to cyclical military assaults and an enduring blockade—Alareer wrote from within conditions of precarity, displacement, and systemic deprivation. His choice to write in English, publish autobiographical testimonies, and teach resistance literature in Palestinian universities represents a conscious intervention into dominant regimes of representation, challenging both local constraints and global discursive formations.

Although the broader role of Palestinian literature in cultural resistance has been explored in the works of canonical figures such as Ghassan Kanafani and Edward Said, as well as within the critical frameworks of postcolonial theory, scholarly engagement with Refaat Alareer's oeuvre remains nascent—particularly in light of his recent martyrdom. Among the few notable contributions are Asma's study[1], Refaat Alareer's "If I Must Die": The Death of the Author, the Afterlife of the Tale, which traces the performative function of storytelling in Alareer's life and culminates in an analysis of the eponymous poem to illustrate how narrative serves as a means of preserving collective memory and transcending physical annihilation. Similarly, the study by Ali, Alteib, and Albur[2], "Resilience in the Face of Mortality: A Literary Analysis of Refaat Alareer's 'If I Must Die'," conducts a close reading of the poem's symbolic infrastructure, foregrounding its articulation of steadfastness, defiance, and the metaphysical transcendence of death through literary form.

Building on these emerging efforts, the present study is among the first to position Alareer at the intersection of cultural production and critical pedagogy, contending that his work enacts a distinctive model of narrative resistance that demands academic scrutiny. Methodologically, the study employs a descriptive-analytical approach rooted in literary analysis, interviews, and public interventions. Through critical discourse analysis of selected texts and digital performances, this research contributes to the fields of resistance literature and postcolonial studies by offering a framework through which contemporary Palestinian writers can be read as active agents of intellectual and political contestation.

1. Literature as an Existential Act: Poetry and Resistance

Literature, in its very ontology, constitutes an act of resistance. It stands in defiance of the disintegrative forces that besiege the human subject during moments of existential vulnerability. Accordingly, no canonical literary work—ancient or modern—can be conceived without this central impulse of resistance. The absence of this element strips

[1] Asma Hussein, "Refaat Alareer's 'If I Must Die': The Death of the Author, the Afterlife of the Tale," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (2025): 85–101.

[2] Fatma R. R. Ali, Inass A. A. Ali, and Hajer M. M. Albur, "Resilience in the Face of Mortality: A Literary Analysis of Rifaat Alareer's *If I Must Die*," *Global Journal of Research in Education & Literature* 4, no. 5 (2024): 8–17.

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literature of the essence of its existence, which is founded on the notion of conflict between the human being and the universe—whether that universe be nature or humanity itself.[3]

Given that the notion of conflict between humanity and the cosmos is as old as humankind itself, poetry emerges as the earliest literary form through which this existential tension found expression—dating back to the very dawn of human consciousness.[4]

The oldest extant record of human literature is found in written poetry, which dates back approximately 4,300 years. However, its origins likely stretch far deeper into pre-literate eras, when poems were transmitted orally across generations. The persistent presence of poetry throughout the long arc of human history points to its profound impact on human cognition and emotion, attesting to its unique power to endure, evolve, and articulate the inner landscapes of human experience.[5] These epic texts offer more than historical value; they function as blueprints for literary resistance that transcend their cultural origins.

This is precisely what underlies the enduring legacy of great literary works such as the epic poems *Gilgamesh*, *The Odyssey*, and *The Iliad*. These epics have become indelible cultural documents, immortalizing the archetypal human struggle on this planet and offering timeless testimony to the heroic dimensions of existence.[6]

Such a radical function of poetry aligns closely with philosophical perspectives on power and resistance. Thus, poetry may be understood as a revolution enacted through language—a form of insurgency that, as Odysseos argues, is part of ongoing efforts to destabilize the modern-colonial episteme. It is deeply entwined with the possibility and imagination of radical social transformation—indeed, with reconfiguring the very shape and temporality of futurity.[7]

Building upon Foucault's insight, it becomes evident why poetry emerges as a critical site of struggle under oppressive regimes. When traditional avenues of dissent are blocked, poetry assumes a more central, strategic role. In this sense, it resonates with Foucault's idea that resistance is an inevitable companion to power, opening up possible spaces for different contexts of freedom. According to Foucault, resistance exists within the very exercise of power, producing an internal relationship between various practices of power and their subjects. And because these relationships are multiple rather than singular, resistance is understood as a plural concept—meaning that there is no single locus of great. refusal, no soul of revolt, no source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary.[8] Such a dynamic conception of resistance finds concrete and poignant illustration in anti-colonial and national liberation contexts.

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3 Ghālī Shukrī, *Adab al-Muqāwamah* (Windsor: Muʾassasat Hindāwī, 2024), 10.

4 ʿAbd Allāh Aḥmad Ismāʿīl, *Al-adab wa-funūnuh: Dirāsah wa-naqd*, 9th ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr al-ʿArabī, 2013), 75.

5 Eugen Wassiliwizky et al., "The Emotional Power of Poetry," *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* 12, no. 8 (2017): 1229.

6 Shukrī, *Adab al-Muqāwamah*, 17.

7 Louiza Odysseos, "Stolen Life's Poetic Revolt," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 47, no. 3 (2019): 341–372.

8 Hussein A. A. K. Mahfoodh, *Home, Exile, and Resistance in Modern Arab Poetry* (PhD diss., University of Surrey, 2023), 244.

As such, the importance of poetry as a revolutionary tool becomes evident. In highly repressive political contexts—such as colonialism, dictatorship, or other forms of non-democratic rule—the possibilities for mobilizing social movements are severely constrained. As a result, movement leaders increasingly rely on cultural materials to build solidarity, especially when media is censored, rights and freedoms are revoked, and dissent is persecuted. In such cases, poetry offers a relatively low-risk avenue for expression, yet it holds the capacity to forge powerful bonds of solidarity.[9]

In other words, resistance consists of a wide array of actions that, taken together, are marked by power and transcendence. According to Foucault, this is because resistance possesses the capacity to mobilize groups or individuals in decisive ways, to ignite specific points of the body, particular moments in life, and certain patterns of behavior. This conception implies that forms of resistance are not fixed; rather, they continually shape and reshape their participants in response to evolving political, social, and cultural relationships with those in power. Hence, resistance and revolutions represent a dynamic and mobile form of power—or more precisely, an "anti-power"—capable of shifting and operating across various dimensions of social, political, and cultural space.[10]

From this standpoint, resistance poetry becomes not only politically engaged but also deeply moral and universal. The resistance poem not only helps the anti-colonial movement participant retain their commitment to the movement but also appeals to a wider public by creating a shared sense of grievance and struggle.[11] It is within this moral horizon that Palestinian poetry situates its voice, transforming national pain into universal testimony.

Among the most enduring and painful sites of such resistance is the ongoing occupation of Palestine. Nowhere is this oppressive architecture more concentrated and catastrophic than in Gaza. This exceptional brutality gives rise to a poetic tradition rooted not only in grievance, but in existential defiance. Therefore, resistance poetry emerges not merely as documentation, but as an assertion of being—of collective and individual existence against annihilation.

The Israeli occupation of Palestine stands as one of the longest and most brutal military occupations in modern history. For decades, it has been marked by systematic and wide-ranging violations of Palestinian rights ("Israel's Occupation of Palestinian Territory"). This prolonged oppression has engendered a persistent spirit of resistance among the Palestinian people—manifested across political, social, and cultural domains.

Although the Israeli occupation enacts severe and repressive measures across all of Palestine, the Gaza Strip has been subjected to a particularly extreme regime of apartheid and genocide. The occupation has entrenched and intensified the apartheid system imposed by Israel upon the Palestinian people. Under this unlawful regime of apartheid and military occupation, Israel has perpetrated acts of genocide against the population of Gaza ("Israel's Occupation of Palestinian Territory").

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9 Kristin Plys, "The Poetry of Resistance," *Theory, Culture & Society* 37, nos. 7–8 (2020): 295–313.
10 Mahfoodh, *Home, Exile, and Resistance*, 244.
11 Plys, "The Poetry of Resistance," 7.

The conflict between Israel and the Palestinian people is not merely a "form" of the broader struggle between the Arab East and Western colonialism; rather, it constitutes the very "substance" of a daily confrontation between a racist, usurping state and a people rendered powerless. From this standpoint, we are able to "comprehend" the essence of Arab resistance poetry within the occupied territories.[12]

If the tragedy of this era is racial discrimination, then the catastrophe of Palestine and the establishment of Israel stand as among its most egregious manifestations. The very foundation upon which the usurping state was built is rooted in a racist ideology. From this vantage point, our national wounds in Palestine transcend into universal human wounds, resonating with the deepest impulses of the human conscience—impulses that inherently reject the return to eras of barbarism and darkness.[13] From this perspective, resistance for the Palestinian people signified a fundamental existential stance — "to be or not to be, that is the question".[14]

2. Palestinian Resistance Literature: The Historical Context

The term "Resistance Literature" (*Adab al-Muqāwama*) was first introduced in 1966 by the Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani in his seminal study Literature of Resistance in Occupied Palestine: 1948–1966.[15] Kanafani's interest in resistance literature stemmed from a desire to employ what he termed the "weapon of literature" (*silāḥ al-adab*) as a form of resistance against the lived Palestinian experience of occupation, siege, and exile following the Nakba of 1948. With the fall of Palestine into enemy hands and the forced exile of generations of intellectuals, those who remained were primarily a rural Arab community subjected to intense cultural, social, and political isolation. In this context, Kanafani sought to challenge the propagandistic Zionist fiction by articulating a counter-narrative. He thus formulated a theory of resistance literature that was acutely aware of the mechanisms of psychological warfare and aimed to resist not only military occupation but also the broader structures of racism, colonialism, and imperialism through literary praxis.[16]

While Ghassan Kanafani is rightly credited with theorizing Palestinian resistance literature, its emergence predates his work and can be traced to the early stages of the Palestinian–Zionist conflict—specifically during the 1930s and 1940s. Poets such as ʿAbd al-Raḥīm Maḥmūd (1913–1948), Abū Salmā (1911–1984), Ibrāhīm Ṭūqān (1905–1941), and Hārūn Hāshim Rashīd (1927–2020) were among the pioneering voices whose literary commitment to the national struggle predated the widespread articulation of *iltizām* (literary commitment) in Arab intellectual circles during the 1950s and 1960s.[17] Their poetry addressed urgent political concerns, including Zionist immigration, disillusionment with international justice, and the resilient spirit of defiance—particularly in the aftermath of the 1948 Nakba. The acute sense of dispossession drove these poets to use poetry as a tool

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12 Shukrī, *Adab al-Muqāwamah*, 109.
13 Shukrī, *Adab al-Muqāwamah*, 109.
14 William Shakespeare, *Shakespeare's Hamlet*, ed. John Livingston Lowes (New York: Henry Holt, 1914), 67.
15 Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 2.
16 Elizabeth M. Holt, "Resistance Literature and Occupied Palestine in Cold War Beirut," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 50, no. 1 (2020): 3.
17 Salam Mir, "Palestinian Literature: Occupation and Exile," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (2013): 111.

of endurance and as a vehicle for expressing national identity and collective memory. As Aldous Huxley aptly observed, "Nations are to a very large extent invented by their poets and novelists".[18]

It is also important to highlight the role of popular (vernacular) poetry, which served as a prominent voice of protest, particularly at communal events such as weddings and funerals. This form of oral poetic expression represented an early manifestation of resistance poetry, deeply rooted in collective memory and daily experience. It offered a grassroots mode of defiance and became a cultural reservoir from which later resistance poets—such as Mahmoud Darwish, Samih al-Qasim, and others—would draw inspiration and aesthetic strategies.[19] Poetry was not simply an element of Palestinian culture but an integral part of the national struggle with the capacity to stimulate the people to action.

One can argue that Kanafani's theory of resistance literature—as a foundational and strategic cultural act—holds a value no less significant than that of armed struggle itself. His framework was informed by a literary tradition that had already begun to take shape in the 1930s and 1940s amidst the early stages of the Palestinian–Zionist conflict. Its features became more visible in the wake of the 1948 Nakba, began to cohere after the 1967 defeat, and fully matured and flourished during the First Intifada in 1987 and the Second Intifada in 2000. To this day, resistance literature continues to fight on the ground, side by side with bullets and firepower. This enduring role explains, in part, what Kanafani described as "the importance even the enemy attributes to the efficacy of cultural resistance."[20]

As he asserted, poetry was not simply an element of Palestinian culture but an integral part of the national struggle—with the capacity to mobilize, inspire, and catalyze collective action.[21]

3. The Pen as a Counterforce to the Bullet

Refaat Alareer (1979–2023) represents a natural continuation of the lineage of resistance poets. The very conditions that gave rise to resistance poetry remain unchanged—and, in fact, have deteriorated further, particularly in the Gaza Strip, which has endured a sixteen-year siege under inhumane circumstances that deprive its population of the most basic necessities of water, food, and medicine.[22] Gaza has become the site of a systematic and ongoing genocide, carried out in full view of a watching—and largely silent—world.

Having nothing but his pen to defend himself against the relentless storm of bullets and shelling, Alareer declared, during an interview three days into the Israeli genocide, "I'm an academic. The toughest thing I have at home is an Expo marker. But if the Israelis invade ... I'm going to use that marker to throw it at the Israeli soldiers, even if that is the last thing that I would be able to do."[23] This powerful statement, steeped in irony and resolve,

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18 Aldous Huxley, *Texts and Pretexts* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1933), 52.
19 Mir, "Palestinian Literature," 122.
20 Harlow, *Resistance Literature*, 11.
21 Elad Ben-Dror, "The Hamas War against Israel," *Digest of Middle East Studies* 32, no. 4 (2023): 341.
22 Chris Procter, "Coerced Migration: Mobility under Siege in Gaza," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 50, no. 10 (2024).
23 Electronic Intifada [@intifada], X (formerly Twitter), accessed May 19, 2025.

illustrates the very core of cultural resistance—where language becomes the last line of defense.

In what would become one of his final written messages to a friend, he reiterated the same spirit of defiance: "The situation is very desolate, we don't even have water… I only have my pen, I will throw it at the occupying soldiers if they invade, even if it were to be the last thing I'll do."[24] These words encapsulate not only Alareer's personal conviction but also the broader symbolic force of the written word as a weapon against erasure, occupation, and death.

This ethos of resistance through the written word resonates deeply with the obituary published in *The Daily Star*, Lebanon's English-language newspaper, upon the assassination of Ghassan Kanafani—the founding figure of Palestinian resistance literature. The obituary described him as "the fighter who never fired a shot; his weapon was a ballpoint pen and the pages of *Al-Safa* newspaper."[25] This characterization draws a powerful parallel between generations of cultural combatants: from Kanafani, who turned journalism and fiction into instruments of ideological resistance, to Alareer, who faced tanks and warplanes with nothing but a marker, a pen, and unwavering conviction. Both figures embody the principle that resistance is not confined to the battlefield; it lives in the line, the voice, and the page.

Refaat Alareer was brutally targeted—much like Ghassan Kanafani—by the very forces of occupation he resisted with his words. Both men were assassinated not for bearing arms, but for wielding the pen with unwavering courage, exposing lies, and reclaiming truth. As Aljamal asserted, "Refaat's life was unfairly cut short by his oppressors because he used his pen to debunk their lies".[26] In their deaths, as in their writings, they remain enduring symbols of the power of literature to resist, to witness, and to fight.

The binary of occupier/native lies at the heart of Refaat Alareer's literary vision, shaping its central theme: the pen against the bullet. If the bullet kills in silence, the pen resists with noise. If the bullet brings death, the pen brings life. And while the bullet penetrates the body, the pen illuminates the mind.

The Palestinian poet Refaat Alareer emerged as a powerful and influential voice, particularly after the republication of his poem "If I Must Die" in November 2023, following the Al-Aqsa Flood operation ("A Bilingual Poem from Gaza," by Refaat Alareer). The poem gained widespread attention after his assassination in December 2023, reaching a global audience. It was viewed over 33 million times on Twitter ("The Story of a Poem," 2024) and has become one of the most famous, widespread,[27] read and translated poems[28] of the twenty-first century.

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[24] Global Rights, "The Writer and Academic Refaat Alareer Killed Yesterday by Israeli Bombs," Global Rights, December 8, 2023, accessed December 16, 2025, https://globalrights.info/2023/12/the-writer-and-academic-refaat-alareer-killed-yesterday-by-israeli-bombs

[25] Harlow, *Resistance Literature*, 11.

[26] Yousef M. Aljamal, "Introduction," in *If I Must Die: Poetry and Prose* (New York: OR Books, 2024), 22.

[27] Kuan-Yu Chen, "The Enigma of Frantz Fanon," *The Nation*, June 3, 2024, https://www.thenation.com/article/society/frantz-fanon-rebels-clinic/

[28] Anna Skopic, "Refaat Alareer's White Kite Will Fly Forever," *Current Affairs*, December 10, 2024, https://www.currentaffairs.org/news/refaat-alareers-white-kite-will-fly-forever

In it, Alareer mourns himself—his own anticipated death—capturing a haunting sense of foreboding that seems never to have left him. He first published the poem in 2011 (Gaza) and republished it at least three times 2024 ("The Story of a Poem," 2024), each time in response to an Israeli assault on Gaza: in 2012 during Operation Pillar of Defense (Hijarat al-Sijjil), in 2014 during Operation Protective Edge (al-ʿAsf al-Maʾkūl), and in 2023 during the Al-Aqsa Flood (Ṭūfān al-Aqṣā) / Iron Swords operation.

The weight of the Israeli occupation under which Refaat Alareer was born—as he himself acknowledged—shaped, and often constrained, the course of his life:

"Every move I took and every decision I made were influenced (usually negatively) by the Israeli occupation." ("Israel Bombing Kills Writer Refaat Alareer in Gaza"). He was born in the Shuja'iyya neighborhood in eastern Gaza City in 1979. Alareer studied English literature at the Islamic University of Gaza, earned his MA in Comparative Literature from the University of London in 2007, and later completed his Ph.D. at Universiti Putra Malaysia in 2017,[29] where his dissertation focused on the poetry of John Donne through the lens of Mikhail Bakhtin's literary theory ("Unframing John Donne's Transgressive Poetry in Light of Bakhtin's Dialogic Theories" - Universiti Putra Malaysia Institutional Repository).

The engagement with English literature for Alareer was a means of conveying the Palestinian voice beyond borders.[30] "His thesis examined representations of Jerusalem in Palestinian and Israeli poetry, reflecting his deep connection to the city, which was physically inaccessible to him as a Gazan,"[31] and his awareness of the Israeli occupier's distortion of facts about Jerusalem and about Palestine.

Therefore, believing in writing in English as a means to refute falsehoods and convey the truth about Jerusalem and Palestine to the world, Alareer began writing during the 2008 Israeli assault on Gaza, driven by his desire "to reach out to the world to educate people about Palestine and save them from the dominant Israeli multi-million-dollar campaigns of misinformation"("Israel Bombing Kills Writer Refaat Alareer in Gaza").

Since taking up his post as a professor of English literature at the Islamic University of Gaza, Alareer was committed to training his students to express themselves in English in their own unique style, using their own discourse and vocabulary. In doing so, they could transcend the challenges of translation, which often distorts meaning and generates ambiguity, especially as mainstream Western media tend to misrepresent the Palestinian narrative by adopting the language, terminology, and ideology of the Israeli occupation. In this context, translation becomes a dangerous and misleading tool, rather than a means of fostering understanding and bringing people closer. ("Israel Bombing Kills Writer Refaat Alareer in Gaza")

During his teaching of World Literature and Creative Writing at the Islamic University of Gaza, Alareer introduced his students to the methods of creative writing. These efforts bore

[29] "Heroes from Gaza," *This Week in Palestine*, no. 315 (2024), 23.

[30] "Refaat Alareer: UCL Urged to Issue Statement on Ex Student's Death," *BBC News*, December 13, 2023, https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-london-67706283

[31] Aljamal, "Introduction."

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fruit in 2015, when he published a collaborative volume that he edited and to which he contributed one of the stories. The book, titled *Gaza Writes Back: Short Stories from Young Writers*, was published in English by Just World Books. It contained twenty-three stories by new Palestinian voices in their twenties, each recounting their personal experience of the brutal war waged by Israel from late 2008 until January 18, 2009. At its core, the book was not merely a collection of texts assembled under the theme of war and resistance to Israeli crimes, but rather an attempt to nurture a generation of Palestinian writers capable of engaging literarily with public events, drawing on elements such as memory and personal experience, both of which were foundational in these stories. These tools, in a sense, reflected the vision of the martyred poet himself and his conception of the relationship between literature and the Palestinian cause. (Alasaad)

Gaza Writes Back, edited by Refaat Alareer and authored by fifteen young writers from Gaza, is a unique collection of twenty-three short stories that represent each day of "Operation Cast Lead." Although Arabic is their mother tongue, most of the stories were written in English, as many of the authors were studying or had studied English at university. This can be seen as a reflection of the necessity of writing in English in order to reach a wider audience or to succeed in the literary field.[32] However, Refaat Alareer saw the collection as providing "a much-needed Palestinian youth narrative without the mediation or influences of translation or of non-Palestinian voices."[33] In another words "That is Palestinians should represent themselves; they should not be represented" ("Israel Bombing Kills Writer Refaat Alareer in Gaza").

4. Narration as a Vivid Memory of Resistance

The remarkable success of *Gaza Writes Back*, including its translation into numerous languages and its resonance with international audiences, inspired Refaat Alareer to devote his life to cultivating a new generation of Palestinian voices. Recognizing the power of storytelling and creative expression as vital tools of cultural resistance, Alareer focused his efforts on training young people in narrative writing, creative writing, storytelling techniques, and effective use of social media platforms. He organized dozens of free workshops, seminars, and lectures, driven by a vision to equip young Palestinian writers and bloggers with the skills necessary to challenge dominant Israeli narratives about Palestine, counter widespread misinformation, and articulate their own lived realities. Through these initiatives, Alareer sought not merely to teach the craft of writing, but to foster critical thinking and build a resilient literary and digital community capable of asserting Palestinian identity and truth in the face of occupation and erasure. Refaat believed that before Palestinians can live in a free Palestine, they have to create a free Palestine in their imagination through stories, films, novels, and the arts.[34]

While Refaat Alareer became internationally renowned as a poet, with his poem "If I Must Die" emerging as a global symbol of resilience and hope, his primary and deepest passion lay in storytelling. Having grown up immersed in the art of listening to and narrating

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32 Matthias Sprengel, review of *Gaza Writes Back*, *Journal of Internal Displacement* 4, no. 2 (2014): 39.
33 Refaat Alareer, *Gaza Writes Back* (Charlottesville, VA: Just World Books, 2014), 13.
34 Aljamal, "Introduction," 21.

stories, Alareer firmly believed that storytelling is a vital tool of resistance and perseverance. He made this belief explicit at the opening of his poem, declaring:

If I must die,

you must live

to tell my story.

If death is inevitable, then the story itself must not die; it requires a narrator who defies death and remains alive to recount it.

Therefore, Alareer regarded the cessation of telling the stories of one's people as not merely an act of neglect but a form of selfishness and betrayal. His unwavering conviction in the power of narrative reflects his broader vision of literature as a means of collective memory, cultural survival, and defiance in the face of oppression.

As a Palestinian, I have been brought up on stories and storytelling. It's both selfish and treacherous to keep a story to yourself – stories are meant to be told and retold. If I allowed a story to stop, I would be betraying my legacy, my mother, my grandmother and my homeland. To me, storytelling is one of the ingredients of Palestinian sumud – steadfastness. Stories teach life even if the hero suffers or dies at the end. For Palestinians, stories stimulate the much-needed talent for life.[35]

Contemplate the ending of his poem, which encapsulates his philosophy of storytelling — for narration is hope:

If I must die,

let it bring hope,

let it be a tale.

Alareer regarded his life's mission not merely as telling his own story but as enabling and inspiring others to tell theirs. Storytelling came naturally to him—an art he attributed to the influence of his grandmother Kamla and his mother Rifqa. Although his grandfather would tempt him with tea to sit by his side, it was always his grandmother's stories that captivated him most. He frequently recounted his mother's harrowing experience as a student in the 1960s, when she narrowly escaped death during an Israeli military raid on Shujaiya. For Refaat, preserving and sharing these memories was not simply an act of remembrance and keeping memories alive, but a matter of survival.[36]

Refaat was deeply committed to serving as a bridge between the generation of grandparents and that of grandchildren through the art of storytelling. He responded to his young daughter Shaimaa—the child for whom he wrote his enduring poem "If I Must Die"—with stories and narratives, especially when he found himself unable to answer her profoundly philosophical question: "Who created the Jews?" For Shymaa, it was inconceivable that the merciful and loving God she learned about in her kindergarten, the one who usually saves the righteous in her mother's bedtime stories, could be the same God who created those instruments of death that, for endless days and nights, brought

[35] Alareer, "Gaza Writes Back: Narrating Palestine," *Biography* 37, no. 2 (2014): 524.
[36] Aljamal, "Introduction."

nothing to their lives but destruction, chaos, tears, pain, and fear. It was this very terror that left Shaimaa and her younger siblings waking up at night, sobbing uncontrollably in fits of hysterical crying. "Her version of God could not be the creator of the same people who caused our windows to shatter," Alareer said "and who, two days earlier, shot at her father while I was filling water tanks on the roof of our house during the two-hour ceasefire."[37]

Alareer answers this question in a poem composed in a distinctly narrative mode—a deliberate stylistic choice that affirms his profound devotion to storytelling as both form and philosophy. Through this narrative voice, he conveys the bitterness of loss and the anguish of deprivation endured by a child living under the relentless machinery of death imposed by the enemy:

so that a child, somewhere in Gaza,

while looking heaven in the eye,

awaiting his dad who left in a blaze—

and bid no one farewell,

not even his flesh,

not even himself—

Here, the act of narration becomes a means of survival, and the story itself transforms into a metaphor for endurance and transcendence. Thus, the story—or the kite—emerges as a symbol of hope, soaring high like an angel that seeks to restore to the violated childhood its lost innocence and capacity for love:

Sees the kite, my kite you made, flying up above,

and thinks for a moment an angel is there,

bringing back love.

Both Refaat and Shaimaa were martyred, but their story endures, as does the steadfastness in the face of aggression and the hope for liberation from colonial rule. Although their lives may have been cut short, the narrative of resilience and the dream of freedom continue to endure.

If I must die

let it bring hope

let it be a tale

The binary of aggression (the occupier) and steadfastness (the Palestinian) was the lens through which Refaat Alareer approached narrative and world literature. He read *Robinson Crusoe*, for example, from this critical perspective, identifying it as a narrative told from the viewpoint of the usurper—one who seizes the land and subjugates its people. This reading only deepened his conviction that Palestinians must have their own narrative—one that tells the truth, dismantles the occupier's false narrative, and asserts their reality in the face of colonial distortion.

[37] Alareer, "Gaza Writes Back: Narrating Palestine," *Biography* 37, no. 2 (2014): 524.

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As Alareer reflected:

I was rereading Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe. And for the first time, it dawned on me how Friday's story was mediated by a self-appointed, colonial, supremacist master assuming ownership of a land that was not his. Crusoe's imperialist discourse had never before annoyed me like it did then—"My island was now peopled, and I thought myself very rich in subjects… my people were perfectly subjected. I was absolute lord and lawgiver, they all owed their lives to me, and were ready to lay down their lives." I thought there had to be a different story that Friday could have told, had he not been silenced, and that we Palestinians should never be the Man Friday of anyone—that we have to own our own narrative, and that no one but us can better reveal the sheer pain and suffering we are made to experience. If Israel's apartheid has to be fought, Israel's narratives have to be challenged, and exposed.[38]

This reflection epitomized Alareer's belief that reclaiming the Palestinian narrative is essential not only as an act of cultural survival, but also as a form of resistance to the structures of colonial oppression.

This perhaps explains his characterization of a poem by the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai as "horrible" and "dangerous," asserting that although it was aesthetically beautiful, it "brainwashed" readers by portraying Israelis as "innocent." He also critiqued a second Israeli poem by Tuvya Ruebner, similarly, describing it as "dangerous" and adding that "this kind of poetry is in part to blame for the ethnic cleansing and destruction of Palestine." Alareer emphasized that Israel has used literature "as a tool of colonialism and oppression," underscoring how cultural production can function as an instrument of ideological control, legitimizing violence and erasure under the guise of shared humanity.[39]

Alareer also believed that Palestinian folklore was the true mirror of the Palestinian people and their suffering. This folklore has played a pivotal role in reinforcing the collective memory of Palestinians. Each village and city have come to carry its own narratives that document the Nakba or the atrocities of the occupation, framed in popular storytelling—either grounded in real events or expressed through symbolic and imaginative metaphors that reflect reality, making them easier to transmit orally. From this perspective, Refaat Alareer aspired to translate this heritage into English. In one of his interviews, he stated: "I'd love to be part of a project that translates Palestinian folklore into English. Folklore is closer to the reality of Palestine and represents the richness and depth of Palestinian culture and heritage more effectively." ("Israel Bombing Kills Writer Refaat Alareer in Gaza")

This vision reflects his deep commitment to literature as a means of preserving Palestinian identity and making its narratives accessible across linguistic and cultural barriers. The act of preserving Palestinian folklore—through listening, narration, and creative reproduction—is not just a means of producing works admired by local and international

[38] Alareer, "Gaza Writes Back: Narrating Palestine," 525.

[39] Peter Kingsley, "In Gaza, a Contentious Palestinian Professor Calmly Teaches Israeli Poetry," *The New York Times*, November 16, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/16/world/middleeast/gaza-university-israel-poet.html

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literary communities, but a powerful affirmation of the Palestinian people's rightful claim to their land. (Refaat Alareer: "Literature as Resistance – Canadian Dimension")

For Alareer, the folklore is not a cultural luxury or merely a form of entertainment, but a tool of resistance and a means of constructing awareness and identity. For him, oral heritage serves as a bridge between a painful past and a hopeful future, and as a truthful expression of the present reality. Hence, it holds particular significance for the Palestinian people living under occupation—not because it recounts life under occupation or constructs identity, but because— as Alareer elaborated—"they connect us with our past, they connect us with our present, and they prepare us to the future".[40]

Therefore, Alareer advocated for reviving storytelling traditions, preserving generational memory, and transmitting these stories to children—believing that the continuity of these stories was synonymous with the continuity of Palestine itself. The absence of storytelling creates a void in the collective memory that allows the oppressor to dominate that space, erase the Palestinian narrative, and replace it with a colonial one. In this sense, folklore becomes part of the struggle to reclaim narrative and history. Alareer often invoked the words of Chinua Achebe, noting "If the lions do not have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunters."

Anyone who listens to or reads Alareer directly realizes that he carried a national mission and bore the responsibility of an intellectual committed to guiding his people. He believed that his role transcended that of politicians and decision-makers, and that true liberation—from both ignorance and occupation—had to come through the creation of consciousness. "Because the oral history should always belong to the people, should shape politics, not the other way around."[41]

To illustrate this idea, Alareer recalled the story of an Indigenous elder in Canada. When colonizers began dividing the land, the elder approached them and asked, "What are you doing?" They replied, "We own this land, and we are dividing it among ourselves." The elder responded, "If this land is truly yours, tell me your stories. If this land really belongs to you, tell me your stories." Alareer commented that, naturally, the response was silence—because they had no stories. They did not possess the land.

The responsibility borne by Alareer—and which should be assumed by every intellectual and even every citizen alike—was to utilize whatever knowledge, language, and history he possessed to rescue the homeland from the grip of occupation, and to continue resisting the oppressor's narrative through the power of thought and the written word.

Conclusion

This study has offered an in-depth reading of the life and intellectual legacy of Refaat Alareer as one of the most prominent figures of Palestinian cultural resistance in recent decades. It has focused on the intersection of literature, politics, and identity within his literary and pedagogical project. The research revealed the profound structure of resistance embedded in Alareer's work—not merely as a discourse of protest, but as an existential

40 "TEDx Talks: Stories Make Us," video recording, YouTube, accessed June 21, 2025.
41 TEDx Talks, 2015.

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and ethical stance that views literature as a tool for reshaping consciousness, reclaiming the Palestinian narrative, and transforming both personal and collective suffering into a form of universal human testimony. Alareer exemplified how words, when spoken with sincerity and written with conviction, can stand against bullets and leave a deeper mark on memory than any weapon.

The study has traced the evolution of resistance literature as an organic response to the socio-political conditions imposed upon the Palestinian people following the Nakba of 1948. In this context, literature became a cultural weapon to articulate Palestinian pain and aspirations, and to confront efforts to erase identity and dispossess land. Resistance literature, particularly poetry, fiction, and storytelling, thus emerged as a crucial component of the Palestinian national liberation project—preserving collective memory, exposing the brutality of one of the world's longest military occupations, and giving voice to a stateless people.

The research also highlighted Alareer's pedagogical contributions in teaching creative writing and critical literacy in the language of the colonizer—not as an act of mimicry, but as a strategic means to subvert colonial narratives and empower students to speak for themselves. His efforts culminated in *Gaza Writes Back*, a collective volume that provided a platform for young Palestinian voices and embodied a grassroots model of resistance rooted in lived experience, personal memory, and narrative agency.

The study concludes that Refaat Alareer's project was not a solitary endeavor, but rather the embodiment of a holistic philosophy of resistance—one that saw literature as a counterforce to erasure, storytelling as a strategy for survival, and translation as a bridge for reclaiming symbolic justice. The significance of this research lies not only in documenting a singular life, but in offering a replicable model of cultural defiance in contexts of colonial domination, where words become weapons, poems become frontlines, and the writer becomes a fighter without a rifle.

Ultimately, this study affirms that Alareer—as a public intellectual and committed educator—has redefined the relationship between the pen and the bullet. He has forged a discourse that shows cultural resistance is not a passive reaction, but a foundational act that reclaims life in the face of annihilation. His legacy reminds us that the responsibility of intellectuals does not end at critique or commentary; it demands active engagement in the struggle for truth and justice. In moments of extreme violence and erasure, cultural expression becomes not just relevant, but necessary—charting a path toward a more ethical and human future.

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Declarations

1. **Ethics committee approval:** Not needed for this study.

2. Author contribution: The author declares that no one else has contributed to the article.

3. Competing interests: The author declares no competing interests.

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