



'The earth doesn't tell its secrets' – his father once said

by Noor Abuarafeh, Sharjah, Sharjah Art Foundation, 2017, 255 pp., \$15 USD (paperback), ISBN 9789948232049

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BOOK REVIEW

'The earth doesn't tell its secrets' – his father once said, by Noor Abuarafeh, Sharjah, Sharjah Art Foundation, 2017, 255 pp., \$15 USD (paperback), ISBN 9789948232049

Within the shifting paradigm of heritage studies, the notion of the museum has been a recurring subject of critical inquiry. *The Earth Doesn't Tell Its Secrets' – His Father Once Said*, a novel by Palestinian artist Noor Abuarafeh, challenges conventional notions of the museum, its role in presenting and interpreting heritage, and its relevance in society. Like many of her art practices, which frequently contemplate themes of archive and memory, the writing of this novel draws on her archival, artistic, and (auto-)ethnographic research. Initially born from the artist's project for the 13th Sharjah Biennial in 2017, the novel was partly re-enacted in her solo exhibition *Whispering* at Yapı Kredi Culture Centre in Istanbul in 2023.

Set in the context of Palestine, the novel's plot unfolds through 15 interconnected chapters, each contributing to the protagonist's evolving understanding of museums as an institution and concept. Chapters 1 to 6 revolve around the speculation about the creation of a museum. The plot begins with an announcement of the creation of the Palestinian Museum, followed by 12 years of speculation among the public about the future museum's scope, design, opening date, and precise location. Finally inaugurated after years of scepticism surrounding its feasibility, the museum was unveiled as an empty shell without artefacts.

The central investigation of the first six chapters lies in the protagonist's critical exploration of the social relevance of museums, as an institution, within a society like Palestine. On the one hand, the protagonist wondered, 'Were we [Palestinians] ready for a museum?' (55). To answer this question, alongside the storyline around the frustratingly delayed and disappointingly inaugurated Palestinian Museum, the author fictionalised Palestinian artist Khaled Hourani's art project, *Picasso in Palestine*, featuring a one-painting exhibition guarded by two soldiers. To visit this exhibition, the protagonist had to endure heavy traffic and police checkpoints, which might stretch a twenty-minute journey to three hours. On the other hand, instead of pondering *how* to make Palestine 'ready' for a museum, the protagonist cast doubt on *whether* Palestine needed a museum. Her doubt was initially triggered in Chapter 3 by an architecture student. This student, from a university in London, when asked to design the venue for the future Palestinian Museum, presented an empty page, holding: 'There shouldn't be a museum in Palestine [...] there should be neither a design nor a museum because the whole idea of "a museum" is Eurocentric. Moreover, any attempt to incorporate an Eastern design would be even more problematic' (35–36).

While this might sound Eurocentric itself, ignoring both the advantages of cultural exchange and the contributions of non-European cultures to shaping global museum landscapes, the protagonist seemed to agree with this argument. Moreover, the author herself is indeed unconvinced about having a museum, as an institution, in Palestine. In an online interview (24 May 2023) conducted for her exhibition at Yapı Kredi Culture Centre, Noor Abuarafeh said: 'I think, maybe a radio can work better than a museum in a Palestinian case, when every narrative is spoken now and is relevant to the present moment'.

Noor Abuarafeh did not specifically explore the theme of radio in this novel, she guided the protagonist to seek alternatives to museums through other means. In Chapter 7, intrigued by Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk's manifesto for museums, which 'predicts that the future of museums is in our houses' (64), the protagonist concluded 'that collecting is an act of presence' (65), whereas 'the museum by comparison is a place [...] they speak about the past' (66). This conclusion redirected the protagonist's focus from museums as institutions to the act of collecting itself.

From Chapter 8 onwards, the protagonist began to explore museums within ordinary houses, delving into the owners' diverse interactions with their treasured objects, which formed alternative heritage-making practices. This exploration compelled her to reflect on the contrast and convergence between museums as institutions and museums within ordinary houses. At first, she noticed the striking resemblance between the two domains of museums and could not resist the idea of mingling them, strongly believing that some personal collections deserved to be seen by a larger audience. However, she soon realised that the two domains were marked by more discord than harmony. For instance, in Chapter 9, the protagonist's maternal grandfather made her understand that his photographs 'would be more alive if they stayed in his album' (102) than in a museum. She understood that her grandfather's connection to the photos was more personal and pragmatic than nostalgic, and he refused to use these photos to follow certain narratives chosen by a museum. In Chapters 10 and 11, the protagonist visited two collections owned by Palestinian resistance activists. One is a grouping of photos showing the locations where the owners – once imprisoned for their resistance activities – used to bury underground the materials produced by their fellow inmates. The other is a collection of wedding invitations related to the first and second Intifadas (uprisings against Israeli occupation). It can be inferred that these collections, entailing political significance, will not be integrated into the domain of museums as institutions in the occupied land of Palestine.

Although, unlike academic scholarship, the novel does not always present arguments and conclusions explicitly, a conclusion that readers can take from this novel is that a museum as an institution is not the best solution to safeguard heritage in Palestine. Without a public museum, Palestinians preserve, present, and interpret their personal and collective heritage in diverse ways that resonate more with their perspectives and current experiences. Another deducible conclusion is that the act of collecting can take place in everyday homes, generating social and political significance nonetheless.

Derived from real events but fictionalised, the novel's narrative exhibits both strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, this novel has the potential to inspire innovative academic writing styles that blur the boundaries between fiction and scholarship. By fictionalising real-life stories, this writing style works better in guaranteeing anonymity to allow characters/informants to express themselves more freely. On the other hand, the novel's narrative is marked by a mild degree of vagueness and confusion, with some meaningfully crafted and others likely caused by mistakes (e.g. one character is described as the maternal and paternal grandfather in different paragraphs in the same chapter), complicating the comprehension of its storylines.

Overall, *'The Earth Doesn't Tell Its Secrets' – His Father Once Said* contributes to the growing field of critical heritage studies in three ways. First, through a fictional lens on heritage-making in ordinary households, it enriches our nuanced understanding of the notion of museums. Second, by situating the story in Palestine, it offers a distinctive perspective on dissonant heritage. Third, blurring the boundaries between academic and fictional writing, as well as between artistic research and museum studies, contributes to the ongoing methodological exploration in critical heritage studies.

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