



## WRITING AS BREATHING: HOPE, RESISTANCE AND POETRY, AN INTERVIEW WITH DONYA ABU SITTA<sup>1</sup>

MARÍA MARTÍN ORTEGA   
University of Córdoba, Spain  
l62maorm@uco.es

MARTA AGUZA BERRAL   
University of Córdoba, Spain  
102agbem@uco.es

In the words of **Donya Abu Sitta**, writing emerges not as a profession but as a condition of survival—an existential necessity that echoes Isaac Asimov’s famous assertion, “I write for the same reason I breathe, because if I didn’t, I would die.” For Abu Sitta, language is inseparable from life itself. It is a vehicle for dignity, testimony, and resistance; a medium through which the self insists on its humanity. Whether through translation, content writing, or photography, her practice is grounded in a conviction that words carry ethical force and transformative potential.

**Donya Abu Sitta** is a student of English at Al-Aqsa University, and she moves between languages and publics, situating herself at the intersection of cultural production and civic engagement. Her volunteer work with organizations such as Hult Prize, Youth Innovation Hub, Science Tone, Eat Sulas, and Electronic Intifada reflects a commitment to translation not merely as linguistic transfer, but as cultural mediation and political articulation. In these spaces, writing becomes an act of passage: carrying ideas across borders, amplifying marginalized narratives, and creating opportunities where structural constraints might otherwise foreclose them. Her intellectual and creative interests—culture, art, and storytelling—converge in a vision of writing as freedom. “My dreams are limitless,” she affirms, framing authorship as both aspiration and agency. At the same time, when asked about a short biographical note on her life, she insists on identifying herself first and foremost as “a human being” entitled to the full spectrum of human rights,

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and as a second-year medical student aspiring to make a positive impact in the world, Donya situates her literary practice within a broader ethical horizon. Writing, for her, is not detached from material realities; it is entwined with care, justice, and the affirmation of life.

This interview, conducted at the end of February 2025, engages Donya Abu Sitta at the convergence of language, rights, and responsibility. Throughout our exchange with her, we explore her understanding of writing as freedom, resistance, and testimony, her experience navigating multiple professional and academic identities in Palestine, and her belief in the power of words to create possibility and hope in contexts marked by constraint.



Figure 1: Donya Abu Sitta. *We Are Not Numbers*, September 2024.

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**Marta Aguza Berral:** We got to know you through Chana, a fellow Jewish activist for the human rights of Palestinian based in the United States, who visited us in Cordoba last year, in 2025. She told us about your book, *Pieces* (2025), which I first read in English and which reached María through its Spanish translation by another colleague from Córdoba, Fairuoz Hussein. Later, I met you in person through the free-of-charge Arabic classes you offered. Currently, despite having written *Pieces*, we know you are studying Medicine. So, what inspired you to pursue this career? Did your family background play a role in your choice?

**Donya Abu Sitta:** I have always had a passion for Medicine, which began in my childhood. However, it was during my final year of high school in 2020 that I was truly motivated to pursue a career in Medicine. During that time, I experienced persistent headaches, blurred vision in my left eye, and numbness in my right hand. Unfortunately, no one believed me and thought I was using these symptoms as an excuse to avoid studying.

Despite undergoing tests for six months, no clear cause was found. Eventually, my doctor recommended an MRI of the brain, but due to the limited availability of MRI machines in Gaza, my appointment was scheduled for three months later. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I was unable to undergo the MRI. These symptoms continued to appear intermittently, along with headaches.

I am certain that the cause is a neurological issue in the brain vessels, but due to the lack of neurosurgeons in Gaza, it has been difficult to receive a proper diagnosis. This experience has only strengthened my desire to become a neurosurgeon in the future, as there is a great need for specialists in brain surgery in Gaza.

The effects of the successive wars have left many residents with neurological problems, and unfortunately, my grandmother passed away six years ago due to a neurological disorder.

**María Martín Ortega:** It is truly admirable to know how this inspiration to study Medicine comes from a personal experience and also out of a desire to connect your individual experience with broader healthcare challenges in Gaza. How do you financially support your studies while being a young woman living in Gaza?

**Abu Sitta:** I sell my poetry collection book, *Pieces*, and transfer the proceeds to help cover my fees. The economic conditions in Gaza have been challenging even before the genocide. As a result, I pursued a Bachelor's degree in English and completed it in three and a half years. Currently, I work as a freelance writer and translator, while also teaching English to students from Gaza and Arabic to non-native speakers. This helps me cover some of my expenses. Additionally, my friends abroad assist me in selling my book to a broader audience.

**Aguza Berral:** How do you feel about the current context in Palestine? Do you see yourself living in the country in the future?

**Abu Sitta:** The situation in Gaza and the West Bank is heartbreaking. Our homes have been destroyed, and our dreams have been stolen. However, we are determined to rebuild our dreams and homes, *Inshallah*. The international community can play a crucial role in this by pressuring for the necessary materials to be allowed into Gaza for reconstruction.

Personally, I envision myself in Palestine in the future, and it would be a dream come true to visit and pray at the Al-Aqsa Mosque. In 2022, my friend Bara'a's grandmother was able to travel to Jerusalem for medical treatment. I asked her to bring me something that captures the essence of Jerusalem. She brought me a necklace with a map of Palestine from the streets of Jerusalem. I am confident that one day, I will be able to bring back a souvenir from Jerusalem and kiss its sacred soil.

**Martín Ortega:** A recent study by scholar Zinnia Sheikh (2025) has shown how women in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are often presented as victims. Do you believe there are misconceptions about being a woman in Palestine portrayed in Western media? If so, how would you describe the actual situation of women in Palestine?

**Abu Sitta:** Western media often portrays Palestinian women through two narrow lenses: either as silent, passive victims or as symbols of endless grief. I view Palestinian women as central agents of power and resilience.

This overlooks our multidimensional reality. In Palestine, women are the backbone of resilience. Women are doctors, writers, and students who pursue education under bombardment. We manage "households" that have been reduced to tents, turning a handful of flour into a meal for a family. Women during the genocide have lost their privacy.

Being a woman in Gaza means your private pain is public; it means losing your privacy in displacement camps, yet maintaining your dignity. We are not just “numbers” or “mourners”; we are leaders of a survival movement. We fight for life as much as we fight for our land. My own journey—studying medicine while working as a translator and author—is a testament that a Palestinian woman is a flame that refuses to be extinguished by the winds of war.

**Aguza Berral:** We know thanks to studies such as those carried out by Goodarzi, Badri and Javadzadeh (2023), Mousavi and Sani (2025), Albelbeisi *et al.* (2025), and Aldabbour *et al.* (2025) that many people are forced to leave their homes due to Israeli bombings and acts of genocide, causing them to suffer from anxiety, depression, and even post-traumatic stress disorder. Do you know of any situations close to you, or have you experienced this situation yourself?

**Abu Sitta:** I was displaced 10 times during the genocide, with the first and most difficult displacement occurring on October 11, 2023, just 4 days after the war began.

On October 10, the residents of the Qizan al-Najjar neighbourhood were ordered to evacuate, but we refused. As a precaution, we all slept in my grandmother's living room, which overlooked the back door of the house.

We had planned that if the shelling intensified, we would exit through the back. However, as soon as the electricity came on for the three-hour period, from 12 to 3, the intense shelling began in the neighbourhood, and the main power grid was destroyed. The shelling intensified even more, and I cried to my father, “Didn’t you say we would exit through the back door?” He replied, “The quadcopter is surrounding us; we won’t be able to get out.”

At that moment, I realized it was our last day, and we wouldn’t survive. We stood near the wall all night to avoid the shrapnel, as some shrapnel had broken the living room window and reached us. As soon as the sky began to turn blue, we gathered what we could and went to the UNRWA school, but we were targeted. I can’t forget one time when a house next to the school was targeted in the early morning, and I woke up with glass all over my makeshift bed. We had to escape barefoot. In our last days at the school, we crawled so the snipers wouldn't see us.

On December 6, we fled to Rafah city, the southeastern city. We spent our first hours at my aunt’s house, and that day I was able to browse the internet after a two-month

interruption. The first news I read on Instagram was the assassination of Dr. Refaat Al-Areer.

My siblings and father managed to set up a tent on the street of Arab Schools in Rafah, and we stayed there for five months. Its location was considered strategic at the time, as it was near the UNRWA school where we could fetch water and use the school's bathroom. The situation was difficult and painful for me.

I remember being in a state of depression that lasted for five months. The thought that everyone in the street and school knew I was going to the bathroom with a bottle of water was unbearable. I couldn't stand it for long until I decided to go only twice a day: once in the morning before people woke up, and once in the evening after the street became empty. This required me to drink little water and eat only one meal a day, which led me to suffer from hepatitis B.

When the occupation army decided to enter Rafah on land and allowed us to return to Khan Younis, we returned to our partially destroyed house in Qizan al-Najjar. However, we were soon asked to evacuate it again, so we moved to several places until we found a house that was uninhabitable before the genocide. We rented it and stayed there for a year until we were asked to evacuate again. We tried to stay until we could see the army tanks with our own eyes, so we moved to the middle area to stay with one of our relatives. When the ceasefire was announced, we returned to the house we had rented.

**Martín Ortega:** Who are your role models, close to you or in your culture? How have they inspired you?

**Abu Sitta:** I do not have a role model in all aspects of life. However, in terms of writing, my role model is Dr. Refaat Al-Areer. Through his lectures and books, I have learned how to write. His inspiration and courage have given me the strength to write. I write in honor of his spirit and to keep his story alive. I also write for Palestine.

I am also inspired by the courage of Mohammed El-Kurd, who defends Palestine by using precise terminology. In the field of medicine, my role models are Dr. Hossam Abu Safiyya, Adnan Al-Barsh and Iyad Al-Rantisi, who never abandon their patients, even at the cost of their own lives.

**Aguza Berral:** We are both students who are currently researching literature for our PhD. It is curious how we both came to your work in two different languages and two different times, and then coincided in wanting to write and research about *Pieces*. In your poetry

collection, have you based your work on real events or people close to you? How have their experiences affected you?

**Abu Sitta:** My poetry book is inspired by reality. Some of its pages are dedicated to the lives of people I know and love, while others tell the stories of strangers whose struggles have deeply moved me.

For example, Youssef “Curly Hair,” whose father, a nurse, was devastated to discover his son among the martyrs. Or “the spirit of the spirit,” whose soul was taken from everyone who knew her when she was killed. I also write about Hind Rajab, who sought help from Red Crescent members and tragically lost her life alongside them.

My book also touches on the long queues of people waiting for bread or water, and the innocent children who have been killed due to the harsh conditions of cold, hunger, and shelling.

**Martín Ortega:** How do you protect your mental and emotional health while revisiting traumatic events in your writing?

**Abu Sitta:** In Gaza, it is difficult for anyone to maintain their mental and emotional well-being, but we strive to coexist. After the ceasefire, I made a conscious effort to avoid reading the news and writing to shield myself from the constant sadness.

However, this changed when a vendor at a small clothing stall on the main street in Khan Younis stopped me and pointed out, “Look at where the girl was standing —he was referring to me —I carried three bodies from her place when we returned to Khan Younis.” This encounter made me realize that avoiding the truth was not the best way to heal. Instead, I decided to share the stories of these people, hoping that writing about them would bring me some solace.

**Aguza Berral:** Why did you use to write the poems in English instead of Arabic, which is your mother tongue?

**Abu Sitta:** Israel has made efforts to manipulate the truth in Western media. Unfortunately, I have not been able to find enough information about our issue in English. And even when I do come across something, it is usually a translation, which does not convey the same emotions as the original.

I felt a strong desire to share the reality of what my people are facing, as I can not guarantee that I will survive by the end of this genocide. Therefore, I decided to document

my experiences, in case I do not survive, I do not want to be just a number. I want the entire world to know me, my aspirations, and my words.

**Martín Ortega:** Do you see your collection as testimony, resistance, mourning, or is there something else on your mind?

**Abu Sitta:** I see it as a history to witness what happened and resist oblivion, and a lament for the elite we have lost, so they know they are still in our memory. In my book, I recorded events from the history of Palestine in 1948, 1967, 2020, 2021, and 2023.

**Aguza Berral:** Why did you decide to use poetry to tell these stories?

**Abu Sitta:** Poetry has the unique ability to convey complex ideas and emotions concisely, often achieving what lengthy novels cannot. Through carefully chosen words and imagery, a poet can tell a story in a limited number of lines, capturing the essence of a narrative in a powerful and impactful way.

**Martín Ortega:** Which poem in this collection was the hardest to write, and why?

**Abu Sitta:** My most challenging poem to write was my first one, titled “May I Choose.” I was inspired to write it after learning about the tragic deaths of Rami and Ismail Al-Ghoul, who were targeted and beheaded while in a press car. I wrote it after reading the news that mentioned the bodies of the Palestinian dead were left in the streets, where they were eaten by dogs and cats due to the occupation preventing their retrieval. This poem was also influenced by the massacre at the Tabi'in School, where we were forced to measure each body as if it were just 70 kilograms of meat.

**Aguza Berral and Martín Ortega:** In this interview, we have been able to grasp how Donya Abu Sitta emerges as a new voice in Palestinian poetry, for whom language is inseparable from life, resistance, and hope. Her work demonstrates how writing can operate as testimony, ethical action and personal survival at the same time, particularly in contexts marked by war, displacement, and structural injustice, like the Palestinian context. Through her poetry and translations, Abu Sitta bears witness to the lived realities of Palestinians, amplifying stories of resilience, suffering, and courage that are too often marginalized or misrepresented. At the same time, her dual roles as a medical aspirant and poet illustrate the interplay between intellectual pursuit and social responsibility, highlighting how personal experiences can inform and drive broader commitments to care and justice. This conversation underscores the transformative power of words—not

merely as artistic expression, but as tools for advocacy, documenting war crimes, and affirming human dignity.

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

MARÍA MARTÍN ORTEGA is a second-year PhD candidate at the University of Córdoba (Spain), enrolled in the Languages and Cultures doctoral programme and employed under the national I+D+i project titled “Resisting the Capitalocene: Narratives of Hope in the 21st Century”. She has completed a BA in English Studies (2016-2020), a Master’s Degree in Compulsory Secondary Education and Baccalaureate, Vocational Training and Language Teaching (2020-2021), and a Master’s Degree in Advanced English Studies (Cognitive Linguistics/Literature) and Bilingual Education at the University of Córdoba (2023-2024). In her doctoral thesis, she applies the lenses of ecofeminism, decolonial theory, resistance, and hope to the analysis of female Canadian literary production (poetry, stories, plays, etc.) from the 20th and 21st centuries.

Contact: [162maorm@uco.es](mailto:162maorm@uco.es)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-4251-6184>

MARTA AGUZA BERRAL holds a degree in English Studies from the University of Córdoba (2020-2025) and in Translation and Interpreting from the same university (2020-2025). She is currently studying for a Master’s Degree in Specialized Translation at the University of Córdoba (2025-2026), which she combines with teaching and research work at the University of Córdoba as an honorary collaborator. She has been awarded the “Beca Semillero de Investigadores” grant, which is aimed at young researchers at the University of Córdoba (2024-2025), as well as the “Beca de Colaboración” (2025-2026), awarded by the Spanish Ministry. She has published some book chapters and articles on English literature and has participated as a speaker at various conferences and seminars on English-language literature and cultural studies. She aims to write her doctoral thesis in the field of postcolonial literature studies and critical discourse analysis, specifically on Palestinian diaspora literature written in English by female authors.

Contact: [l02agbem@uco.es](mailto:l02agbem@uco.es)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-7072-5545>

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