

## **Against the Tide**

By Taghreed Najjar

Translation and report by Elisabeth Jaquette

### **Reader's Report**

When the course of her family's life changes forever, 15-year-old Yusra is faced with a choice. Either she accepts her new life as it is, or she defies society's expectations and does something no woman in Gaza has ever done before.

As the novel begins, Yusra's parents are fighting, her younger brother is crying for breakfast, and Yusra is forced to go beg for handouts from the neighbors – again. Her father has been paralyzed and bound to a wheelchair since one of the tunnels between Gaza and Egypt collapsed on him, and her older brother was tragically killed by an Israeli missile. Between her family's struggles and the restrictions of life in occupied Gaza, Yusra feels like the walls are closing in on her. But then she has an idea: she decides to fix up her father's fishing boat and take up his trade to become the first and only fisherwoman in Gaza.

Yusra repairs her father's old boat with the help of her older brother's friends, but that's only the first hurdle. She must convince her parents she's up to the responsibility, and that it doesn't matter if conservative Gazan society disapproves of what she wants to do. Yusra perseveres and gains their support, and then ventures out to sea where she faces the greatest challenge of all: catching enough fish to support the family while staying within the 3-mile zone in which Palestinians are allowed to fish. One day Yusra goes past the 3-mile mark by accident, and has a harrowing encounter with the Israeli navy, when they threaten to seize her boat. The international media gets ahold of her story and interviews Yusra, just as the Freedom Flotilla is attacked. After meeting a foreign journalist, Yusra decides that she wants to be a journalist when she grows up, to help show the world what life in Gaza is really like. She pursues her new dream with the same determination: she becomes a member of a cultural center, gains access to the Internet, begins taking photographs and starts a blog. Ultimately, Yusra realizes that she can be whoever she sets her mind to be, even against terrible odds.

\*

*Against the Tide* is a compelling YA read, notable for its strong female protagonist, complex characters and relationships, and rich details about life in Gaza. It explores universal themes in YA literature: feelings of being trapped by family restrictions, frustration with society's expectations, and eagerness for greater responsibility. Yet Yusra's circumstances are anything but ordinary, and the novel candidly addresses harsh realities of poverty, family stress, and losing a loved one. The main character has a great deal at stake and goes through intense emotional experiences, and through these, she always ends up finding a way forward, often with the help of her friends. Yusra is a relatable protagonist, resourceful but stubborn. Her relationships with her parents are complex and realistic; she argues with her family at times, but also clearly loves them. Her father starts off as an unlikeable character, smoking

and yelling at her mother, but eventually the reader learns that he is struggling with his recent disability, and a more supportive, tender side is revealed.

In a gripping scene halfway through the book, Yusra stands her ground against the Israeli navy, highlighting the historical and political specificity of her story. Nonetheless, the novel shows that even under occupation, Yusra is much like a girl of her age anywhere: she seeks more independence, enjoys the help and companionship of her friends, and has a frustrating but loving relationship with her family. In the end she learns that, even if her goals change, her resourcefulness will carry her along her new path.

*Against the Tide* is a stand-alone novel, and the author also has the potential to be brought on board for several titles. Taghreed Najjar is a prolific writer of YA and children's literature, and her second YA title, *Hawk Eye Mystery*, was also shortlisted for the Etisalat Prize for Arabic Children's Literature. Her books have proven international appeal with independent readers and been adopted as part of the curriculum throughout the Arab world, and her children's books have been translated into English, Swedish, Turkish, French, and Chinese.

The novel is inspired by the true story of a young Gazan girl named Madelein Callab, who became Gaza's first fisherwoman at the age of 15. The novel was shortlisted for the Etisalat Prize for Arabic Children's Literature in 2013 and featured on *LitHub*'s list of '10 Books by Arab Women Writers that Should Be Translated.' This sample translation was also awarded an English PEN Supports grant.

Ultimately, *Against the Tide* speaks powerfully in the name of social justice by exploring global issues through a relatable main character. It is contemporary, realistic fiction aimed at a teen/tween market, and as it is based on actual events, it could also have strong appeal in an educational setting. It is remarkable for offering a human perspective on Gaza, an area of the world often featured in the news. Critically, it shows the effects of the Israeli blockade without demonizing the other, or explicitly engaging in politics. It features a strong female protagonist, and deals with complex real-life problems, and I highly recommend it for translation.