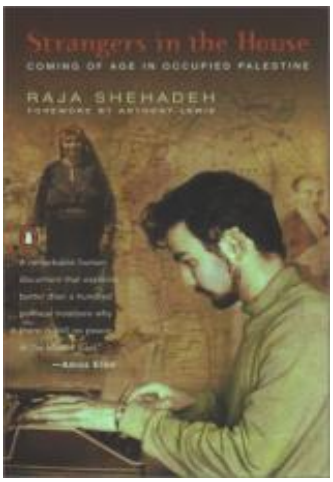
Strangers in the House: Coming of Age in Occupied Palestine

by Raja Shehadeh



About the Book

Strangers in the House is a personal memoir in which the primary conflict is between father and son. Nevertheless, it's suffused with the tumultuous politics of the Middle East and the Palestinian issue forms much of the fabric of the author's relationships. This contributes to the multiple meanings of the title, which echoes the author's feelings about his family as well as the situation in Palestine in general.

Raja Shehadeh was born in the West Bank into a family of two strong, very different wills?his stately, aristocratic grandmother, always looking to the past, and his father, Aziz, full of nervous energy and barreling toward the future. In their immediate world, British misgovernance of the areas of the Middle East under its purview had quickly lead toward violence between Jews and Arabs. Thus, Raja's first breath was taken in a personal and political world already brimming with contention.

But while his father is fighting to realize a realistic solution for Palestinian sovereignty and dignity?efforts for which he is branded a traitor to the Arabs?Raja grows from being a sickly boy to a promising, intellectually vigorous man. Despite Aziz's brilliance, however, he is perhaps the last man to acknowledge his son's potential. Raja instead seeks out wisdom in his school experiences as a student of English literature in Beirut and London, an abortive trip to India, and a love affair with an American woman. The father's world of politics and law seems the last place Raja is headed.

Eventually, however, that's exactly where he ends up, working as a lawyer side by side with Aziz in Ramallah while the city is under Israeli occupation. Raja becomes a leader in developing legal means to assert Palestinian rights, even as the fire that once burned in his father's belly grows noticeably colder. Raja earns international kudos for trying to stop the disintegration of Palestinian law as an author and for his human rights work.

But an increasingly depressed Aziz has no encouraging words for his son. Where others see Raja as making strides in

ending the excesses of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Aziz feels he is stirring up trouble. When the Israelis begin harassing the law firm and its employees, Aziz interprets it as evidence that he's been right all along. In the end, it's nearly too much for Raja, who temporarily leaves the law firm.

He eventually returns, but his relationship with his father isn't mended in time. While Raja is abroad on a speaking tour, Aziz is murdered. The public embraces the idea that he was assassinated as a traitor by a Palestinian extremist. However, Raja is convinced that Aziz's death is unrelated to politics. Transforming himself from an international human rights lawyer into a criminal prosecutor, he investigates the murder while goading the Israeli police into doing more about his father's case. After several setbacks and false victories, he is given a tantalizing glimpse of the truth: An Israeli police officer claims that one of Aziz's opponents in a land dispute killed him. Raja's oath to lay his father's spirit to rest with justice looks as if it's about to be fulfilled. But his optimism is short-lived, when he realizes that the murderer is being protected by the Israeli administration because he's an informant for the occupiers. Politics in Palestine, it seems, is inextricable from the personal.

Discussion Guide

1. The concept of land and space continue to crop up at all levels, from the occupation and Julia's feud with her neighbor to Raja's impressions of the physical changes the Israeli settlements bring to the land he grew up around. ("Where once there was a division, now there was an open, continuous, accessible space" [p. 55].) What meaning does physical space hold for the parties involved in these situations, and is space ultimately liberating or confining? How do the author's descriptions of geography coincide with his ideas about naturalness and artificiality?

2. Abandonment is a major theme. How does the author come to grips with the acts of abandonment committed against him, and those that he himself commits? What other instances of abandonment can one find?

3. Compare and contrast the benefits the author at points sees in the Israeli occupation with its dark side. Does he come out definitely behind either perspective?

4. The author introduces the idea of the stranger from the very first page, where he describes his grandmother as a *gareebeh* in Ramallah, a city she's lived in for thirty years. How does he explore the concept of what it means to be a stranger?

5. Compare the cities of Jaffa, Ramallah, and Tel Aviv with the Israeli settlements. How do they coincide or conflict with the author's sense of the future, the present, and the past?

6. What distinction, if any, does the author make between Jews and Israelis, between Palestinians and Muslims, and between Muslims and Christians? How does he deal with the issue of religion?

7. How do aspects of the author's childhood, such as his physical weakness, affect his self-conception as an adult? How do they affect how others view him?

8. How do Julia and Aziz's differing influences manifest themselves in the author's own developing personality? What effect does Julia have on him well after her death?

9. How does the traditional idea of masculinity show up in the author and his father's behavior toward each other and in other situations? (Note, for example, Raja's reaction to being ordered about by a young female soldier during a search [p. 85], or the notion of the occupation as compromising of manhood [p. 54].) Why does the author begin his narrative with a lengthy description of a strong female character?

10. How does the author's perception of Israelis change over time? In the end, is the "illusion" regained that they are "monsters" and "the enemy"?

11. In the beginning, the author frequently dedicates long paragraphs to descriptions of color. How does his use of color change later in the narrative?

12. Is it significant that the author decides his father's murder wasn't politically motivated after all?

13. How is writing used as a weapon in the narrative? Is this book itself a kind of weapon? If so, what is its target?

Author Bio

Raja Shehadeh is a Palestinian lawyer and writer who lives in Ramallah. He is a founder of the pioneering, nonpartisan human rights organization Al-Haq, an affiliate of the International Commission of Jurists, and the author of several books about international law, human rights, and the Middle East.

Critical Praise

"Unusually honest, beautifully written....Few Palestinians have opened their hearts and minds with such frankness."

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