

***“Now It was a War of The Viola”:***  
**Youth, Music and Creative Pedagogies**

**Authored by: Diksha Poddar**

**Author Profile**

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Scholarship on and experiences from across conflict zones worldwide suggests that the use of creative arts forges pathways for youth to engage in transformative experiences that contribute enormously towards developing peace initiatives. Arts-based methods used as pedagogical tools hold the potential to further expand the reach of and access to education in areas where education is repeatedly disrupted on account of conflict. According to Lederach (2005), it is the simplicity and honesty in these artistic methods that carry the capacity for reconciliation and healing. This is because such methods and tools go beyond the cognitive experiences of the individuals and instead involves the community and larger society. Cohen (2015) writes that what makes arts-based methods interesting is the emphases laid on the “refinement of expression” and “virtuosity” of a particular artist or ensemble that “invites transformation in those who witness it”.

How does the youth experience ‘transformative’ change while engaging in the creative arts? How does the youth harness these changes and contribute to broader transformations and engage in impactful activities? How do these experiences transcend to the level of the community? What are some of the challenges that the youth might encounter while further sharing their transformative tools and creative pathways to change? How do such experiences contribute towards scholarship on Education for Peace and Conflict Transformation, at large? A recent book ‘*Children of the Stone: The Power of Music in Hard Land*’ (2015) by Sandy Tolan, a renowned journalist, engages with and attempts to answer some of these questions in an evocative manner. Tolan shares the experiences of a young boy from Ramallah who is fiercely determined to create music and music schools for and with Palestinian children.

Experiencing music through Al Kamandjati music school in Ramallah, the book ‘*Children of the Stone*’ encapsulates experiences of the younger generation of Palestinians as they expand their vocabulary to give space to healing, non-violent resistance and compassion, through their encounters with music instruments, workshops, and concerts. Tolan provides a biographical account of Ramzi Hussein Aburedwan, a young stone-thrower who gradually moved on to become a violist and the founder of music schools in refugee camps in Ramallah. It describes Ramzi’s personal journey through these phases, his reflections on music as a tool for resistance for youth, and music schools as transformative spaces for learning and ‘dreaming’. Tolan highlights individual and collective journeys of transformation in Palestine through music.

The author, with empathy, weaves the narratives of different individuals in and around Al Kamandjati, with Ramzi at its center. A Note to Readers at the beginning, a detailed section on Source Notes, which runs into over one hundred pages, and a bibliography at the end, coupled with Palestinian maps from various time-periods since 1936, reflects Tolan’s attempt to produce a rigorously researched nonfictional work. As he mentions in the introductory pages, he largely relied on interviews, archival research, news accounts and other secondary sources for information.

The journey is divided into four sections or ‘movements’ as Tolan titles them. The first movement is referred to as *Stone*. Set during the time of the first Palestinian intifada, the various chapters in this section describe Ramzi’s childhood experiences in a refugee camp, as a stone-thrower and his introduction to the viola. Second movement or *Instrument* unfolds Ramzi’s dream of a music school and his initial journey towards its realization. *Practice* or the third movement narrates the difficult phases of shaping the school in Ramallah: acceptance by the community, perceptions of the international music community about the sustainability of the school, and logistical challenges of hosting musicians from across the world in Palestine. In the phase of the final movement or *Resistance*, Tolan captures the essence of the transformative role music played in the lives of the students. It concludes with a chapter titled *Musical Intifada*. Here, the author recounts various encounters of Palestinian children as they confronted Israeli army in one of the most sensitive areas of the region, through music. In addition to the thirty chapters within the four sections, it also carries a prelude, postlude and three interludes between the four sections.

Tolan is a renowned journalist and has reported extensively on Israel-Palestine conflict for over decades now. He is also a professor at the University of Southern California’s Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, Los Angeles and is a co-founder of Homelands Productions. Various books and articles that he has authored are testimony to Tolan’s expertise on the politics of Middle-East region and his skills as a narrative journalist.

He captures various aspects of living in refugee camps, such as: everyday struggles of the youth to walk a thin line balancing the historical baggage and aspirations for their future; negotiating various psycho-social challenges within the existing cycles of perpetual violence; and lack of physical, psychological and social support to provide space to dream unconventional possibilities. Tolan has interestingly contextualized the varied narratives within the prevailing political climate throughout various phases of conflict in Palestine. The book juxtaposes these political events with on-ground everyday realities of people living through violence.

During his growing years in the refugee camp of Al Amari, Ramzi, the protagonist, constantly romanticized his home village on the coastal plains, which he picturized from listening to various narratives from his grandparents. At the same time, he struggled to make meaning of the present realities of abandoned childhood, challenges to meet basic needs, collective trauma and constant threat to life. As early as at the age of eight years, Ramzi gained popularity among the masses, both in West Bank and Israel alike, through his iconic image of throwing a stone which was transmitted through newspapers and posters across the region. This image symbolized the first uprising in Palestine of 1980s and bestowed him the title – ‘a child of war’.

Within a couple of years, in a serendipitous moment, Ramzi was chosen to participate in a music camp hosted by the National Conservatory of Music, Ramallah. He was selected purely with an intention to provide opportunities to the children from the refugee camps, and not for his intrinsic inclination towards music. At the Conservatory, Ramzi was introduced to viola. Initially, he constantly juggled between a traumatized child and a dedicated music student. However, by the end of the summer camp, through rehearsals, *he had learned to talk through viola* and had begun to experience music in a surreal manner. Ramzi expressed that his encounters with music in the initial days were often eerie, calming, and would reduce his anxiety levels. From here, he embarked on this musical journey with viola and participated in

various music contact programs and trainings at the Apple Hill Summer Chamber Music and Festival in New Hampshire, USA; Conservatoire d’Angles, France; and personal interactions with famous musicians such as Edward Said and David Barenboim; among many others.

Ramzi had hoped to introduce music to more and more Palestinian children to make them experience it differently and be able to transform their trauma into positive energy. *Tolan writes, He didn’t believe music could magically purge the trauma. But the presence of music in a child’s life could provide a means of therapy and protection. It could point the way...to a more normal life* (p. 110). With these thoughts and vision, at the age of eighteen, Ramzi conceived the idea of introducing Palestinian children to music through Al Kamandjati, his music school.

Initiated at an old renovated building in Al Amari refugee camp, Ramzi envisioned Al Kamandjati (or The Violist) as a physical and psychological space for healing and critical reflection for its students and instructors. Through curriculum, music trainings, and concerts, the schools in different camps across Ramallah probed young Palestinians to introspect and redefine dignity, freedom and peace, and to re-envision their future and that of their homeland. It also provided a context to foster a network of musicians by connecting young musicians across Palestine and those from the other parts of the world.

Through the experiences of Ramzi, Al Kamandjati and its students, the author offers an engaging account to critically reflect on the role of creative pedagogical tools in bringing a transformative change in the learning process. Three aspects of the book make this a unique read through the lens of transformative pedagogy. First, contextualized in Ramallah, the book draws attention to transformative learning processes within the everyday lives in a *protracted conflict*. Second, through the narratives of the protagonist, the book foregrounds music as a tool for transformation at the personal level, with a potential to lead to change at the larger societal and cultural levels. It highlights two instances where music worked as a connector between the students and Israeli army men and provided a context for the children to humanize the perceived enemies. Third, the author shares critical insights into the experiences of ‘dreaming’ of an experiential music school in Ramallah; the physical and structural challenges incurred in setting up of the school; and the transformative space the school provided for the students, instructors, and the community at large.

Ramzi problematizes the perception of music as a symbol of normalcy in the areas of protracted conflicts. He uses music to respond to violence non-violently, to resist the Israeli Army, and to transform the lives of children even during the time of violent situations. This is evidently highlighted in the latter chapters.

This opens a dialogue with its readers on the impact of the creative pedagogical initiatives on the possibilities of creating sustainable, peaceful and compassionate future. The experiences of Rasha, a young flute player at Al Kamandjati unfolds elementary, yet powerful feelings of agency and transformation at the personal level. *Tolan writes, [Playing flute] was an escape to another world. A better world. I owned that world ...Music, Rasha believed, was not only a source of pride; it was a means of assertion, protection and even, at times, vengeance* (p. 204, p. 230).

Shehada’s sister expresses her happiness as she saw her brother move away from throwing stones and to join the school to learn the art of making various musical instruments. Oday Khatib, as singer from Al Fawwar camp shares that, *[he] had found resistance to the occupation in his voice* (p. 300). It highlights various instances where music had begun to initiate a change among the students at varied levels: personal, relational and larger structural and cultural levels. Thus, foregrounding the intrinsic role of transformative pedagogy in cultivating change in the learning process, especially in the areas of prolonged conflicts.

Bringing the conversations on transformative pedagogy, creative methods and critical learning closer home, within South Asia, the muppets Zari and Zeerak from *Baghch-e-Simsim* in Afghanistan are worth a mention. The local version of *The Sesame Street* in Afghanistan introduced an indigenous pair of sister-brother muppets to initiate a dialogue on gender equity and empowerment at the grassroots levels amongst the young in the post-war region. The program uses muppets and other audio-visual methods to create opportunities for alternate learning for the children in the region where the formal education is disrupted (Rand Cooperation xxxx).

Zari (meaning shimmering) is a six-year-old purple Afghani girl whose ambitions, confidence and inquisitiveness makes her stand out. The producers of the program feel that the portrayal of a female muppet as a strong figure has resonated well with the children and parents and has contributed immensely towards initiating conversations on the empowerment of girls in Afghan society.

Zari’s younger brother, Zeerak (meaning smart and talented), an orange-colored four-year-old muppet, who joined her very recently is a powerful male character who emphasizes on the importance of respect for others, compassion and education, especially girls’ education. What makes Zeerak distinct is the fact that he looks up to Zari as his role model, which is unusual for the context. Through his actions and conversations with Zari, he attempts to break gender stereotypes and roles. It is interesting to note how the muppets are creatively employed to address some of the existing structural biases and perceptions within the communities. For example, Zeerak wears glasses and with this, he normalizes boys to use spectacles which are otherwise perceived negatively in the Afghan society.

Thorough follow ups and analytics have reflected increasing popularity of the siblings amongst the children and parents (Sesame Workshop 2017). Sherrie Westine, Sesame Workshop’s Executive Vice President of Global Impact and Philanthropy, furthers that the research has indicated that Zari has been successful in generating awareness on the importance of female education, especially amongst the fathers (Jill Serjeant 2016), thus, subtly fostering father-daughter relationships in Afghanistan. The siblings together foreground values of love, respect, tolerance, and compassion towards others in the families and friends amongst the children, parents and educators. They hope to bring attitudinal and behavioral changes among the various stakeholders to revisit gender roles, critically question gender stereotypes and accept females in the leadership positions in Afghanistan.

The experiences of Ramzi’s music in Ramallah in the book *Children of the Stone* and that of Zari and Zeerak’s with the children in Afghanistan profoundly reflect on the transformative power of creative methods in the teaching-learning process, especially in areas of conflict and those in

the post-conflict reconstruction phase. The book is a captivating read of Ramzi’s experiments with transformative pedagogy which set its readers on walk through his exploration of the transformative ‘power’ of music in difficult realities.

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