

The Lost Place: A Study of the Images of Place in Palestinian Children's  
Literature between 1967 and 2001

**Abstract**

This article attempts to read the phenomenon of place in Palestinian children's stories between 1967 and 2001, within a political and cultural context that had an impact on Palestinian literary production. To the best of our knowledge, there is no study related to place in Palestinian children's literature. Therefore, this study came to fill in the missing in the children's literature.

**Key words:** Palestinian Children's Literature, political, homeland, open places, closed place.

**Introduction**

The place is one of the most basic elements in a literary work: it is the location where events occur, the space through which characters move, and a concept by which the writer is affected. Yuri Lotman defines place as "a set of homogeneous things of changing phenomena, states, functions, or forms [...] among them are relations similar to familiar and ordinary spatial relations such as contact and distance" (Lotman 8). For Lotman, then, the place is part of the reality of life and an aspect that impacts people as much as they do place. In his view, each place imposes its rituals and specific characteristics on the people within it, and, by extension, is bound by and subject to those rules that govern it, while also imposing its existence on its inhabitants. Similarly, Gaston Bachelard was interested in concepts of place and their relationship to humanity, with particular respect to their aesthetic aspects. He states:

The principle point from which the author starts is that the old home, the home of childhood, is the place of familiarity and the center of imagination, and when we move away from it, we always remember it, and we project upon many aspects of material life, that sense of aesthetics and security that the old house provided us with (30).

### **Sense of place**

Within the notion of the “sense of place” in humans, Tuan notes that the human freedom of movement in the place is connected to the feelings of spaciousness and of crowding, each having different terms and conditions. An individual incapable of movement must have difficult control and/or dominance issues and primitive ideas about the abstract place, and about experiencing the place through movement. As such, it can be said that man lives in two spatial places: the first is the personal private place, and the second is the communal public place. In the place, a person travels in search of his identity, where this identity is confirmed and his sense of it is firmly established (44).

Based on this theory the concept of place in Palestinian children’s literature, took on its unique significance. This literature not only served to record the reality of life for Palestinians. Rather, it created a special place with distinct dimensions, a place with various connotations and meanings, freighted with the values of culture, heritage, politics, religion and humanity which help the reader to understand Palestinian life. In so doing, it gives meaning to life and to humanity as a whole.

For a Palestinian, the notion of place is intertwined with the concept of the lost homeland, not only the lost place. People of all backgrounds live in specific places – except for Palestinians, because the place lives in them wherever they settle, be it as a result of relocation or migration. Place, for Palestinians, is not like any other place; it is a place that can only be discovered or retrieved by way of recollection and through the revival of Palestine anew. It is impossible to experience Palestinians’ longing for their homeland

because Palestinians do not live in their original place, but in memory, in waiting, in remembrance, and in suffering for loved ones who have departed. The uprooting and erasure of the place, the horror of loss, the pain of exile, the alienation of the body, and the agony of human isolation are all formative elements underpinning some of the Palestinian stories that grapple with the dilemma of place (Mousa 30-38).

### **Children's stories**

Within many of the children's stories discussed here, the concept of place appears to exist on two levels: the open place and the closed place. Places in children's stories have different characteristics and take different forms; they are not alike. It is these differences that give each place a certain distinguishing particularity. The first group encompasses Palestinian children's literature from 1967 to 1987. Initially, Arab literature focused on the Six-Day War in 1967, which resulted in Israel's victory over three Arab countries combined. This defeat left the Arab world reeling from the force of a double setback that affected every aspect of life. Along with its impact on Arabic literature, in general, and Palestinian literature, in particular, the Six-Day War also impacted Palestinian children's literature, with writers of the period tending to document the suffering of the Palestinian people under occupation in their stories. Embodying the national consciousness and instilling it in the minds of children was a deliberate and intentional task that all writers examined undertook through their stories. Writers also worked on conveying the events through which Palestinian people lived and depicting the suffering in the refugee camps in narrative form.

This is illustrated by the tale *Knights and the Sea* (1989) by the Palestinian writer Mufeed Nahli (1939 –). Nahli was born in the village of Beit Natif near Hebron, in the West Bank, and now lives in Jordan. The story follows a girl named Samra who lives with her parents in a beautiful seaside village, the majority of whose inhabitants earn their livelihood through fishing. One day, Samra hears the sounds of cannon fire as the village is subjected to

a Zionist invasion. The village knights volunteer to defend the village and save it from the enemy, but they need someone to go to the neighboring city with a handkerchief as a sign of victory. Samra volunteers for this dangerous mission. The story ends with the knights liberating the city from the enemy.

The sea occupies a prominent place in literature in general and in Palestinian literature in particular. The sea is an open place replete with symbolic connotations. Expatriates associate the sea with both loss and nostalgia simultaneously, while writers have portrayed it as a symbol of injustice and tyranny, or a metaphor for oppression, loss and forced departure from their homeland. *Knights and the Sea* presents images of the house and the sea alike. The latter is shown from a dual perspective within its diverse symbolic space, with reference to both its positive and negative manifestations. The story begins with the use of the retrospective technique, as the writer/narrator remembers the beautiful house in which he had lived as a small child:

On the seashore [...] We had a beautiful house [...] Its dirt road was broad and wide [...] stretching across the wheat fields on the Palestinian coast to the faraway mountains in every Arabic country [...] And one night [...] A cold October wind blew over our little house [...] The wind uprooted its trees and destroyed its pillars, but its stone walls remain to this day, telling us a story every day (Nahli 9).

The writer links the image of the sea to his memories. When a person grows up, they wish to return to their youth. They remember all the innocent days of childhood spent in the family home, and by home, we mean the closed place that serves as the cradle for us all, the place in which we were born and spent our childhood, and where we were raised and grew up. By extension, people have a strong and solid relationship with this domestic environment (Bachelard 38).

Home is a place for daydreams, fond memories, and joyful reminiscences. When we leave home, we can look back on our memories of it. An image of the house appears in the following section of the tale:

And her beautiful village used to sleep and wake up under the shade of olive trees [...] Samra stood [...] in front of the little house [...] She knocked on its doors [...] She sat waiting [...] From afar, she saw the village empty of people [...] Its sons came out from among the hills, and went down to the seashore, and she felt something heavy hitting her head [...] She wondered: What happened? She did not wait in front of the house [...] She jumped among the ears of wheat (Nahli 11).

In the next passage, the writer uses the notion of place to show nostalgia for his homeland, via the symbolism of the sea. It is inseparable from the writer who longs for the homeland from which they are far removed, in exile and in a diaspora.

Towards the end of 1987, the first intifada (uprising) erupted, which indirectly increased the suffering of the Palestinian people. As a consequence, it was not surprising that this was reflected in children's stories. These stories also began to exhibit an explicit, clear focus on the issue of the conflict with Israel within a context characterized by violence. Encouraged by the first intifada, writers continued to embody Palestinian suffering in children's stories. They portrayed the image of the Palestinian cause and the movement of struggling and fighting against the enemy to liberate Palestinian land, whether directly or through the use of metaphor. *Haifa and the Seagull* (1991), written by Tawfiq Fayyad (1939 – ), who was born in the village of Al-Muqבלah in the Galilee, is considered among the first generation to witness and live through the Nakba in 1948. He ended up moving to Tunisia and settling there, where he still lives to this day. The story is about a young girl named Haifa (after the coastal city of Haifa in Israel). She lives with her parents and grandfather in a tin house on the seashore in Beirut. One day, Haifa sees her grandfather holding his fishing nets and heading toward the boat. She wants him to take her with him, as usual, but this time her

grandfather refuses to do so, telling her he is going to a faraway place. The girl is saddened by the thought that her grandfather is leaving her and returning to his home in the city of Haifa.

The story begins with a description of the closed place, the house in which Haifa lived. However, she does not like her house in Beirut because it is made of tin, which leaves it hot in the summer and allows rainwater to infiltrate it in the winter. This evokes the conditions of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and the diaspora, along with the restrictions imposed upon them in terms of construction, employment, and freedom of movement.

Haifa's house is described as follows:

Haifa is a young girl with a dark complexion, who lives with her parents in a tin house on the seashore in Beirut. Haifa does not like her house very much, because it becomes very hot when the sun rises in the summer. In winter, water runs from the cracks in the roof, and the cold wind almost blows it away (Fayyad 2).

Her happiness is evident when she stands in front of the sea, the open space, as the following section shows: "But Haifa has always been happy, because she loves the sea so much, and loves those beautiful white birds that always flap their wings in space, and hover over her grandfather's boat when he goes far out to sea" (Fayyad 3).

In the above passage, the sea serves as a symbol of the homeland, represented by the city of Haifa, to which the writer's attachment is highlighted. Haifa and its splendid shoreline reflect the features of the homeland of Palestine, with the beauty of its sea. The pretty city of Haifa serves as a proxy for the image of the homeland, just as its sea reflects Palestine, because Haifa is unlike any other city except Palestine the homeland. The writer symbolizes this parallel concerning the sea:

One day, she saw him holding the fishing nets and heading towards the boat. She preceded him and sat in the boat as usual, but this time he took her in his arms and lowered her, saying: 'Today, you do not go with me, Haifa'. Haifa said, 'Why, Grandfather'? 'Because I'm going

so far today, there's another Haifa behind the sea, beautiful like you, and always waiting for me (Fayyad 6).

The dialogue here presents the dialectic of the relationship between the self and the place, between nostalgia and the dream of return, symbolizing the longing experienced by Palestinians who were forcibly displaced. Here, the images of the symbol and the place undulate from one to the other, oscillating between distance and proximity in a whirlpool of tears, fueled by longing and the anguish of separation. The passage ends with an existential question that subjects the wish of reaching Haifa, the city symbolizing the entire homeland, to a metaphorical shift, and thereby highlights the dialectic of the relationship between Palestinians and their homeland.

Through the dialogue between the grandfather and the granddaughter, the grandfather yearns for his homeland in an attempt to search for freedom and revolution. As a consequence, the image of the sea is invoked in the passage cited above as if it would grant him freedom and return to his homeland. The grandfather's heartbreak prompts him to tell his granddaughter that he will return to Haifa on his own, suggesting that the hope of return is soon to be fulfilled and that he believes that it is time for him to travel back to his homeland, Palestine, where he was raised and made such beautiful memories on its territory.

This text is shaped by a wide variety of different emotions. At the beginning of the story, the text is shaped by a sense of exile and alienation, but things change in the previous section, as we see the grandfather associating the return with the sea that will return him to the safety of his beloved homeland. He is sad because of his distance from his homeland, to which he dreams of returning.

The Oslo I Accord (1993) represents a paradoxical point in the lives of Palestinians and in the struggle of Palestinians to recover their place. Works by writers after the Oslo Accords play host to a variety of positions regarding the Accords, in line with the authors' political affiliations. Their views were reflected in some of their output, and the concept of

the “other” began to make its mark on many stories, especially those written by Palestinians living in the territory and those returning to it in the wake of the Oslo Accords.

Writers wanted to show Palestinian children in a new light. These children are no longer only fighters and martyrs in support of the resistance: they have become intelligent, questioning, tolerant, open-minded to the world, and lovers of nature. This period, and the associated shift in the presentation of children, is illustrated by the tale *The World Has Changed* (1996), by Mustafa Murrar (1929 – 2022), who was born in the Palestinian village of Jaljulia. This story follows the mouse Lahmas, who lives in a hole in the ground. One day, he sneaks into a classroom at the nearby school, curious to know what children are learning about animals. The mouse slips between the folds of a map to watch the proceedings. He listens to the students mention all kinds of animals, except for mice themselves. He gets angry and tries to defend himself.

Palestinian writers have expressed their solidarity and national affiliation by employing the image of the land in their stories. After the Nakba in 1948, Palestinians who remained and lived inside Israel became concerned with steadfastness, the desire to cling to their land and continue their struggle and sacrifice, despite all the intimidation they faced. Mustafa Murrar witnessed the suffering of the Palestinian people, with traces of this evident in his stories for children. Love of the land, according to Murrar, is the love of one’s homeland. This is demonstrated when the mouse says, “I want to make an agreement with the owners of the house, an agreement of friendship and non-aggression. I will mention to you and to them some of the terms of the agreement” (Murrar, 3). The mouse managed to strike a peace agreement with the owners of the house, but on his own terms: on the one hand, he wants to live in peace, while on the other, he does not want to leave the land and his homeland. The defense of his home evokes the notion of humans’ defense of their land and homeland. It is clear that the story refers to a change in the world order in the wake of the

Oslo Accords. In this passage, the writer is talking, symbolically, about peace between the Palestinians and the Israelis.

Pay attention to me, we make a peace that is witnessed by every peace-loving person in this house. The cat asked him: Will it be unilateral peace? And the mouse responded quite insistently: Rather, all parties to the conflict will bear witness to it, and participate in the signing. Then everyone knows his limits, and peace is established (Murrar 6).

Here, Murrar tried to convey his feelings to his young readers. Using metaphorical language, he suggests that peace can happen and is not an impossible feat, but he reiterates and confirms his long-held position that, as far as the “other” is concerned, we should not trust anyone, even if we make an agreement with them.

The writer also uses terminology unique to the Palestinian people in their steadfastness against the Israeli forces, as in the following passage:

The mouse Lahamas was listing his conditions, while he was standing at the door of his house on the way to the garden. When his voice rose, the cat, Fattash, took notice of him, so ran towards him, wanting to pounce on him. However, the mouse declared that he was one of the house animals, so did not move from his place, and stood steadfast and defiant (Murrar 9).

In the above passage, the writer mentions that the mouse was one of the animals of the house, alluding to the fact that the Palestinians who live in Israel are among the owners of this land and that they struggle to protect the land of their fathers and grandfathers while simultaneously extending a hand of peace to the Israeli “other”.

As these tales show, the place held great significance, and manifested itself in various ways, in children’s stories from 1967 to 2000, particularly within the Palestinian context. The place is considered to be one of the main components of creative works directed at children. Through their stories, writers display their keen interest in place, a notion with strong symbolic resonance. This is especially the case for Palestine, as this lost place for Palestinians is under Israeli occupation, causing Palestinians to cling to their land and everything related to their homeland.

It is also evident that the specific place in question takes on a different form from one story to the next. There are open places, such as the sea, as we saw in the stories of *Knights and the Sea* and *Haifa and the Seagull*. For Palestinian writers living in the diaspora, far away from their homeland, the sea carries symbolic connotations, which differ from writer to writer according to their personal experience and insights. The sea has a great presence in their writings and assumes aesthetic, psychological and political dimensions. Its symbolic connotations serve as a symbol of the homeland, nostalgia, steadfastness, childhood memories, and the return to the stolen homeland.

### **Conclusion**

Writers showed interest in other open places, too, such as the land. For the Palestinian people, the land represents their safe place, their motherland of Palestine, and it is the book on whose pages childhood memories are written. If the land is lost, Palestine is lost. Palestinian writers were also interested in describing the closed place, as we saw in the story of *Haifa and the Seagull*: the home is coded as the place to which a person retreats in search of comfort and tranquility, as the place that houses the people closest to them. The home is the familiar place where we were born, the site of our childhood, and one of the most important closed spaces for which writers express their longing. The concept of place holds a special position within Palestinian writers' minds and memories: whether these Palestinians live inside Israel or in the diaspora, they nevertheless they direct their gaze from those open spaces to their occupied state of Palestine.

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