

FORMALISM IN THE SERVICE OF THE NAKBA NOVEL: SOHAIL KIWAN'S NOVEL BALAD AL-MANĤŪS AS AN EXAMPLE

Abstract

Russian Formalism is considered one of the most important modern schools of criticism, which came to establish a science for literature based on stable criteria emphasizing the argument that the value of the text lies in its ability to shock the reader with the new thing that comes with it. The new thing does not occur except in its capacity for de-familiarization, namely, transforming the familiar thing into an unfamiliar one, on the level of the linguistic structure, style, form, and method of broaching the subject.

The shock and de-familiarization at the core of formalism are among the phenomena accompanying Palestinian literature after the Palestinian Catastrophe/Nakba in 1948. The Nakba was a sudden and shocking event that turned Palestinian life upside down. Sohail Kiwan's (b. 1956) novel, *Balad al-Manĥūs/Country of the Unfortunate* (2019), is a good sample of these different forms of expressions, which reveal different patterns of de-familiarizations that do not just describe a change but include a kind of intuition and presentation of the current condition. Additionally, it introduces a vision and a prophecy of what will happen. These patterns are rarely present in other Nakba novels, which are often a kind of documentation of the Palestinian people's catastrophe.

Keywords: *formalism, structuralism, Nakba, de-familiarization, alienation, symbolism*

1. Introduction

Sohail Kiwan's novel *Balad al-Manūsis* among the best works that have been written about the Nakba. The novel consists of 320 pages that address several significant subjects and specific side streams that flow into the sea of the Nakba. Through these issues, the reader can understand the historical, political, psychological, and cultural dimensions of the Nakba. Throughout its pages, the novel introduces comprehensive information related to Palestinian land, in general, and the city of Akko, in particular. In addition, the novel presents the characteristics of Zionist thought and its beginnings, starting with Herzl (1860-1904), through the Holocaust, and ending with the fall of Akko and other cities and villages in Palestine in 1948, the submission of the Arabs in Israel to the Military Government, and their daily oppression and humiliation.

Most of the events in the novel take place in a ten-year period before and after the 1948 Nakba. These years include many associations and recollections introduced through the flashback technique and refer the reader to different periods in Palestine's history: the Ottoman period, the British Mandate period, the history of the Jews before the Holocaust, and the circumstances of Jews in Europe before and after the Holocaust.

At the end of the novel, the writer dedicates several pages to describing conditions in 1998, fifty years after the Nakba, when the novel's characters have aged and reached the end of the road. This article argues that the issue of the Nakba, according to this novel, is that this occupation did not only come to establish a state for a people at the expense of another people, but to destroy and wipe out the Other by all means, through unjustified grudge and malice.

Many novels and stories deal with the Nakba and its severe impact on Palestinian life among different sections of the people. Writers from Palestine and the Arab world have explained the crime committed against an unarmed people under international cover and international silence¹. Therefore, the question that is introduced here is: What is the new thing that Sohail Kiwan introduces in his novel, *Balad al-Manhūs*?

I should emphasize that any novel about the Nakba, no matter where it ranks among the total number of novels, remains new because the Nakba has not ended yet, as the two researchers Ahmad Sa'di and Laila Abu Lughod confirm.² It continues with Palestinians across the generations, appearing their psyche, movements, attitudes, literature, and arts, which have come to be known as Post-Traumatic Literature.³

On the other hand, Nakba stories are still told, and its memories still storm in the minds of the generations that lived through it. However, most of the early generation who were older and present in body and soul during the Nakba has already passed away. Specialists in the history of modern Palestine and folklorists who rely on the oral narrative managed to record many Nakba stories. We can notice a new element of oppression, injustice, and suppression wielded against the Palestinians in each story.

Given this, I can say that everything that Kiwan introduces in his novel can be seen as a new element or a reproduction of an old image from a different angle. Kiwan draws the map of the Nakba from its different dimensions and clearly shows the truth of its gravity through his care for all aspects and areas related to Palestinian individuals before and after the Nakba. Further, he does not ignore even sensitive religious and social issues, which were also among the causes of the Nakba, which introduces to the reader a different biography of a whole people, the biography of the Nakba.

However, what distinguishes this biography from other biographies is the writer's supervision from outside, once through the eyes of the partner and the sympathizer, and once through the eyes of the critic, the researcher, and the political historian. The latter applies not only their education and knowledge but also their thought, criticism, analysis and prophetic ability, **that give** this repeated and truly cloned Nakba a kind of exciting renewal. It also opens new doors of thought for the reader and enlightens dark corners of that history, whose effects are still prominent among the Palestinians to this day.

What can be confirmed in this novel is that the writer, who **lives** in this country, is closer to the pain of the Palestinians inside Israel, and is more sensitive to their feelings of humiliation, oppression, distortion and is more knowledgeable of the temperament of the Other and his treatment of the Palestinians and their heritage. He managed to insert a lot of the obsessions of

¹ See: in his book *The Palestinian Novel from 1948 to the Present*, Abu Manneh discusses the impact of the Nakba on the evolution of the Palestinian novels. By examining several novels published in different periods after the Nakba he tries to show the critical changes that the Palestinian novel has undergone in the last 60 decades, at all levels and highlight the relationship between the political and social changes from one hand and the aesthetic literary developments from the other (see: Abu Manneh 2016).

² See: Sa'di & Abu Lughod 2007: 19. Cf.: Nasir 2014: 76-77.

³ See: Saloul 2012: 59-60; Sa'di & Abu Lughod 2007: 19-20.

the present moment into this historical work besides his fears as a Palestinian, who is living in the same atmosphere in which the characters live. He also shows the reasons for this prevailing situation by treating its ancient roots, which puts the novel on the front line with history and Israeli politics and society today. This makes it a lively visionary novel, which provides a practical benefit to those living in the shadow of the Nakba in Palestine in general and the interior, namely, Israel, in particular, which is mostly **missed** in the majority of the other Nakba novels.

2. Methodology

Since its beginning, the Formalist School placed a dividing line between literature and other sciences and called for its liberation from outside indications and the tedious search for the relationship of its content with an external fact, confirming that the most crucial element in the text is its language and artistry. However, it is obligatory to confirm the literary nature of literature, namely, the total techniques of the artistic devices and the distinctive features that make the text a literary one. For Mayakovsky (1893-1930), who is one of the most important followers of this school, literature is “the sum total of all stylistic devices employed in it.”⁴ Or as Shklovsky puts it: The technique of art is to make objects **‘unfamiliar’**, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important”⁵.

This outlook on literature, which later developed into a kind of a call for separating literature from the writer, announced the *death of the author* and limited the role of the critic to searching for the new tools and techniques that are employed in the text and constitute tools of attraction for the reader, and uncovering of the manner of the work of these tools and devices within the text⁶.

In this article I’m trying to shed light on one of the *Nakba* recently published novels from a formalist perspective. According to this orientation, the only part of the narrated text that deserves to be considered as a literary constitution, by readers, critics and scholars is the “new” unfamiliar part that the writer himself created and which called the “plot”. In the current article I try to observe the new literary techniques that used the author and brought this “familiar” historic incident (fabula) which is called *Nakba* to be a literary piece (plot). I shall analyze this novel stylistically with special emphasis on the devices and techniques that contributed to the process of defamiliarization, including binary oppositions, irony, distortion, legendizing etc. Parts of the novel will be presented and analyzed formalistically, taking into my consideration the character designs, the plot (against the fabula), the language (including diglossia), symbolism and etc⁷.

⁴ Seldern, Widdoson & Brooker 2005: 1; Ruwayli and Bazi’i 2000: 206.

⁵ Seldern, Widdoson & Brooker 2005: 32.

⁶ See: Introvern 2012: 3; Jarir 2012: 16-31; Seldern, Widdoson & Brooker 2005: 26-32.

⁷ On these formalist terms read: Khitrova 2019: 1-2; Tynyanov 2019: 77.

This mission is not easy, especially if literature is originated from reality and connected to the writer's biography or a familiar political or social history, as the case is in most Palestinian literary works after the 1948 Nakba, which constitutes unique literature that acquires its uniqueness from the nature of the imposed reality of the Palestinian people in various places of its existence.

It is vital to observe the aesthetic techniques in the various historical novels of the Nakba. Generally speaking, these novels tend to observe actual events and depend on official documents and historical records. These practices limit the writer's ability to imagine and remove the text from its narrow frame to a kind of defamiliarization, which the formalists focused on in their theoretical thought. The main techniques of defamiliarization that the formalists adopted in the literary arts include: mythologizing, paradox, irony, parody, breaking of the time linearity and monotony, hyperbole, and distortion, among others. Through these techniques, the writer is likely to resort to reality, modify or modulate it, and transfer it to the space of literature in a completely different form.⁸

The Formalists dealt with the technique of *binary oppositions* (dichotomies) in a particular way, emphasizing that the words in the text reveal their meaning through the context. The antonyms (opposites) reveal the meanings of each other. The combination between opposites in the form of a paradox or balance or parallel creates a kind of puzzle and a shock to the reader, activates his thought, and urges him to analyze, compare, and conduct a constant search. This approach grew enormously with the evolution of structuralism and its prosperity later on.⁹

This binary division imposes itself in any novel that introduces a conflict between two sides regarding a principle, a doctrine, or a thought. According to this division, I can say that the novel of this study, *Balad al-Manhūs* is a novel of *opposing binaries* that are largely complex and overlapping and can be classified under two major titles: the Victim (the Palestinian) and the Executioner (the Israeli). According to this division, all the characters and the events can be divided between the two sides. I find this division present in the characters, too.

This antithetical and synonymous parallelism includes the elements of place and its names; a comparison between the Hebrew names, which are empty of life and emotional associations, and the Palestinian names, which are charged with emotional and human feelings (as we shall see below). In this way, the image in its integrative epic form moves as if it were an image of a total conflict between all the components of space and characters. The authentic ordinary images turn into images of a mythological nature that are highly negative and positive, which are more like competing higher values, as the case is in Greek epics. These parallel or antithetical dichotomies appear in the novel in different forms, which will be discussed below by exposing their artistic value.

Synchronous Conveyance

⁸ See: al-Ruwaylī & al-Bāzi'i 2000: 206, Cf.: Tynyanov 2019: 31.

⁹ See: Seldern, Widdoson & Brooker 2005: 78; Tynyanov 2019: 77.

It seems that Kiwan made a plan at the outset and committed to following it strictly throughout the text. The plan aims to explain the relationship between the two catastrophes: the Jewish catastrophe (in Western Europe, namely, the Holocaust) and the Palestinian Catastrophe (in the East, namely, the Nakba). Therefore, he allocates more than a third of the novel to the miserable condition of European Jews, in general, and Jews in Germany and Poland, in particular. Then he discusses the condition of the Jews in the East, especially those who emigrated to Palestine before the campaign of purges and harassments they were subjected to following the Second World War. The writer confirms beyond a doubt that the Palestinian is an inevitable result of the Jewish catastrophe, namely, the Holocaust¹⁰. This formula made the second catastrophe more severe and more violent than the **first (Jewish) catastrophe**, because it resulted from a psyche originally in crisis and had experienced all kinds of oppression and mutilation, which it then tried on its victim. Besides, the **second (Palestinian) catastrophe** was carried out according to an explicit scheme and for a specific purpose, which is the elimination of the historical existence of a whole people, namely the Palestinian, in every possible way: displacement, evacuation, deportation, exile, forged and fraudulent documents, changing of names, confiscation of culture, closure of institutions, and resettlement of foreigners on the land of the original local population.¹¹

Notably, the description of the Jewish catastrophe/ Holocaust in the West is introduced here in an intense, concise, and instructional way. The reader feels that he is reading a historical and political review that addresses the status of the Jews in the West before the Second World War. The dramatic elements in this part are nearly absent to the advantage of structuring a background for the Nakba.¹² This historical narration, devoid of a dramatic element, gives the novel a specific biographical quality. This narration is repeated in more than one place in the novel, which makes the identity of the novel vibrating and unstable, on the one hand, and makes some of its sections similar to comprehensive educational pieces that have a reduced literary craft and less excitement, on the other.

Movement between these two catastrophes and between the two different mentalities of the Jews who lived under oppression in the West and the Palestinians who lived under the policy of oppression during the Ottoman era and the British Mandate period that, at first glance, are disconnected, created the need for the writer to build a bridge between two different fronts. The building of this bridge is considered the quintessence of the novel and one of its principal axes, as it is one of the most important goals that the novel is expected to achieve. The writer manages to connect the two events through the insistence of Isaac (Rashensky), the Jew (whose Jewishness is suspect because he is not circumcised). The writer imagined Isaac's story with his relatives, who were exposed to oppression in Poland.¹³ This oppression compelled him to leave Europe and travel to Palestine with Ben Gurion's permission, carrying with him all his

¹⁰ Many historians and politician writers assert that there is an obvious strong link between the Holocaust and the Nakba, they all agree that the second trauma is a direct result of the first or that it was used by Zionists as a justification for the Palestinian catastrophe that they caused (see: Bashir and Goldberg 2019, Masalha 2012: 11-12).

¹¹ See: Parmenter 1994: 42; Kanafāni 2015: 11-13; Jayyusi 2007: 107-108; al-Hardan 2016: 1-3; Masalha 2012: 1-3.

¹² See for example: Kiwan 2019: 25.

¹³ See: Kiwan 2019: 96-100.

complexes and psychological problems that resulted from the violence and shock he was exposed to in Europe. All these events make him a typical character of the Jewish immigrants from European countries, as we will see later.

Through Isaac, the writer transmits this shocking encounter between the local people with all their simplicity and calm life and modest education, on the one hand, and the newcomers, who wanted to replace these local people, using all their available means and weapons, all their plans, their deep study of the subject, their psychological shock, their ferocity, their strong relationship with the dominating countries in the world, and their broad education that they had gained from the West. The writer prepares for this forceful and rough collision by constructing the conflicting characters' backgrounds, showing each side in its absolute positive and negative qualities, approximating the conflict to the borders of a mythological epic conflict between the power of good and the power of evil. This clash justifies all the violent scenes **witnessed** in the novel, that **follow** the collision in which Evil overcame Good. Moreover, all the humiliation, insult, and persecution inflicted on the Palestinians, with no cause or fault, indicates a kind of psychological dysfunction on the aggressive side, as the writer wanted to confirm.

On the other hand, the writer **makes** this synchronous presentation of the tragedy extremely clear and contradictory by keeping common lines that clarify the theory of the victim's transformation into an executioner. Probably, the scene that is most indicative of the writer's desire to stress this parallelism is his detailed description of the violence that Isaac (the real) was exposed to in Poland and the humiliation that the Jews were exposed to there,¹⁴ in addition to his description of the violence that Isaac (the fake) himself exerted on al-Mukhtar Abu Amin al-Zidani as if he wanted to emphasize to the reader that the images are similar, but the names only exchanged. However, the problem now is that the victim has become the executioner. The deeds that the executioner will practice are driven by an acquired psychological brutality, which makes the tragedy of the Palestinian more brutal and more violent.

Binaries of Place

Balad al-Manhūs is a novel of **Place**, which turns, through its characters, into the Real Hero of the novel. Throughout the novel, the writer tries to show the human connection between the Palestinian and Place, which confirms that the Palestinian presence is natural. The description of this intimate relationship between the Palestinian and the Place is introduced in various ways. Each time, the writer consciously and deliberately conveys the perception of the **Other's** side of this place and his treatment of it to show that the Other's treatment is discordant. He does not understand nature and is not consistent with the shifts of its climate. He neither interprets the movements of the wind or clouds, **nor** appreciates the value of its trees and plants. The writer emphasizes this discordance between the Other and the Place versus a complete harmony between the Palestinian and the same place in various ways that indicate full awareness and advanced study of these connections and their nature, components, significance, and implications. These ways include the following techniques:

¹⁴ See: Kiwan 2019: 92-102.

a- The Live Name Versus the Rigid Name

The Palestinian gave live names to the narrow places and wide places that are connected to certain events that happened in the place, or the nature of the place, which reflects his love to the place and the depth of his human experience in the place he lives. When the Nakba occurred, the Zionist movement changed the names of the places to biblical names or names of Zionist or foreign people who supported the Zionist schemes and goals. Sāḥat al-Ḥanātīr/ namely, the Horse-drawn carriage square, which was also known as Khamra Square, in reference to the winery family who owned areas of the square in Haifa, was changed into Paris Square. The hospital “Shajarat al-Ḥaya/ The Tree of Life” and Ḥamza Hospital, named after the doctor who established it, became Rambam Hospital, named after the Jewish doctor and philosopher Maimonides (1138-1204 CE).¹⁵

Many other **changes that made** indicate the difference between how Israelis and Palestinians treat the Place. The Palestinian people have spent hundreds of years among the valleys, plains, mountains, coasts, and *khirbas* (ruined villages) and gave each place a living name that refers to a historical experience or an event in their heritage. When Israel was established, and Jewish immigrants came to it from the East and the West, they had no experience or history with the geographic places. They made up their minds to substitute the features of the country and its names depending on their Jewish culture, mainly biblical culture, and mostly chose rigid proper names that are empty of any emotional or living human feature¹⁶.

b- The Place between Friends and an Enemies

The writer repeatedly confirms that the relationship between the places and the original residents is a relationship of integration, interaction, and mutual sympathy. Therefore, the Palestinian individual pour much human emotion into all the places he exists in and treat them as human creatures that feel and speak. These scenes increase, especially in the events of the novel after the Nakba, when these places **were** exposed to constant destruction, which, actually disturbed the history of the place, on the one hand, and ruined the memories of the residents in these places and their past, on the other. The writer conveys images from the Other’s side that confirm the violence that Zionist movements practiced was practiced against the places by uprooting trees, destroying houses, and shelling the villages and their creatures, plants, and natural places, as well as the cultural centers and the various recreation sites that connected Palestinians to their daily lives.¹⁷

¹⁵ See: Kiwan 2019: 73, 124, 170; about the Zionists systematic efforts were being undertaken towards altering the historical and cultural features of the occupied Palestinian areas and places, see: Slymovics 2007: 42; Parmenter 1994: 71; **al-Hardan 2016: 20-23; Davis 2007: 53-56; Masalha 2012: 3. About memorizing the old features in a nostalgic way, see: Rozveh 2017: 532-533.**

¹⁶ **About the importance of language at the anthropological, social and cultural levels, and the role it plays in preserving the historic identity and in the evolution of the nations, see: Levi-Strauss 1963: 62, 68.**

¹⁷ **See for example: Kiwan 2019: 114-120. About the Zionists violent actions against the Palestinian features of the place and the landscape, see: Masalha 2012: 3-4; Sa’di and Abu-Lughod 2007.**

c- The Place between the Organic Link and the Technological Link

The treatment of this aspect appears through the writer's description of some Palestinian names associated with the place from which they come. When the *hakawati* (a popular storyteller) before the Nakba related folk stories to the people, he chose specifically the story of Wadha from Suffouriya and Mohammad from Tiberias, whose residents were evacuated, driven away, and substituted by foreign settlers. This integration between the personal name and the family name is the top of integration between the Palestinian character and the Place as if it were impossible to define the character far from the place of its birth and growth. In return, I do not find any presence of the Place in the Other's side's triple name. I rarely find a triple name for the character. For example, I do not know the name of Oria's father or his family. Similarly, Batsheva has no father's name or a family name. However, Isaac's position is even worse because he assumes another name for himself and changes its sources completely.

Distortion

Distortion is considered one of the most important poetic techniques and one of the ways that Formalism employed in order to create a different text or transform the familiar into unfamiliar, which transfers the spontaneous text into an alienated zone, a technique that became known, from the formalist point of view, by the name "defamiliarization."¹⁸ Besides, distortion is considered on top of the techniques of certain arts, such as caricature. The caricature artist tries to depict a distorted reality or highlight a certain feature in the characters and objects surrounding him, to which others do not pay attention. He exaggerates in his drawing, which disproportionates the formal percentages to lead to a certain kind of funny or comic strangeness.¹⁹

In Kiwan's novel, I see two types of distortion that are largely clear to the viewer, indicating the writer's awareness of this technique and his desire to recruit it to highlight some facts and reveal what hides behind certain formal matters. The first type is a *actual* distortion, and the second is a *technical* distortion.

The term "actual distortion" refers to the true distortion that occurs to objects under the effect of an uncontrollable external power. The writer primarily focuses on this distortion by displaying images of destruction, cutting, breaking, and fragmentation of relations and the like, which the Occupation did in Akko and other Palestinian cities and villages²⁰. For example, the names of the cities and towns were changed, and some places, such as the Darat al-Fann (Art House) and other cultural institutes that were destroyed or whose roles were changed by the Occupation. For example, flutes, which are symbols of the originality of Palestinian culture, became sticks to adorn a donkey; Shukri's oud/ lute, a musical instrument, is turned into a drum used to make

¹⁸ See: Seldern, Widdoson & Brooker 2005: 26-45; al-Ruwayli & al-Bāzi'i 2000: 16-32; 'Anāni 1996: 69-82.

¹⁹ See: Knust 1975: 218; Kernan 1974: 36-38.

²⁰ About the repopulation of Akko and other Palestinian cities by the Zionist movements and the distortion of the Palestinian institutions, see: Masalha 2012: 7; Parmenter 1994: 71-72; Khoury 2020: 11.

noise rather than express pride.²¹ The most significant scene that describes the ugliness of this distortion and the violence that it contains is one featuring Qaddoura, the owner of the Art House, when he returns to his square that the occupiers distorted. He sees there that they have disturbed everything. He tries every possible human and logical means to beg for their sympathy to obtain the antique musical instrument, qanun (zither), which is the most precious thing that he owns on an emotional and spiritual level, but they refuse. Instead, they curse him and beat him. He tries to save the qanun/ zither by force, but the following thing takes place:

The qanun was pulled from between his fingers as he was saying goodbye to it with touches of sorrow and astonishment, [...] then he saw the qanun crash to the floor, and the brass pieces and keys flew off and scattered; it fell on the floor and he felt a flock of ants crawl on his forehead and face and nose and neck [...] and some of them were still kicking him with their feet and cursing him; he crawled and walked on all fours [...] he noticed Um Kulthoum's photo, which was on the wall, with a kufiyya and iqal; the glass frame was cracked and dirty with potato skins and eggs [...] the scene of the photo was more painful than the kicks and beatings; he noticed that a sticker for a party by Farid Atrash was covered with a yellow material which was poured on Farid's face and oud/lute, and there was still a sign with the words: "No touching of the musical instruments without permission of the teacher or washing hands."²²

The last sentence stresses the deep gap between the noble Palestinian individual as a human who has a rooted moral system and the foreigner, who has not even the lowest human feeling. Additionally, it shows the gap between yesterday and today, a gap that appeared suddenly and was extreme and shocking, which neither Qaddoura nor any Palestinian can absorb.

Distortion not only covered the places and material things but also went beyond them to the spiritual and moral systems and the characters. A good example can be the transformed behavior and moral of the second generation after the Nakba (represented by Shukri and Ribhi al-Nayati), who forced to live under a foreign regime and break away from the commonly accepted norms in their societies, such as the subject of sexual relationships, and divert under the attraction of the new females arriving as part of the Jewish immigration.²³

Distortion is also stretched to overcome people's principles and their identity, where the Occupation subjugated them to a sort of a military government, controlled their economic and social conditions, and observed their movements, which sometimes enabled the Occupation to blackmail them and, consequently, make them change their temperament, their professions, and their behavior²⁴. This happens to Shukri, the able, patriotic musician, who, because of a slip he

²¹ See: Kiwan 2019: 116-177, 266.

²² Kiwan 2019: 118.

²³ Kiwan 2019: 205-208.

²⁴ These policies are noticed by all the scholars who examined the status of the Palestinian in Israel after the Nakba, see for example: Khoury 2020: 11; Nassar 2014: 90; Masalha 2012: 1-5.

made with Batsheva, is forced to leave his original profession to work as a music teacher according to a ministerial work program and then forced to play the Israeli National Anthem.²⁵

Even the public mood and temperament in Palestinian society were distorted, which affected intimate relationships between men and women. Furthermore, the relationships between people themselves were affected by doubt and foginess. No one trusted the other. They did not distinguish between the good and the bad, the patriotic and the betrayer, and lived in chaos, which the Occupation authorities intended to create in their quest for tightening their control on the Arabs by separating them.

By the term ‘artistic distortion’ I mean the distortion that the writer makes in order to create a particular indication, which primarily enters the field of symbolism and requires the reader to make a greater effort to interpret the purpose behind it. For example, I point out the design of the character and the way it is presented to the reader and the focus on some attitudes and events in their unusual form and sometimes on highlighting their sharpness and magnification. In the writer’s presentation of the Other, I hardly find even one good positive character. The writer introduces the character’s traits in a highly negative way, which makes them unbalanced creatures. For example, he makes Isaac distorted physically and **spiritually; on** the one hand, he has a problem with his eyes as well as his penis. However, on the behavioral level, the writer describes him as full of ferocity, estrangement, insensitivity, and lack of conscience. The writer makes him have a dialogue with himself in which he estimates his morals, and through which I see that this character is largely distorted on the psychological level.²⁶

A kind of falsification can sometimes accompany distortion. This character’s name is Rashinsky and not Isaac. His origins are not sufficiently clear, which raises doubts about his identity as a Jew, let alone that he takes part in torturing and captivating and murdering Jews in Europe. However, he declares he belongs to them.

When the reader notices his behavior with Palestinians, particularly his speech and language, as well as even his treatment of his close Jewish friends such as Oria and his lustful look at Oria’s **fiancée** and then having sexual intercourse with her, the reader understands the extent of deviation of this character. Its characterization in this way turns it from a realistic character into a character of a ‘mythological’ nature, a stereotypical representative character that summarizes all the powers of the Occupation and its different crimes on all levels.

This *distortion* extends to the other Jewish characters introduced in the novel. For example, the character of Yonatan, who comes to make the Arabs believe that he is the opposite of Isaac, namely, understanding and human, is a highly distorted character. The writer describes him as an attractive, athletically built man, but, on the other hand, he has a soft voice and appears like a woman in his way of walking and speech. However, his name is originally biblical, even though he is a homosexual, and while he claims to be close to the Arabs, he exploits his position to satisfy his sexual desires. Further, the writer makes a distortion in his name by writing it as D. Yonathan (which implies in Arabic that he is a “doctor”). At the same time, the (d.) letter is an

²⁵ Kiwan 2019: 298.

²⁶ See for example: Kiwan 2019: 80-84.

abbreviation of 'Dickman', his family name.²⁷ However, Batsheva and Oria are two biblical names prevalent throughout Jewish history, but the writer depicts them as people who have no moral values and are deviants and traitors. For example, Batsheva has no qualms about selling her honor for private or national purposes. Oria, too, has no scruples about raping women to satisfy his lust.

The Historical Reflection – The Present in the Mirror of the Past

The idea of the saying “history repeats itself” appears in several places in the novel. The writer stresses that the present Occupation does not differ a lot from previous Jewish occupations in the region, starting with their entrance to Canaan’s lands thousands of years ago and ending with their exit from it when they were scattered into different lands. However, the writer does not stop at this point. He reflects the idea through the characters’ designs and names and his direct reference to a pattern that parallels ancient biblical characters. For example, Oria’s story and his wife Batsheva are known in Jewish heritage, and it is considered one of the scandalous stories of the Jewish kings. This history is reflected in the characters by giving the name ‘Batsheva’ to the attractive soldier, Oria’s fiancée, and making Isaac the General Leader as an ‘objective correlative’ to King David, who established Israel’s Biblical Kingdom. This implies a severe criticism of the foundation of Zionist thought and its sources, which inspired the establishment of its modern state. The criticism implies that the early kings of Israel were originally without morals and that this also applies to the modern “kings” of Israel. So, how can a kingdom be established according to biblical principles while its kings are immoral?²⁸

Symbolism and Vision

The artistic value of the novel reaches its height in its symbolism, hides behind some of its characters and events and transforms the novel from a novel that documents the Nakba and describes its consequences into a novel of a ‘vision’ that derives from the historical event some energy to foresee the future and conclude messages for building it. I will not be exaggerating if I say that the writer, while narrating Palestinian reality after the Nakba, intends to transform some events and characters into symbols, making them general events that can be seen in the present and the future. The symbols in the novel can be classified into five types:

a- The Transparent Mask

Tynyanov asserts that in some literary contexts we see that “simple linguistic metaphors being realized and transforming into verbal masks”²⁹. This means that mask is nothing but a kind of metaphor and the artificial level of the mask is determined by the distance between the apparent

²⁷ See: Kiwan 2019: 223.

²⁸ See what happened between Izak and Batsheva, Kiwan 2019: 85-86.

²⁹ Tynyanov 2019: 33.

superficial meaning of the words and the hidden intended meaning. When the writer chooses to recall a historic character with its main distinguished features, making just minor changes to it, including changing its name, then he would be using what I call the “transparent mask”.

Employment of the “transparent mask” in Kiwan’s novel makes the “artistic” characters evoke real characters in the history of the Palestinian Nakba and the Zionist movement without directly stating the characters and their names. This ensures that the novel stays in artistic garments and keeps away as much as possible from being a historical novel and pure political narration.

For example, Isaac is nothing but an ‘objective correlative’³⁰ to the military character that stays in Palestinian memory as a human “beast” who contributed to slaughtering many Palestinians during the Nakba, Moshe Dayan (1915-1981). To hint at Dayan, the writer cleverly left a link, an index, saying that it is the defect that exists in one of Isaac’s eyes because of an old event, which compelled him to put on black glasses all the time,³¹ which reminds the reader of the one-eyed commander Moshe Dayan, who used to hide his eye with a black patch.

Batsheva is also an ‘objective correlative’ to the biblical Batsheva, like Oria, as previously mentioned. Sometimes, the writer leaves a more explicit clue about the artistic authenticity of the characters in reality by mentioning part of the name of these characters, such as mentioning Emile and Samuel as two friends in one political party. The reader who studies the text carefully will feel sure that the writer is referring to the socialist Palestinian writer, Emile Habibi, the founder of the National Liberation League, and his communist comrade, Shmuel Mikonis. Kiwan wrote an article about both and their role in the local political arena, especially regarding the division of Palestine, and published it before publishing the novel.³²

b- The Single Symbol

This is represented in the employment of a *single word or name or place* to symbolize a particular thing. Still, it differs from the transparent mask in its being more general and farther than the symbolized object of a place or a person. Therefore, the reader **must** follow it throughout the novel to be sure about its indication.

The characters in the Nakba novel often represent a certain section rather than a specific individual. For example, Isaac’s character can be overgeneralized to include all the Zionist leaders who participated in the occupation of Palestine and evacuation and driving away its people in 1948. Amin al-Zidani, too, was chosen by the writer deliberately because his name represents his character. The name “Amin” in Arabic means “loyal,” “honest,” and “faithful” to his homeland, heritage, and neighborhood. Furthermore, he is a noble resister who cannot be bought. He is the model Palestinian who chose to remain on his land and resists with no flattery. Nijmeh is also a symbol and a model for every noble Palestinian woman and struggler. She

³⁰ See what T.S. Eliot says about the “objective correlative”: Eliot 1965: 102; cf.: Lu’lu’a 1980: 27-29; Fathi 2000: 221.

³¹ See: Kiwan 2019: 86.

³² See: Kiwan 2018; about the resemblance of the names as an act of highlighting the literariness of the text, see: Tynyanov 2019: 36.

knows how to resist by protecting her heritage, educating her sons, and supporting her husband (as we have seen before). This can be overgeneralized to all the other characters, including Makhlouf Effendi (the disloyal agent) and Jamalata (the naïve and simple person who cares for appearances and does not care for the national issues).

c- The Symbolic Image

The Symbolic Image is closer to the Metaphor because it conveys one real image, which appears to be ordinary at first glance but, in reality, carries a further indication and connotation. An illustration of this is the transfer of the advertisements related to Farid al-Atrash's party, Umm Kalthoum's photo, and what happened to all of that during the period of Occupation.³³ It is a rigid image of the compulsory unjust change caused by the Occupation, which forced the Palestinian time to stop and forced the Palestinian heritage to boycott the Arab heritage and, consequently, stagnate.

Shukri's cousin, the symbol of the new generation, who tries to coexist with the new situation, swims while wearing her clothes. She appears as if she were swimming and not swimming, wearing clothes and not wearing them. The details of her body are revealed though she did not take off her clothes like the others. This image is symbolic of the Palestinian who tries to live in the country according to the new system, but he appears discordant and unable to live naturally.

d- The Symbolic Scene

There are some samples of this type in which the writer conveys a whole scene and an image from the characters' reality. The image contains some surrealist events or vocabulary and unique expressions that make reality closer to a myth or fantasy, attracting the reader to a more profound indication. In this way the author immortalizes some of the Palestinian's Nakba events, generalizes them and makes them more universal; since "whatever our ignorance of the language and culture of the people, where it originated, the myth still felt as a myth by any reader of anywhere in the world".³⁴

For example, the scene of destruction of the previously mentioned qanun/ zither musical instrument, the freezing of the moment at that event, the indication of the extent of its effect, the injustice that it contains, the breakup of all its links and strings in a detailed and accurate way, is a symbol and a clear expression of the loss of the qanun, and disrespect of the Other to any international decision or human law.

Another exciting scene in the novel is the "purgation" of Isaac by the agents, when Fadda, Rasmi's wife, tries to circumcise Isaac, hurts his penis, and makes it bleed. This scene shows the extent of the agent's contribution to the falsification of the enemy's identity and nature. It conveys a false image to the world about the justice and purity that the enemy enjoys. In that action, Fadda and Rasmi were trying to "clear" Isaac's "page," and contribute to the crime of

³³ See: Kiwan 2019: 118-119.

³⁴ Levi-Strauss 1963: 210.

falsifying the facts, and this includes a kind of severe criticism by the writer of the Arabs who collaborated with the Other and helped him to improve his image in the world.

e- Allegory and the Integrated Symbol

The term “Integrated Symbol” **that** I use here refers to a symbol that the writer preplanned from the beginning. He built his whole story upon it and expanded it over that symbol from its beginning to its end, making the symbol the backbone of the whole novel. This type of symbol is represented **here** in music, whose central presence is noticed in the text in several different forms, including its positive and negative indications, its presence at the level of musical education, and its presence at the level of the dramatic expression.

No doubt, the writer proved his deep knowledge in music in general and oriental Arab music in particular. He successfully recruited this cultural aspect and employed it in his text as a mirror that moves in a straight line that parallels the events. Thus, the events are reflected through music, and music is reflected through the events. The music turns into a device that measures tension and emotion and detects changes in the psyches and events throughout the novel.

What characterizes music is that it is a legacy connected to the soul of its owners, temperament, mentality, the nature of their country, and their classical heritage, which makes it a significant symbol of culture, life, identity, and presence. This explains the Occupation’s destruction of the Art House and selling of the musical instruments on cheap markets, destruction of different instruments, and tying of the flutes on donkeys, which also explains Amin al-Zidani’s insistence on teaching his son Shukri music.³⁵ It also explains the cause of the pursuit of Um Shukri, Nijmeh, to buy her son’s Lute from a merchant on the market and pay a lot of money to get it. In a chapter **that the writer cleverly calls “Awdat Oud/ Return of a Lute,”**³⁶ connecting the two words **through a paronomasia (jinas)**, but also in a remote symbolical way, conveys the idea that “return to the homeland,” self-regaining, and emphasis on identity and continuity are connected to the Oud/Lute, music, and original culture.

On the other hand, music has a negative presence in the novel in several places. The common thing among all the places is that the participating side in it is the Other’s side, or the violent brute whose lousy mood cannot harmonize with music and the soft human feelings required.

Among the violent scenes in which music takes part is the scene of murdering (the real) Isaac in Warsaw, where the murderers use the guitar strings to kill him by tying them around his balls and tightening them strongly.³⁷ Other repeated scenes include the scene of the drums, which were constantly drummed in a noisy way to force the Palestinians who remained in their homes to leave and go away.³⁸ Disturbance and harassment eliminate harmony between the Palestinian

³⁵ Kiwan 2019: 29-30.

³⁶ See: Kiwan 2019: 144.

³⁷ See: Kiwan 2019: 100.

³⁸ See: Kiwan 2019: 145-147.

and nature around him, injure his feelings, and cancel his self-confidence and trust in his heritage, which guarantees he is weak and makes him leave his homeland quickly.

Irony

Shlegil defines the technical device Irony as follows: “Irony is a kind of paradox... and in every paradox there are two contradictory facts, which creates a sort of sweet ambiguity”. Therlowal adds: “It includes a revelation and opening of closed places that were dark, which is accompanied by a surprise, wonder and openness, and new knowledge...”³⁹. On the artistic level, irony is considered a top-level aspect of creativity because it is not just a different look at things, but a different look at the familiar in which the roles are turned upside down and the attitudes are reversed, which creates a kind of a surprise and a shock to the reader, puts him in a kind of confusion and challenges his concepts and knowledge. According to the formalists, the structuralists, and the adherents of new criticism and post-structuralism, irony is considered a sophisticated art that reflects creativity in its utmost revelations.⁴⁰

In a novel in which things are divided into a highly binary form, as we have seen, and the conflict in it reaches its climax between two entirely different sides, irony is the most crucial technique. I find the ironic paradox in the novel in different forms, such as *irony of situation* and *irony of character*. The first is represented in Qaddoura, who is considered a symbol of manliness, Arabism, and nationalism, when exposed to sexual harassment by a Jew. This irony leads the reader to a kind of aversion and a kind of surrealistic scenery with a profound symbolic indication. The second kind of irony is represented in characters with contradictions, such as Isaac, who defends the Zionist movement and claims to be patriotic. Isaac occupies a crucial position in the ruling authority. Yet, he is the one who handed over many Jews to the Inquisition. He was also a cause of the unhappiness of many Jews.

Probably, one of the most exciting ironies of the situation is the irony revealed at the end, which makes it more violent in its shock to the reader. This kind of irony is represented in the transformation of the character of Rasmi, the agent, into a patriotic character in the eyes of the people, and the transformation of Shukri’s character into an outcast, even though he was the real patriotic personality.⁴¹ This reverse indicates the people’s narrow horizon, and their rush to judge and lack of self-confidence and intuition. On the other hand, it indicates the amount of confusion and distortion created by the Occupation in their souls, opinions, and thoughts, which enables the authorities to control them and subjugate them to the Occupation dictations.

As the novel reaches this point, the crisis has become more complicated, and its solution has become very difficult. It seems that the writer wants to show through this end the actual condition of the Palestinians in their country today – their confusion, blurred vision, lack of

³⁹ See: John De Gimp 1993, vol. 4: 35-37.

⁴⁰ On the importance of irony in modern literary theories, see: Selden, Widdowson & Brooker 2005: 15-29, 62-81; Tynyanov 2019: 31.

⁴¹ See: Kiwan 2019: 318-319.

clarity, fragmentation, lack of constants and their uncertainty about their identity and the nature of their treatment and co-existence with the Other.

Summary and Conclusion

The shock of the Nakba on Palestinians led to the diversion of the whole course of Palestinian literature. It imprinted it with some features and styles that expressed this “distortion” that occurred to Palestinian existence and the disruption of its history.

Irony, distortion, and symbolism have become among the most important components of the Palestinian literature that express the repression that was exerted on the Palestinians, on the one hand. On the other hand, their critical psychological condition started to see that the landmarks of the Place had been distorted. Moreover, the temperaments, traditions, and nature of the people who continued to live in their homeland have been distorted and emotionally changed.

Therefore, the post-Nakba researcher will find a fertile material for his research by the employment of the critical tools of the schools of formalism, and in accordance with the formalists’ focus on the techniques of defamiliarization, alienation, variation, and abnormal depiction in their search for the “Pure Literature.”

Sohail Kiwan’s novel *Balad al-Manhus/ Country of the Unfortunate* is an excellent example of this theory. It emphasizes this relationship as it is a novel that adopts the techniques of distortion, irony, symbolism, and elaboration in conveying the event of the Palestinian Nakba in a unique way that integrates between the general culture and the real history on the one hand, and the subjective personal emotion of the writer, on the other, through which he confirms the literary nature of his novel on the one hand, and the liveliness of the historical events and their living pulse even in the present, on the other.

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