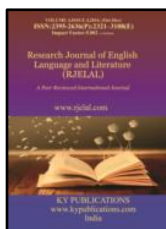**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

DISSEMINATING THE TRAGEDY OF THE PALESTINIAN REFUGEES IN ARABIC WAR LITERATURE

SADDIK GOHAR
Professor of English Literature and Criticism
UAE University

ABSTRACT

This paper briefly traces the representation of the Palestinian refugee tragedy in the literary works of the Palestinian poet, Mahmoud Darwish, and the Lebanese novelist, Elias Khouri with focus on the plight of the Palestinian refugees during the Lebanese Civil War (1985-1990). The literary works, analyzed in this paper signify that the Lebanese civil war originates in an atmosphere of absurdity prevailing in a country torn apart by a monstrous armed conflict lasted for fifteen years and achieved no concrete strategic objectives. Delineating an irrational war which traumatized the Palestinian refugees and uprooted a beautiful Mediterranean country, Darwish and Khouryviewed absurdityas an ontological, inescapable fact of human existence, giving the Lebanese war and the painful experience of the Palestinian refugees universal proportions.

In 1948 more than 750.000 Palestinians were forced to leave their villages in Northern Palestine before and during the war between the evolving Israeli state and the Arab armies which ended with a shameful Arab defeat. The period following the 1967 war also witnessed a second displacement of substantial numbers of Palestinians from their residential areas in East Jerusalem and the West Bank after the second defeat of the Arab armies in the six-day war of 1967. Many of the refugees also escaped by ships carrying them through the Mediterranean to other countries. In the aftermath of the 1967 war, the Palestinian leadership settled in Jordan. After violent confrontation between the Palestinians and the Jordanian forces – Black September (September 1970- July 1971)[1] – the Palestinian leadership moved to Lebanon, where thousands of Palestinians lived in refugee camps. During the Lebanese civil war, Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982, ostensibly to destroy the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organization), which had been formed in 1964 to liberate occupied Palestine, from the Israeli occupation. During the summer of 1982, Israel bombed and besieged Beirut, finally occupying it in early September. Israel did not stop its allied Lebanese militias from massacring thousands of Palestinians in Beirut's refugee camps. Later, the Israel army swept the city, forcing most Palestinian political leaders and paramilitary fighters to leave Lebanon, effectively moving from one place of exile to another exile.

Karl von Clausewitz defined war as "an act of violence pushed to its utmost bounds."[2] Michael Walzerechoed this perspective, whenhe wrote: "war

---

[1] The month of September 1971 witnessed bloody confrontations between the Jordanian army and the Palestinian militias located in Amman particularly the PLO. There were political differences between the Jordanian King and the Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat which were transformed into military conflict. The clashes led to the exodus of the Palestinian troops and their families from Jordan and they were settled in Lebanon.

[2] Karl von Clausewitz (1989) …………, p. 103

SADDIK GOHAR

KY Publications
www.kypublications.com

kills, that is all it does."[3] This view of war is substantiated by the violence and havoc during the Lebanese civil war, which ruined much of the country. The civil conflict brought about an enormous change in the Lebanese sensibility toward war and divided the society on clear ideological and religious issues. In order to fathom the depth of the Lebanese calamity, the Palestinian poet, Mahmoud Darwish and the Lebanese novelist Elias Khoury articulated the civil war experience in a way that affirms the degeneration of morality and the dissolution of traditional literary forms. The Lebanese civil war, worsened by the Israeli occupation of Beirut, intensified the Palestinian tragedy and resulted in the inevitable exodus of thousands of Palestinian refugees from their refugee camps.

They went to other exiles in Yemen, Tunisia, Cyprus and Greece. Speculating on the siege and slaughter of the Palestinians in Beirut during the war, Darwish's persona, in most of the poetry of the period, pointedly refers to the odor of death overwhelming the city. When the refugees tried to escape from the burning city toward the sea, death comes from the sea simply because the fleeing Palestinians were chased by Israeli navy ships. Noticeably, the city became a graveyard for the Palestinian refugees surrounded by antagonistic troops in all directions. The city never knows anything like this throughout history. In his novel *Gates of the City*, the Lebanese writer, Elias Khoury, echoes the poetry of Darwish: "Babies died when they smelled the odor of the sea, and the people were perplexed, how do we keep back the sea, can the odor be stopped. They were burying their children in little graves."[4]

Apparently, the central persona in*Gates of the City* seems to be a Palestinian refugee, because he is called "the stranger" the common term used for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and in other Arab countries. The statement "he was a man and he was a stranger," conflated with the protagonist, is repeated numerous times throughout the text. The repetition technique undeniably is adapted from Western literature to emphasize the motif of an alienated and exiled humanity. The first person narrator in the novel refers to "the stranger" early in the text affirming : "I have spotted him and I approached him, he was walking and walking, the roads were an extension of his emaciated, collapsing body, but he went further away."[5] Moreover, the stranger, the speaking voice of the Palestinian refugees in the novel, was forced to stay in the ravaged city (Beirut) because he has no other place or refuge. If he leaves the refugee camp in Beirut, he will not " find another city" and he will not find "another place" where he is able to "cry over a grave."[6]

The narrator distinctly refers to several desolate spectacles of death in the refugee camps during the war. When the stranger and one of the seven women "went to the suburbs of the city," where the refugee camps are located, they were outraged by the heinous scenes of the massacre: "When they reached the clay houses, the odor of the city emerged as it filled up with the corpses the people were burying, and they heard the sound of the sea as it crashed against the thorns."[7] In a connected scenario, the sea imagery unmistakablyand extensively is proliferated in the text of *Gates of the City* as an inter-text evoking the Palestinian ordeal during the war. Historically, the Palestinians have miserable memories of the sea, particularly the Mediterranean.During the Palestinian *nakba*[catastrophe] in 1948, even before the Arab war with Israel, the great majority of the Palestinians in the villages and towns in the Galilee area and northern Palestine, such as Haifa, Jaffa and Acre were expelled from their homes via the Mediterranean. They were dispersed in refugee camps in neighboring countries such as Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. Such events aesthetically were articulated in prominent memoirs and literary works, such as GhassanKanafani's novel,*Returning to Haifa*,depicting the first expulsion of Palestinians from their land.[8]

---

[3] Michael Walzer (1977) …………, p. 109.
[4]Khoury, *Gates of the City*, p. 85.

[5] Ibid, p. 3.
[6] Ibid, p. 91.
[7] Ibid, p. 93.
[8]See GhassanKanafani (2000) *Palestine's Children: Returning to Haifa and Other Stories*, trans. Barbara

SADDIK GOHAR

Since any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations, which means that any text is the absorption and transformation of other texts,[9]*Gates of the City* reveals frequent references to Beirut and the Mediterranean Sea that evoke the poetry of the pioneering Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish (1941-2008), who wrote widely about the Palestinian experience in Lebanon during and after the war.Darwish's Beirut poems are war poems, written under the shadow of a wasteful war. These poems take the readers around the city that harbors the beasts of war, the phantasmal figures that shuttle between different Arab cities trading death. In his poetry of the Beirut civil war, Darwish uses the sea imagery to signify the temporary home of Palestinians living in the Diaspora. In "Beirut," he depicts the city as an exile for Palestinians isolated in refugee camps: "Beirut our tent / Beirut our star, Beirut shape of shade."[10]

Furthermore, in his historical poem, "Brief Reflections on an Ancient and Beautiful City on the

Coast of the Mediterranean Sea," written during the Lebanese civil war and in the aftermath of the exodus of the Palestinian refugees from Beirut following the Israeli invasion of the city, Darwish laments the fate of the Palestinian refugees. The poem is pervaded by a sense of wretchedness reflective of the Palestinian condition in the city.Darwish utilizes both the city and the sea as symbols of the Palestinian experience in Diaspora: "Let this city be / The mother of this sea or the sea's first cry / Let this city be / The grandmother of the world or whatever she likes/ Let the one who named this city be / A knight, a lover or no one." Displaced from their homeland, the Palestinian refugees have lived in exile in Lebanon since 1948. During the civil war in Lebanon, they were forced to leave their camps in the country and move to a new place of exile: "We have to sing for the sea's defeat within us / or for our dead lying by the sea / and wear salt and revolt to every port / before oblivion sucks us dry", writes Darwish.[11]

Darwish highlights the continuation of Palestinian suffering, clarifying that the Palestinian people were compelled to leave their country twice, in 1948 and in 1967, after the occupation of all the Palestinian territories. The Palestinian refugees were also kicked out of their refugee camps in Jordan in 1971 due to political conflicts out of their reach. After their fourth displacement, from Lebanon in 1982 during the civil war, the Palestinian refugees were subjected to more suffering and endless pain: "The sea cannot take another immigration / oh, the sea has no room for us." The remaining Palestinian refugees who survived the genocide of the camps and whom Darwish calls "the generation of the massacre" are doomed to move from one exile to another just to be killed: "Every land I long for as a bed / dangles as a gallows."[12]

Like the poetry of Darwish, *Gates of the City* dramatizes the consequences of the Lebanese civil war and its crippling impact upon the Palestinians

---

Harlow and Karen E . Riley (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers Inc.), pp. 149-196.

[9]For further details on the theory of intertextuality, see the following books and studies: Michael Bakhtin (1981) *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, tr. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press); Roland Barthes (1977) *Image, Music, Text,* tr. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana); Jay Clayton& Eric Rothstein, eds*.* (1991) *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press); Jonathan Culler (1981) *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press);Paul Ricour (1981) *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action andInterpretation*, ed. J.B. Thomson (London: Cambridge University Press); Claudio Guillen (1993) *The Challenge of Comparative Literature*, tr. Cola Franzen (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press); Julia Krestiva (1984) *Revolution in Poetic Language* (New York: Columbia University Press); and TorilMoi, ed. (1986) *The Kristeva Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell).

[10]See Mahmud Darwish (1992) "Beirut", in *An Anthology of Modern Palestinian Poetry*. ed./trans. Salma Jayyusi(New York: Columbia University Press), P.205.

[11]See Mahmud Darwish (1986) 'Brief Reflections on an Ancient and Beautiful City on the Coast of the Mediterranean Sea'*,* in *Modern Poetry of the Arab World,* ed./trans. Abdullah Al-Udhari (New york: Penguin Books), p. 130.

[12] Ibid, p. 136.

and their cause. Utilizing sea imagery and other complicated symbolic mechanisms, the author, through the voice of his narrator, draws a picture of the Palestinian tragedy in Beirut: "Then the sea came. The sea ate up the fire and spread over the city. Everything was floating, and nothing remained of the city except weeping voices coming from the entrails of the fish and rising to where no one can listen to them."[13] Portraying the ghastly spectacle of a damaging debacle obliterating the entire city, the stranger describes the crowds fleeing from the war :"And the crowds of people became more numerous. Some go to the sea and don't come back, and some go to a faraway place and walk along barren soil filled with brackish waters."[14] The stranger also points out that the Palestinian refugees, including women and children, were forced out of their cottages in the refugee camps in Lebanon during the war. He describes a scene of a refugee woman forcibly being pushed "into the sea" while other female refugees were thunderstruck with fear: "The ululations of the women increased. I heard the ululations and felt like crying."[15]

In a similar vein,Darwish poetically depicts the Palestinian refugees, who were evacuated by sea: "We are the leaves of tree / the words of a shattered time we are the moon light sonata / we are the other river bank that lies / between the voice and the stone / we are what we produced / in the land that was ours / we are what's left of us in exile/ we are what's left of us in exile / we are the plants of broken vase / we are what we are but who are we?[16]Using the sea as an image of Palestinian exile, Darwish continues: " Greetings oh ancient sea / You, sea that have saved us from the loneliness of the forests / you, sea of all beginnings (the sea disappears) our blue body, our happiness,/ our soul tired of stretching from Jaffa to Carthage / our broken pitcher, tablets of lost stories, we looked for the legends of / civilizations but only could find the skull of man by the sea."[17] Like Darwish, Khoury takes pains in his attempt to grab the complex

realities of war. The author abandoned chronological narration in favor of a paradigmatic mode of narration that can be considered as a move away from realism toward greater fictiveness and allegory.

The utter helplessness of the author to cohere the chaotic reality of war pushed him to abandon traditional novel conventions and to adopt experimental modes of representation as an appropriate mode for reflecting the horrendous reality of the war. Khoury was aware of the hazards of writing an old-fashioned war narrative out of a terrifying experience like that of the civil war. He deliberately rejected the traditional war novel conventions that are not sufficient to convey the horrors of war. The text of Khoury's novel signified that in the light of the aggressive assaults on people and cities, ordinary modes of communications degenerated into banality and deception because language itself became one of the causalities of war. With the deterioration of language, human beings have lost faith in the power of narrative to give purpose and direction to life.

Personifying the suffering of the Palestinian refugees in Beirut, Khoury's novel emphasizes that the city was devastated twice by fire and by a deadly sea tsunami. Many city dwellers were burned in fire while many of the survivors were drowned by the sea and became banquets for the fish and sea weeds. Searching for answers as to what triggered the war, the protagonist / stranger came from remote destinations to explore the situation in his city but he was told that the city had vanished: " It was said that it had sunk in the eyes, and it was said it had gone to the sea and it was said that it had caught fire."[18] Afterward, the stranger met the old man who looks like the forefathers and asked him about the women. The old man "pointed to the distance " and said that everyone went to the sea, "everyone is there, don't you see the smoke, it's the fire, everything is burning."[19] In his journey through the city, the stranger met a woman who told him "unbelievable things." She said: "the dead were everywhere" and she refers to an unknown thing that kills children: "This thing killing the children we

---

[13]Khoury, *Gates of the City*, p. 97.
[14] Ibid, p. 91.
[15] Ibid, p. 66.
[16]Darwish (1986) "Brief Reflections", p.130.
[17] Ibid, p. 134.

[18]Khoury, *Gates of the City*, p. 64.
[19] Ibid, p. 96.

SADDIK GOHAR

know no reason for, this thing that kills will kill everyone."[20]

In a similarly transparent tone, Darwish castigates the Arab rulers and the PLO leaders for their failure to stop the destruction of Beirut and the subsequent genocide of the Palestinian refugees. He regretfully points out that even in the Arab countries where Palestinians live in exile "a knight stabs his brother in the chest" and there "my dream leaves me only to make me laugh / or make people laugh at someone leading a dream like a camel in a market of whores."[21]Overtly, Darwishdemonstrates that the Arab and Palestinian leaderships react to the Beirut tragedy not with action but with empty rhetoric and lamentable statements: "We have a country of words. Speak, speak so we may know the end of this travel."[22] The end of the Palestinian journey of suffering and pain cannot be predicted particularly after the destruction of Beirut, an emblem of Arab cultural unity.

According to Darwish, Beirut was not only the home of the Palestinian refugees (kicked out of their land after the occupation of most of eastern Palestine in 1948 and after the Israeli occupation of the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and East Jerusalem in 1967) but also it provided a sanctuary for Arab political refugees, particularly poets and writers. Therefore, Darwish sharply criticizes oppressive Arab governments that remained silent during the rape and obliteration of Beirut. He refers to the hostile attitude of oppressive Arab regimes toward all the poets and artists exiled in Beirut, because they had revealed the political corruption and impotence of the defeated Arab regimes. Like Darwish,Khoury ridicules the indifferent attitude of the Arab rulers toward the war in Lebanon, expecting no positive change in the future: "The storyteller said that things which kill people are what they are, things, and this happened a thousand years ago and will happen again in a thousand years. And the storyteller was laughing, laughing in loud voice so that hisface was engraved like fallen branches, but he was laughing."[23]

The final scene of the novel portrays in a strikingly repugnant manner the nullification of the entire city for the second time by drowning after it was razed by fire: "The stranger moved forward, and the peoplewere forests on fire, approaching one another and collapsing."[24] In his paranoid hallucinations, the stranger envisions a suicidal scene as he "looked and saw his clothes burning. He saw, he was in the square and the square was in fire, and he saw, he was in the alleys, and the alleys were on fire and he saw, he was in front of the walls and the walls were on fire. Everything, the women and the coffin and the grave and the houses, everything, even the sea, the sea was coloured with blue. This is the colour of fire, this is fire."[25]Clearly the preceding citations allegorically evoke the final moments of a war that destroyed Lebanon and expelled most Palestinian refugees out of the country to wandering the deserts of exile.

References

Allen, Roger. (1995) The Arabic Novel: An Historical and Critical Introduction. New York : Syracuse University Press.

Al-Udhari, Abdullah, ed.(1986) And trans. *Modern Poetry of the Arab World*. London: Penguin Books. P.119.

Clausewitz, Carl Von. (1989) *On War*, Trans. Michael Eliot Howard and Peter Paret . Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Ghandour, Sabah, ed. (1993) *Gates of the City.* Trans. Paula Haydar, Forward by Sabah Ghandour.   Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. pp.vii-xxv.

Gana, Nouri. (2010) "Formless Form : Elias Khoury's*City Gates* and the Poetics of Trauma". *Comparative Literature Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 4: 504-532.

Harlow, Barbara.(1990) "We Discovered Our Nation When It Nearly Was No More: Interview with Elias Khoury ". *Middle East Report*, No. 162, Jan-Feb: 37-38.

Jayyusi, Salma, ed.(1992)*An Anthology of Modern Palestinian Poetry*. New York: Columbia University Press.

---

[20] Ibid, p. 90.
[21]Darwish (1986) 'Brief Reflections', in Ibid, p.136.
[22] Ibid.
[23]Khoury, *Gates of the City*, p. 90.

[24] Ibid, p. 97.
[25] Ibid.

SADDIK GOHAR

Khoury, Elias .(1993) *Gates of the City*. Trans. PaulaHaydar, Forward by Sabah Ghandour. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Olderman, Raymond M. (1972)*Beyond the Waste Land: Study of the American Novel in the Nineteen-Sixties*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Said, Edward, ed.(1998) Halim Barakat, *Days of Dust*. Boulder and London : Three Continents Books.

-------------"(1971) Molestation and Authority in Narrative Fiction" in *Aspects of Narrative*, ed. J. Hillis Miller. New York, cited in Edward Said , Introduction : Halim Barakat , *Days of Dust*. Boulder and London : Three Continents Books, 1998. pp. 9-34.

Walzer, Michael. (1977)*Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument With Historical Illustrations*. New York: Basic Books.