

Aesthetics of Place in the Palestinian Diaspora Novel “Qabl an Tanam al-Malika” as a Model

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Abstract

We aim to shed light on the aesthetics of place in “Qabl an Tanam al-Malika”, a novel about the Palestinian diaspora by Palestinian author Hizama Habayyib. Through interpreting the places in the diaspora in the novel, we will attempt to discuss the rhetoric used and its psychological and social projections (and the relationships between them) on the heroine. We should note here that we have drawn upon a framework that views places as an effective component of a narrative, a component that influences and is influenced by other components.ⁱ

Keywords: diaspora, asylum and exile, homeland, narrative perspective, the principle of polarity

Introduction

Place comprises one of the fundamental axes around which literary theory revolves, in that it is an active artistic element, as opposed to a mere background against which dramatic events occur. Many modern studies confirm that the concept of place lacks symbolic significance unless it can be linked to the individual inhabiting said place. This is because the projection of the characters’ mental or cognitive state on their environment grants “place” a significance that transcends its traditional function as a decorative detail, transforming it into a fundamental axis of importance in critical interpretive reading.

Yusif Hatini treats the topic of place in Palestinian literature specifically, pointing out that the relationship between man and place brings about a controversial relationship between place and freedom. There are places in which people have complete freedom and there are other places in which freedom is limited, and a place faces humanitarian problems if it is invaded.ⁱⁱ Therefore, the depiction of place has acquired a special importance in the Palestinian novel which talks about an invaded place and the struggle to reclaim it. It also discusses the problems associated with this struggle in places in the diaspora. In line with the uniqueness of the Palestinian situation, the Palestinian narrative was based entirely on the painful feelings associated with places, and the concept of place was founded on the contradiction between past and present, between dreaming for a homeland and the reality of exile.ⁱⁱⁱ

We deliberately decided to research the aesthetics of “place” exclusively (without exploring other elements arising in novels about the Palestinian diaspora). Continuing from what was mentioned above, the concept of diaspora literature, as we will elucidate below, is fundamentally bound by place. It is a literary genre about a specific group living outside their homeland, a genre containing a deep awareness of the diaspora and its emerging problems resulting from the situation. Therefore, diaspora literature deserves to be analyzed according to the deep problems of exile, its repercussions that arise as a result of displacement and forced exile, the problems of identity, and the emergence of feelings of nostalgia and remembrance (not to mention the attempt to build a utopic Palestine).

It should be noted here that we will not set forth theoretical material about the concept of place (nor its importance or varieties in the literary work), as this topic is mentioned in many critical Western and Arabic studies. That said, we will, of course, draw upon these studies for our analyses of the aesthetics of place in the novel as necessary.

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The importance of this research is threefold. Firstly, it is the first study to shed light on the aesthetics of place in novels about the Palestinian diaspora generally and about the female Palestinian diaspora specifically. Secondly, this study explores a novel by a female Palestinian author who has experienced life in the diaspora firsthand, transforming the sense of “place” from literary fiction to fact, based on historical facts, on the one hand, and personal experiences, on the other. Thirdly, the novel is worthy of academic critique, due to the scarcity of studies on the topic.^{iv} The critic Sabri Hafiz considered it the most important Palestinian novel that has been published by the second generation of Palestinian authors, after the famous Palestinian novels by Ghassan Kanafani and Jibran Ibrahim Jibran.^v

Palestinian Diaspora Literature: The Concept and Situation

“The greatest tragedy a person can live through is the tragedy of the diaspora, of alienation, of expulsion from dignity, safety, and country. Of course, when one experiences tragedy himself, he is better able to sense its pain, and therefore, when he is creative in confronting it, his creativity is as great as his pain”.^{vi}

Before we can analyze diaspora literature, we must first define the concept of “the diaspora” epistemologically. Many sources define the term in question as “a large group of people living outside of their homeland,”^{vii} or “the expatriation of a people expelled from their homeland living in places scattered around the world”^{viii} as a result of factors such as slavery, colonialism, and forced migration.^{ix} The principle concept of “the diaspora” as it pertains to the Palestinian situation is founded on the suffering of a large group of Palestinians who found themselves in places of emergency, bringing about a shift in the expression of this experience, especially in the aftermath of mass migration and displacement.^x

The formation of a Palestinian community witnessed many transformations resulting from the forced migration imposed on the Palestinian people by the Zionists after 1948.^{xi} This resulted in waves of Palestinian social migration that shaped the largest concentration of Palestinians outside of their historical land, especially in the Arab Gulf and other Arab nations (in addition to the groups that migrated to Europe, America, Canada, and Australia). This migration has triggered legal, political, cultural, and intellectual problems, all stemming from the Palestinian presence. Overnight, Palestinians found themselves displaced, living as strangers in a host country, or in temporary places, threatened literally and figuratively by the fear of never belonging anywhere. They consequently began searching for ways to maintain their physical and cultural existence while in exile.^{xii}

It is no surprise that the daily struggles Palestinians experience in the diaspora are represented in an array of literary forms including novels. The Palestinian novel has played a prominent role in expressing the depth of the tragedy, being the literary genre most capable of representing the problems of exile (due to its ability to narrate details and to depict the cultural, social, and psychological dimensions of the diaspora in depth). Many new names emerged in this field, amongst them Ghassan Kanafani, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, Yahya Ikhlef, Hizama Habayyib, Suzan Abu al-Hawa.

In one of his studies on diaspora narratives, the critic Abu Shihab distinguishes between exile and asylum. The former is considered to affect one on an individual (rather than a group) level, while the latter is a forced imposition targeting large groups, driving them to a series of camps and pushing them through an endless diaspora.^{xiii} In that study, Abu Shihab drew upon a number of Palestinian narratives across the generations to confirm the role the novel plays in the formation of awareness in the diaspora (as each generation examines the experience of distancing itself from the homeland from a different perspective). The experience of those who went through the Nakba, for example, differs from the experience of those who have only read or heard about it.

The critic Feysal-Daraj believes that, no matter how many dimensions a novel contains, it is not able to accommodate the diaspora. He writes: “Perhaps the dimming of the Palestinian horizon that stormed the diaspora so mercilessly, and which made it impossible to tame and control refuge, is what made the Palestinian diaspora violent and difficult, with no room for nationalistic desire no matter how pure. Palestinian novels do not capture such details, no matter how hard they try.”^{xiv} Daraj adds that he is skeptical of diaspora novels’ ability to protect Palestinian identity, emphasizing that there is no future for Palestinians unless they form a united identity. Just as the first Nakba brought about a series of other catastrophes, the first wave of refugees brought about a second, third, and fourth wave, leading to divergence from the original Palestinian identity: “As novels, just like dreams, need a stable foundation, the Palestinian novel had to translate the experiences of the Palestinian people in various ways. Rabi’ al-Madhun wrote about the Palestinian diaspora communities he lived in in London and Jordan. Samiya’ Isa recorded her experiences in Beirut and the Gulf, and Suzan Abu al-Hawa portrayed how much she missed her grandparents while residing in the United States.”^{xv}

In al-Daraj's view, the diversity of experiences within the diaspora has led to diversity in types of novels on the topic in question. Thus we, as critics, should approach every novel about the diaspora as a unique conveyance of the diaspora (according to the circumstances shaping them and the era in which they were written). Furthermore, novels bear numerous interpretations, perhaps the most important of which is the artistic aesthetic interpretation—Novels are not historical documents. They are artistic molds of fact and fiction, drawing upon the full range of aesthetic linguistic elements.

Based on the above, we assume that the study of "place" in novels about the Palestinian diaspora have their own unique characteristics resulting from the uniqueness of the experience itself (which vary from one novel to another and from one writer to the next). Furthermore, in our exploration of the aesthetics of place in such novels, drawing upon "Qabl an Tanam al-Malika" as a framework, we took into consideration that this experience represents a part of a whole which can be generalized at times but at others preserves its uniqueness and peculiarity.

The Aesthetics of Place in the Novel

In our analyses of places in the novel "Qabl an Tanam al-Malika", we will adopt a structural approach to explore the integration of the three main axes. The first axis (i.e., the narrative perspective) is the point of view the narrator or characters adopts towards place. The second axis is our understanding of the language used to describe places; each language has its own unique way to describe a place, and, through this uniqueness, place achieves its own significance. The third axis represents our role as recipients in interpreting place according to our own cultural references.^{xvi} Furthermore, for our analysis, we will draw upon various Arab and Western criticisms of the concept of the aesthetics of place in literary works.

The novel we are analyzing for the present work reflects the Palestinian woman in exile, describing her movement between Arab countries far from her country which has been stolen from her, the tumultuous journey, and the horrible feeling of homesickness. Sabri Hafiz commented on the novel that "despite being a Palestinian novel to the core, not a single word is written about Palestine. As it is a novel about the generation born in the diaspora, its writing about Palestine acquires double meanings confirming Palestinian rights and rooting them in consciousness and conscience".^{xvii}

An interesting aspect of this novel is that the author is a woman and the story revolves around a heroine whose dialogue is shaped by the experience of living in the diaspora; the author's voice and the heroine's merge into one, uniting in disclosure and perspective.^{xviii} It is worth mentioning that the first person to methodically analyze the notion of "perspective" in the novel was Piercy Lubock (1954) in his book "The Making of the Novel". The term was derived from the formative arts and means that the shape of any object on which the eye rests depends on the position from which the viewer is looking. He later transferred the term to literature, referring to the perceptual vision of the fictional material that is presented through a character who sees things in a subjective manner that is shaped by their own vision, be it ideological or psychological.^{xix}

The novel tells the story of Jihad (the main character) and her daughter. In the novel, Jihad is both a mother and queen. That said, she is a queen without a country or subjects, as her country has been pillaged and her people displaced. Her reign is limited and she begins to feel like Scheherazade, relaying her story to her daughter in an attempt to keep her by her side, fearing she will lose her just like she lost everything else: her country, husband, family, and lover. Thus, we can describe this novel as a novel about "loss", the loss that the Palestinian people constantly suffer, the loss that robs them of their will to live.

The critic Hafiza Ahmad views the aesthetic of place in the female Palestinian narrative as generally lending various symbolic meanings connected to two main issues pertaining to Palestinian women: the female issue and the Palestinian issue.^{xx} The novel talks about the suffering of Palestinian women in the diaspora, as well as the struggle complicating their attempts to build respectable lives for themselves in a foreign country. Perhaps the name of the heroine, "Jihad", refers, in addition to its symbolic and political dimensions, to the struggle of Palestinian women, as they lead a life of pain, recurring disappointments, and a dream of returning to Palestine. The mother struggled for a long time in her attempt to provide her daughter with basic needs, crossing deserts and facing danger. However, in return, she got nothing but disappointment and rejection from a world that abandoned her.

There are many places in this novel, and there is a differentiation between open and closed places, places of movement and places of residence, private and public places, and narrow and large places. The author deals with this differentiation skillfully and describes wide interpretive spaces which we will discuss in the next section in order to elucidate its various aesthetics.

The Departure

The first chapter in the novel begins with the title “In the Second Departure,” so the reader concludes that it was preceded by a first departure, and may be followed by a third, fourth and fifth departure. The mother describes this departure to her daughter, and says: “as usual, before every difficult departure, I poured out my rage from the world on you, forcing my plans for the future on you, although your plans were so different from mine.”^{xxi} She continues: “What prepares us for another departure? Are shorter departures practice runs so that we can endure a longer journey later? Or do we depart professionally, since we have mastered living in cities and countries that aren’t ours?”^{xxii}

In the passage above, the concept of place is used as a linguistic accentuation. The use of the word “departure” indirectly invokes an image of place in our minds. The dictionary definition of “departure” is “leaving one place and moving to another”.^{xxiii} In a Palestinian context, however, it lends other meanings, as Palestinians are in an endless series of departure and deportation, and with every departure comes separation and alienation from their place of origin. The process of moving from one place to another arouses different expectations on behalf of the one moving, as it is accompanied by feelings of “losing” the place from which he is moving.^{xxiv} If we consider the previous excerpt, we find that Palestinians are used to moving from one place to another. Therefore, Jihad does not bother to express her feelings about the old place or her expectations for the new one. Instead, she describes the process of moving and its psychological effects, utilizing expressions like “a difficult departure”, “resentment”, and “we muttered ‘when did you get bored of us?’” to express the feelings of pain and humiliation triggered by “the departure” that embodies the forced migration of the diaspora.

Thus, from the very first pages of the novel, the author presents the topic of the diaspora, depicting the ramifications and instability connected to deportation, which, from the main character’s view, seems never ending. It is worth mentioning that the author merges, as she does in many parts of the novel, ideological and psychological perspectives.^{xxv} The ideological perspective is manifested in the quote “departure, little one, is for those like us, those in an eternal state of asylum”, while the psychological perspective is manifested in the references to “a difficult departure” and “resentment”.

Houses

The description of houses occupies a large portion of the novel, so much so that the author sets aside an entire section entitled “In the Naked Houses” to describe the houses in which the heroine and her family resided in the diaspora. The precise and detailed description of these houses are not just frivolous padding; they bear significance and symbolism regarding psychological needs.

The description of “place” plays a crucial role in modern narratives. It is not a structural, physical description, but rather describes the characters moving in their orbits. Places in the text become semiotic signs indicating the form of their inhabitants, their way of thinking, and their destinies. This means that the characters can be thought of spatially; the places described in the novel influence the heroine, and the descriptions of these places come to describe her future.^{xxvi} The place may turn into the narrative character and embody emotions derived from the emotions of the characters.^{xxvii} One might wonder which perspective the heroine described the house that she and her family lived in in the diaspora. What significance does this description bear? What do these houses symbolize?

Houses are largely domestic places, places in which one chooses to reside when one is in one’s homeland. In exile, however, they become cold and hostile places in which one is forced to reside. Gaston Pashlar coined terms for these two concepts (namely, “domestic houses” and “hostile houses”). “Place”, according to Pashlar, is represented by “the home”. That is not to say that there is no other “place” in the world, but shifting his focus to the intimacy and protection found in one’s home, Pashlar believes that all residential places bear the concept of “the home” (insofar as one finds that real and imaginary places carry in their essence the concept of home). Consequently, whenever a person finds a place that has some of the characteristics of shelter, he builds walls and sinks into the illusion of protection. Or, on the contrary, one may live behind fortified walls and yet find oneself convulsing with fear, doubting the strength of those walls.^{xxviii}

Drawing upon Pashlar's concept of "home", the title "The Naked Houses" bears an array of meanings stemming from personal awareness and feelings towards these houses. The word "naked" points to the lack of emotion and material possessions that give one a sense of security in these houses, and this "nakedness" makes one vulnerable to violation at any moment. 'Azzal-Din al-Munasira maintains that there are places appropriate for all walks of life, however that does not necessarily entail "shelter", as there is no historical or emotional connection to a shelter's contents.^{xxxix} We treat this topic by exploring the following passage, in which the heroine describes the houses she lived in in the diaspora:

Our apartment consisted of two bedrooms and an open-plan living room overlooked the street, making it resemble a wide hallway. It accommodated a small sofa set and table, and there was a corner for a modest buffet. My mother and father's bedroom opened to the salon with a wide double door... as for our bedroom, which doubles as our living room, there was a TV and a sofa (with room underneath that my mother used as storage space for blankets), and two closets (the big one for the girls' clothes and the little one for the boys' clothes). When the amount of clothes we owned increased, the girls commandeered a good chunk of my mother's closet.^{xxx}

We notice that the description of "place" above is void of emotion. Shakiral-Nabulsi described it as "the photographic place", "a place that is photographically depicted without any interference from the narrator".^{xxxi} When a place is described thusly, it means that the character is observing it from a purely "objective perspective".^{xxxii} Jihad describes the house and its rooms, cabinets, curtains, carpets and corridors in a manner that does not denote an intimate relationship, revealing the nature of a relationship characterized by aridity and indifference.

Therefore, "home", according to its inhabitants, does not represent anything more than a commodity that can be exchanged for any other house. In fact, Jihad and her family moved between a number of houses. Some of these homes may be better than others in terms of space or furniture, but, in the end, they all exuded a constant feeling of psychological instability, on the one hand, and physical discomfort resulting from the narrow geographical space, congestion of human spaces, and the lack of amenities and privacy, on the other: "Our life in Kuwait was, in reality, an extension of how our life could be in the camp, marked by diaspora with a few improvements and additions. We were living in an apartment building crowded with people and rife with conflict."^{xxxiii}

This topic calls for a discussion of the principle of polarity that Abraham Moles and Elizabeth Roemer have discussed. A place is not narrow unless there is a wider place, as everything is relative. These scholars speak of a range of polarities, such as open/closed, empty/full, simple/compound, comfortable/annoying, high/low, etc.^{xxxiv} The Russian critic Yuri Lotman was also interested in polarity, but what was new for him was the connection between spatial terms and their political, ideological, social, and economic contexts.^{xxxv}

The interpretation of place includes the principle of polarity, an important aspect for the analysis of the aesthetics of place in literary works. However, this interpretation seems dubious, as places often bear many contradictory significances. Pashlar spoke about this and analyzed the internal and external poles in some poetic frameworks, noting that the internal pole does not always reflect a place of intimacy and enjoyment, whilst the external pole is not necessarily a place void of intimacy.^{xxxvi}

The critic Siza Qasim pointed out that a place that is described in a seemingly positive manner does not necessarily mean that said places brings about feelings of peace and happiness, and the opposite is also true.^{xxxvii} Continuing from this, let us now consider the excerpt below in which Jihad describes the house that she inhabited with her family in Kuwait's Furaniyya district after her divorce and the birth of her daughter:

You and I occupied the *en suite* master bedroom with a small hallway big enough for a small wardrobe for towels and shoes and a main door separating the hallway from the rest of the room. There was also a door inside the room, separating the room itself from the bathroom. The hallway was almost like a house within a house. I could lock it up and we would be able to be alone... I also bought a desk and two bookshelves, and, finally, a couch... my couch leaned on my wall in my room in its designated spot, between the books and the wardrobe. It does not budge or shift, granting it the characteristic of an unattainable homeland. And when I go to it as if I go to... to a couch (as much as a couch can be a warm embrace).^{xxxviii}

For the first time, Jihad and her daughter were able to enjoy a private room that granted them freedom, privacy, safety, and warmth. This presents the concept of “the onion” that Moles and Romer talked about, representing a person being surrounded by different places on all sides, like layers of an onion. Therefore, the “ego’s” relationship with a place changes the layers, in that said relationship, at times, permeates the layers from a distance. At other times it prefers to stay somewhere close.^{xxxix} Thus, these scholars have divided places into four different types, namely: my house: the intimate place in which one has all the power; someone else’s house: similar to “my house”, in that it grants one a sense of intimacy but differs in that one still feels under someone else’s control; public places: places with public governance in which there is sense of freedom, albeit limited; and endless places: places that can be represented by the desert, in that they do not belong to anyone and are far removed from government monitoring.^{xi}

Jihad and her daughter’s room, despite being small in terms of space, gave them a feeling of safety and reassurance, because it belonged to them and them only. The couch that Jihad placed between the two wardrobes represented two main features of a homeland: stability and constancy. That said, this homeland was imaginary and unattainable according to the narrator who was residing in the diaspora, and unattainable, also, to Palestinians, as a result of the occupation. However, the mere independence of Jihad and her daughter in a space of their own made her feel at home compared to the rest of the family who were unstable and scattered around the apartment. This inconsistency in describing the contradictory feelings emanating from the rooms of the house confirms the most important thing that the homeland grants the human being, namely the feeling of freedom and stability. Jihad continues to describe the house, saying: “When I lock us in our room, you and I are in our homeland, while others, my father, mother and brothers in the diaspora, are living as refugees in an apartment larger than our semi-timeless apartment in the ghetto of Naqra. The new diaspora apartment was filled with our belongings that we brought from the old apartment... and although we only lived in the new diaspora apartment for a few months, it witnessed the addition of other structures and the accumulation of things that we might have assumed in our frantic awareness would legitimize our presence in the house...”^{xli}

The quote above highlights the innate human tendency to spread out across a place to prove their existence (as no one exists beyond the boundaries of time and place). This prompted the family to impose its existence—albeit in exile—through their belongings. This indicates that humans, wherever they may be, need to feel like they belong to a place that grants them an identity and legal existence in the world, as the critic Nabila Ibrahim says: “The Palestinians who were forced to leave their homes stay strongly connected to those homes which represent their identity, address, and existence. Therefore, one’s existence is not only achieved through a relationship with a place, but through one’s feeling that one is connected to said place, prompting people to search for themselves where they laid their roots.”^{xlii}

The family truly tried to plant its roots in the new place, but at the same time felt that these roots were flimsy and could be uprooted at any moment, as evidenced by the reference to “our planted existence”. This indicates the impossibility of achieving any true affiliation with Palestinians in the diaspora. After Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, Jihad decided to meet her family at the Jordanian camps, leaving her father alone in Kuwait, saying: “I went to our room, our independent country, which was removed from the possibilities of annihilation. I gathered only some of our belongings, leaving most of them behind, in case we were to return someday.”^{xliii}

Jihad’s actions reveal to us the internal struggles which affect every Palestinian in the diaspora and causes repeated disappointment. This alternative homeland may be manifested in the form of a house, a room, or even a sofa. What is important is that it gives its citizen a sense of security and stability. Jihad reveals the deep desire for her need for a homeland, saying: “If only we, Queen of my heart, could take our homeland with us in the car.”^{xliii}

As soon as Jihad began to enjoy a sense of stability and freedom through the creation of her new “homeland” (represented by her room in Furaniyya) she was forced, once again, to leave and seek refuge elsewhere in the diaspora. In Amman, her feelings of fragmentation and alienation intensified, making her hate the constantly-changing houses, especially the one she and her family lived in in the white mountains, and in which she never once felt a sense of belonging or love: “I did not like the house. I left in the morning to go to work, and I did not rush home in the evening.”^{xliii}

Her big, open garden was the only thing that allowed her to bear the house’s hostile atmosphere; it was the only place she could breathe (compared to all the small, closed places that suffocated her). In the garden she was able to feel serene and at ease. She was also able to escape her thoughts and often felt inspired to write: “The garden remained unchanged for years, which prompted me to refrain from committing suicide in the place that nibbled on my soul... I carry a large cup of plain coffee, a notebook, and a pen that cut my boundaries... crossing

the pain ... then I let the pen walk slowly over the paper. The cold, absent of ideas, warms up with time and coaxes with perseverance.”^{xlvi}

It is not strange that Jihad writes her thoughts in the very home she hates, so much so that she contemplated suicide. That said, suffering begets creativity, and the greater the pain, the greater the creativity emanating from it. When one person is afflicted by this magnitude of negativity (e.g., alienation, torment, dispersion, loneliness, poverty, wandering, loss, and lethargy), the result is an uninterrupted narration, “the coffee finishes but talking doesn’t”.^{xlvii}

“Houses” did not mean anything more than “physical places” to Jihad and her family. Places that sheltered them during their unrelenting displacement but towards which they did not develop any feelings of belonging, fully understanding that they could not set down roots in a place that was not theirs. If they tried to set down roots (perhaps out of instinct and an inclination to attain a sense of identity and homeland), they knew for sure that they would one day be uprooted, as Palestinians, who were viewed as a heavy economic burden that competed with citizens, were not welcome in the Arab world.^{xlviii}

Diaspora Countries (Kuwait, Jordan, Dubai)

There is a clear tendency in the Palestinian novel to refer to places by the names defined on the map. Thus, we find the names of the Palestinian, Arab, and foreign cities (as well as the names of the cities in the diaspora and the camps) distributed across the Palestinian novel. There is no doubt that the tendency for the Palestinian novel to refer to places by their real names stems from the realization that the importance of place in the novel is achieved through an illusion of realism, making readers believe fictional stories.^{xlix}

The illusion of realism is considered one of the most important artistic representations of place in literary works, especially in Palestinian literature, as it makes the reader sympathize with the Palestinian situation.¹ It is not strange that the author resorted to referring to the Arab countries comprising the Palestinian diaspora, as well as the camps and neighborhoods in which they resided, by their real names. She begins firstly by mentioning the Naqra neighborhood in Kuwait, her favorite place in the diaspora. That said, her love for this place was not as deep as her love for Palestine, as it was easy for her and her family to forget their love for Naqra and to eradicate it from their hearts and memories: “We learned that we were liberated from our previous life in Kuwait, as we had been liberated from any future we could have possibly had there. With time, we erased the place and its people from our memories through a painful process which seemed necessary for our new lives. It was not an entirely difficult process, nor was it as painful as one might expect, perhaps because the place and its people remained marginal and detached...”ⁱⁱ

The process of being liberated from the place resembled the painful process of a malignant tumor metastasizing, but, at the same time, it was necessary in order to survive. It has been expressed as the strong relationship that links a person to a place, but when the place becomes deadly (like the places in the diaspora), there is no choice but to be liberated from it.

Jihad describes Jordan, her next country of residence in the diaspora, as “a dry land. Its water is far away, its air is suppressed, and its misery is dispatched”.ⁱⁱⁱ

We notice here that the author describes Jordan according to her own feelings, and this is what the critic Shakiral-Nabulsi termed “the psychological place”. The words and expressions she uses express a negative view and feelings towards Jordan, making life in Jordan seem impossible from the main character’s perspective. Her feelings about Dubai are not any better, as they all blend into one—one diaspora community extends into another, homesickness intensifies, and defeat begets more defeat: “After seven years I bid farewell to Jordan. I did not go to Dubai seeking a dream or trying to escape a nightmare. I did not go to the new country for the sake of another potential land or in pursuit of another borrowed homeland. On the eighth floor, Dubai opens its roads without reservation to many strangers, their destinies are parallel rather than intersecting, and within each of them is a nation that is often defeated or at best postponed.”ⁱⁱⁱⁱ Furthermore, it can be said that the Arab nations appeared across the novel as “hostile places”, imposed on Palestinians; they were forced to adapt to these places, and each Palestinian dreams to return to his homeland one day.

Money Stashes

One of the most interesting places the novel describes is the money stashes, secret places linked to Palestinian’s feelings of loss and danger in the endless diaspora. Palestinian women have developed various techniques to hide

cash for emergencies. This was not "a pitifulness, but rather a prolongation of a temporary safety and a false sense of security".^{lv} The author describes how her mother, grandmothers, and aunts all made their own secret stashes (e.g., closet drawers, grain jars, trouser and handbags pockets, socks, pillows, and bedding), and they made sure to hide various sums everywhere as needed. There were small sums for daily needs and larger sums and gold for emergencies. Jihad herself was later forced to make her own secret stash: "I grew up with the spread of ample human flesh in a narrow house, the collision of requests and the intertwining of wishes ... and monetary precautions, as losing money is certain, even when it is squeezed into the nooks and crannies of secret stashes."^{lv}

The large number of secret places for money and their distribution across all corners of the house, as well as the women's exaggerated worry, evoke the large number of unexpected dangers in exile. These dangers make Palestinians constantly defensive, as if they are on constant alert to fight for their lives. Therefore, it can be said that these places have a symbolic dimension, as they symbolize the lifeline that the Palestinian diaspora needs whenever an unexpected danger emerges. The aesthetics of these places is also evident in the connotations they contain related to the economic role Palestinian women play in the diaspora. The particular concern of women to find these places indicates the economic responsibility they have assumed and their active role in providing for their families and saving them whenever necessary, to live in dignity amid the harsh conditions in the diaspora.

The School

"The school" is considered one of the most important places the author focused on in general. Jihad viewed the school as an important place that could be taken advantage of to change the ideological thought process of the new generation: "I pushed for change, and I wanted to be a revolutionary. I convinced myself when I was assigned my classes that I might shape a generation."^{lvi} The heroine tried to use her profession as a teacher to influence the students: "In one of the regions of despair in Jordan, I tried to shake the moths off of the students' heads."^{lvii} The students began to seek emancipation and education for the sake of self-sufficiency, not in order to find a husband. She also rebelled more than once against the curricula set by the government which sought to inculcate its ideological values in the younger generation. The students often discussed political and ideological issues. However, the heroine's attempts to seek change failed because she discovered that education at school is an extension of education at home.

Focusing on the school and the changes Jihad sought to implement, we get an image of a Palestinian woman who is aware of her surroundings and who has sought to educate herself through reading, her constant preoccupation in a life devoid of entertainment. This indicates that difficulty of life and the conditions that Palestinian women experience in the diaspora have not prevented them from educating themselves. This knowledge serves as a weapon to help them confront the many pitfalls of life and to improve their living conditions in an authoritarian male society.

When Jihad is on the school grounds, she feels like she is in Palestine. When the school principal asks her to pledge allegiance by proclaiming "I swear to God almighty that I am loyal to King and Country" (as is typical in Jordan), Jihad simply mouths the words without saying them out loud. This is confirmation that Palestinians cannot be loyal to any country other than Palestine, and they never feel like they belong anywhere else, even in Arab countries that welcome them. We are covering this topic before covering "the identity crisis in the diaspora" caused by loyalty to two identities (one of which is original and the other acquired). This brings about hybrid identities and identity crises.^{lviii} Although Jihad was officially hired at a public school in Jordan, she was unable to pledge allegiance, indicating her awareness of, and loyalty to, her original identity despite the other hybrid identities she acquired in different Arab countries.

The Body

In Muhammad Haju's view "the conversation about history and geography is a conversation about Earth. Places, plants, people's features, dialects, and stories are all geographic, and thus one carries his geography with him wherever he goes."^{lix}

The critic Tami Daghilit claims that, as the Arab world has been plagued by colonialism and occupation, the homeland has become just a mental image for those in the diaspora. The physical image of the homeland becomes clear among the writers of the occupied land in particular, as, for Palestinians, the homeland becomes a heartbeat, pulsing in their chests.^{lx} Furthermore, we can consider the body a significant place in literature. Women are often symbolized in literature as countries, with the earth signifying the body made from dirt from which humans were created. They are depicted as doting mothers or fertile wives.^{lxi} The author dealt with "the body" as a

spatial concept (the homeland) in several places throughout the novel, made evident through the description of Jihad's relationship with her daughter and her daughter's relationship with Jihad's body, as expressed in the quote: "When our sorrows haunt our dreams, you come to me barefoot with your hair in your face, the smell of fresh sweat from dreams that wake you up emanating from you... you climb into the bed next to me smelling my bare arm, saying that you love the smell of my flesh, saying you search for it, or something like it, in your city that is so far away, but you never find it..."^{lxii}

The mother sees her daughter as the generous land blessed with abundant rain as a metaphor for goodness, fertility and growth, in reference to the future Palestine. The daughter, on the other hand, treats her mother's body as a safe haven that emits the scent of Palestine, a scent she yearns for in her lonely exile. After her daughter travels abroad, Jihad returns home, weeping, thinking back to the series of images that depict the situation of Palestinian refugees in the diaspora, specifically in Kuwait's Naqra neighborhood, imagining the trials and tribulations she endured during her difficult life in the world's capital of contradictions.

These memories begin to evoke the series of massacres that afflicted the Palestinian people, and Jihad is particularly reminded of the "Empty Bullet" massacre on "Al-Abadan" in Gaza. The massacre in question is another instance that sheds light on children's bodies as places targeted by the occupation. She is plagued by the images of the murdered children and their severed limbs scattered all around.

Jihad remembers how deeply she wept at the sight of a little Gazan girl who was targeted during the bombing, her eyes still open, as if her soul was refusing to leave her young body. This image has aesthetic significance, raising the idea of the soul's significance to the body as a place. Jihad cries and cries—for her daughter's departure, the situation of Palestinians in the diaspora, and the children of Gaza. Thus, the present is linked to the past and places become extensions of each other, a series of torment and suffering.

The last transfiguration of the body as a concept of place/homeland is found in the description of the little girl named "Palestine" who lived in Jihad's neighborhood in Naqra. Jihad and the girl's father view the little girl like the country of Palestine: "she was veiled, ugly, and behind in her studies, possessing every bad quality."^{lxiii} In addition to that, she had a slight limp. The child "Palestine" suffered abuse from her father, who would beat and insult her. She was also victimized by her teachers' contempt and bullying from fellow students for her stupidity and disability. During one of Palestine's visits to Jihad's house, she confidently declared that:

When she grows up, hair will grow on her head, and she will storm out of the house, slamming the door behind her... she promised me that it will just be a matter of time, even if it takes a little longer, before she finds out many things and sees and understands. She said she does not understand now because she does not want to understand, and that she does not find out because she is afraid that if she finds out she will hate herself. She swore she would find out many things soon, and she might know everything later, which would not be too far away, and she knows one day she will not be herself anymore.^{lxiv}

The passage above expresses the narrator's ideological perspective in that she describes the little girl as "the embodiment of Palestine" whose disability and stupidity possess a symbolic connotation referencing Palestine, a country suffering from poverty, ignorance, and backwardness. What highlights the violations committed by the occupying forces against Palestine is the fact that Palestinian the child cannot defend herself, just like the country of Palestine. One day, the little girl insists on becoming smarter so she can escape her painful past, shaped by her father's insults. However, her dream for a brighter future will never become a reality, symbolizing that Palestine will not be liberated unless it frees itself from the cloud of ignorance and strives to improve itself by acquiring knowledge that will enable it to confront the occupying forces.

The Car

For Jihad and her Palestinian lover, Iyas, the car represents a mobile place, different from all constant places. Their car was the place in which they shared moments of stolen happiness: "The car became the vast home which compensated for my father's narrow house."^{lxv} Once again, we are faced with the principle of polarity, pitting the vast place against the narrow place. This quote shows that "place" is considered a psychological place according to the characters, and self-awareness of the place varies according to circumstances and experiences.^{lxvi} The car, despite being physically narrow, seems like a vast space compared to the house they do not like, and the car becomes a beloved place for alienated Palestinians who do not have any connection to the places they are forced to hate. The quote above turns the reader's attention to the fact that Jihad likened the car to a house. This brings

us back to Pashlar's statements about the home as an intimate place. Every place in which the inhabitant is granted this intimacy must be related to the home in one way or another.

The Desert

The desert is generally featured prominently in Arabic novels, so much so that it is the main character in a number of novels (e.g., those by Miralal-Tahawi, 'Abdal-Rahman Mufid, and Ghassan Kanafani, etc.). This stems from the geography of Arab countries (which are largely desert) and the link between Arab culture/heritage and the desert, as well as Islam which emerged from the Arabian Peninsula.

According to 'Abdal-Qadir bin Salim, the desert forms a structure that reflects the intellectual system and beliefs of its inhabitants.^{lxvii} As we have already mentioned above, the desert has been described as “the infinite place”, since it is an open space owned by no one. The vastness of the desert also represents a place of hope that transcends time and place, just as it represents man's struggle with the unknown, far beyond his physical existence.^{lxviii}

The author effectively uses “the desert” aesthetically by granting it a symbolic dimension. Jihad was forced to leave Kuwait and travel to Amman, where she would meet her family. In order to get there, she had to travel across the desert via Baghdad in a rental car with her daughter and three other passengers. Jihad describes the difficulties and dangers she faced during the trip, particularly when they reached the Trebil crossing on the border between Jordan and Iraq, which was closed; they were forced to wait a long time, during which they suffered from the scorching desert heat during the day and coldness at night. Additionally, they had very little food and water with them. As a result, Jihad deprived herself of lunch so that her daughter could eat, causing her to become dehydrated and weak: “On the third day, we did not find anything to eat... I kept three quarters of a metal bottle with me... I tried to save diapers by keeping them on you as long as possible, so your flesh chafed between your thighs... I could no longer hold you... I stayed in the car for most of time to resist hunger and fatigue... as if my legs and arms loosened the screws that fasten them to my withering body, and my limbs loosened on the seat like autumn leaves trying not to fall.”^{lxix}

Even though the trek across the desert only took three days, it felt like years to the travelers. In fact, Jihad believed her daughter grew during that time: “It is as if you've grown in these three days”.^{lxx} This quote indicates the discrepancy between psychological time and real time. Psychological time depends on the place and the events that occur therein, as well as the extent of their impact, while real time is independent and immune to external factors. Thus, since the place (the desert) was harsh, painful, and fraught with danger, the duration of the time spent there felt long psychologically.

The desert appeared in the novel as a harsh and cruel place that threatens to destroy those who cross it. Jihad's trip across the desert was psychologically long and physically destructive. In our opinion, this trip served to summarize the Palestinian experience in the diaspora generally, and the experience of Palestinian women in the diaspora specifically. This arduous journey is the path of suffering that every Palestinian must cross, guided with patience, armed with determination, clinging to the hope of return, and realizing that dream. As for the Palestinian woman (Jihad), this journey (in addition to the aforementioned) is a test of her strength and resilience, especially since she is the bearer of the new generation (her daughter). Failing in this journey would indicate a breakdown of the future generations of Palestinians, while success would bring about new hope. Thus, we witness the jihad of the Palestinian mother. After overcoming all obstacles and adversities, she became a fully-fledged woman psychologically, physically, and mentally. This alludes to the strength of Palestinian women and indicates that nothing will deter them from achieving their dreams.

Summary & Conclusion

In this study, we have sought to explore the aesthetics of place in the Palestinian diaspora novel by analyzing the places in the novel “Qabl an Tanam al-Malika”. To this end, we examined the places in question from the narrator's personal psychological and ideological perspectives. The diversity and significance of the places in this novel prompted us to interpret them according to the principle of polarity. In terms of our linguistic analysis, the vocabulary the author employed expresses the heroine's psychological state and her relationship to the different places within the diaspora and during exile. Additionally, we tried to capture the messages embedded in the text and interpret them from our own perspective.

A contemplation of the narrative about the Palestinian diaspora hints at the dispersion of its structure on several levels, including physical displacement. An explanation of this perhaps lies in the dispersal of the (productive) Palestinian ego hierarchy. The Palestinian narrative is present in the margins of the host countries that Palestinians traversed and settled in. Thus, the diaspora narrative is colored by “place”—every work becomes a peculiarity that is related to the specificity of the experience and the ability of the dispersed to harmonize. Not everyone’s experience in exile is the same.

In the novel “Qabl an Tanam al-Malika” the characters are scattered across different places, spaces, and times. Thus, the diaspora personifies a layered investigation between fact and fiction. The peculiarity of the novel lies, as we indicated earlier, in the fact that the author and the heroine both belong to the second generation, uniting them in experience, vision and revelation. It seemed clear to us that although the heroine (Jihad) was not born in Palestine, but rather born and raised in Kuwait, she remained plagued by a sense of loss, insecurity, and instability. She felt that she was dispersed and fragmented because she and her family lived transnational lives, as reflected in the descriptor “post-colonial”. This indicates the fragmentation of the second generation as well and its inability to adapt to places of refuge, having no right to exist outside of Palestine—this sense of non-existence will accompany the second generation everywhere. Likewise, we noticed that, despite the places in the diaspora narrative being described with overwhelming intensity of all kinds, sizes, geographies, and topography, said places remain abstract for those who have lost their homeland.

All places in the novel are connected to the heroine’s enduring awareness of Palestine. It can be argued that the places in the diaspora share a similar, marginal relationship to the homeland. Despite their many components, Palestinians in the diaspora find them empty, lacking a sense of connection, history, or belonging. Jihad and her family’s failure to assert their existence with their ‘chariots’ may also reflect the stance that Arab countries take toward Palestinians—despite their efforts to navigate the diaspora, Palestinians are constantly reminded that they do not have a right to remain and must eventually return to their homeland.

Finally, the emphasis on the desert as a place at the end of the novel carries a symbolic meaning, encapsulating the exhausting journey through the diaspora. It also alludes to the fortitude, cohesion, and resilience of the Palestinians, highlighting their ability to ensure the safety of the third generation, allowing them to continue their march and pursue the dream of returning to Palestine.

ⁱHafiza Ahmad, *Baniyat al-Khutab fi al-Rivaya al-Nisa’iyya*, (Ramallah: ManshuratMarkazUgharit al-Thiqafi, 2007), 121.

ⁱⁱYusifHatini, *Mukammilat al-Sard fi al-Rivaya al-Filastiniyya*, (Damascus: Itihad al-Kitab al-‘Arab, 1999), 77.

ⁱⁱⁱZaki Al-‘Ila, *Al-Mara’a fi al-Rivaya al-Filastiniyya*, (Ramallah. ManshuratMarkazUgharit al-Thiqafi, 2003), 224.

^{iv} Much of what is written about the novel is comprised of short, scattered, non-academic articles published on different websites and newspapers.

^vSabri Hafiz, “KitabatFilasteenBa’adJil al-Nakba, *Qabl an Tanam al-Malika*, BeynRiwayat al-TakwinwaRiwayat al-Mutakhayyil al-Watani.” 2018.<http://web.archive.org/web/20160304042301/http://nooralmsbah.own0.com/t5031-topic>.

^{vi}Inji Ibrahim, “Adab al-Shitat: KhamisRiwayatTahki al-Ghurba.” 2019. <https://www.ida2at.com/5-novels-about-alienation/>.

^{vii}*The Columbia Encyclopedia*, (Columbia University Press, 2013).

^{viii}Fahad Abu Khudra et al, TahrirYasinKatani, *Qamus al-Mujam’ fi Alfaẓ al-‘Arabiyya al-Mu’asirawa-l-turathiyya al-Sha’i’aAkademiyya al-Qasimi*, (Mujam’ al-Qasimi li-l-lugha al-‘rabiyya, 2012), 664.

^{ix} Macey David, *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory*, (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 98.

^x Rami Abu Shihab, “Sardiya as-Shitat as-Filastiniyya fi Du’ al-Khutab ma Ba’ad al-Kuluniyali: Riwaya “Gharib al-Nahr” l-Jamal Naji”. (Dirasat, 2018), 41.

^{xi} Arif al-‘Arif, *Al-Nakba al-Filastiniyyawa-l-Firdus al-Mafqud*,(Kafarqara’: Dar al-Mabdi, Mujallid 5, 1956), 1082.

^{xii} Rami Abu Shihab, “Sardiya al-Shitat al-Filastiniyya”, 40.

^{xiii} Rami Abu Shihab, “Sardiya al-Shitat al-Filastiniyya”, 40.

^{xiv}Feysal al-Daraj. “ShitatFilastini La TahitBihiRiwaya.” *Jarida al-Haya*. 2019. <http://www.alhayat.com/article>.

^{xv}Feysal al-Daraj. “ShitatFilastini”.

^{xvi} Muhammad ‘Azam. *Tablil al-Khutab al-Adabi’alaDu’ al-Minabij al-Naqdiyya al-Hadathiyya*(Damascus: ManshuratItihad al-Kitab al-‘Arab, 2003), 20.

^{xvii}The interview may be viewed on YouTube via this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bByxbeg9TkE>.

^{xviii}JahinaKhatib, *Tatawwir al-Rivaya al-‘Arabiyya fi Filastin 48*, (Haifa: Maktabat Kull Shay’, 2012), 131.

^{xix} Muhammad ‘Azam, *Tablil al-Khutab al-Adabi*, 168.

^{xx}Hafiza Ahmad, *Baniyat al-Khutab*,126.

^{xxi}HizamaHabayyib, *Qabl an Tanam al-Malika*, (Beirut: al-Mu’asisa al-‘Arabiya li-l-Dirasatwa-l-Nashr, 2011), 9.

^{xxii}HizamaHabayyib, *Qabl an Tanam al-Malika*, 12.

- xxxiii Fahad Abu Khudra et. al, *Qamus al-Mujam*, 543.
- xxxiv Fatima Kahlush, *Bilagha al-Makan: Qira'a fi Makaniyyat an-Nass al-Shi'ri*, (Beirut: al-Intishar al-'Arabi, 2008), 22.
- xxxv Muhammad 'Azam, *Tablil al-Khutab al-Adabi*, 168-172.
- xxxvi 'Adwan Nimr 'Adwan, *Al-Makan fi al-Riwaya al-Filastiniyya Ba'ad-Anslu 1993*. Risala li-Nil Laqad al-Duktura, (Al-Jami'a al-Urduniyya: Kulliyat al-Dirasat al-'Uliyya, 2005), 41-42.
- xxxvii 'Adwan Nimr 'Adwan, *Al-Makan*, 54-55.
- xxxviii Gaston Pashlar, *Jamaliyat al-Makan, Tarjamat Ghalib Halsu*, (Beirut: al-Mu'asisa al-Jama'iyya li-l-Dirasatwa-l-Nashr, 1984), 28.
- xxxix 'Azz al-Din al-Munasir, "Shahada fi Sha'ariyyat al-Amkana." *Majjalatal-Tabayyin*, vol. 1 (1990), 31-32.
- xxx Hizama Habayyib, *Qabl an Tanam al-Malika*, 165.
- xxxii Shakir al-Nabulsi, *Jamaliyat al-Makan fi al-Riwaya al-'Arabiyya*, (Beirut: al-Mu'asisa al-'Arabiyya li-l-Dirasatwa-l-Nashr, 1994), 15.
- xxxiii Upinski divides the psychological perspectives into two types: subjective and personal [see Muhammad 'Azam (2007), 170].
- xxxiiii Hizama Habayyib, *Qabl an Tanam al-Malika*, 153.
- xxxv Abraham A. Moles and Elisabeth Romer, "La Psychologie de l'espace." (Belgium: Casterman, 1978), 55.
- xxxvi Yuri Lotman, *Jamaliyat al-Makan* (translation by Siza Qasim), (Casablanca, Dar Qurtuba, 1988), 50.
- xxxvii Gaston Pashlar, *Jamaliyat al-Makan*, 199.
- xxxviii A Group of Researchers, *Jamaliyat al-Makan*, (Casablanca: Manshurat 'Ayun al-Maqalat, vol. 1, 1988), 63.
- xxxix Hizama Habayyib, *Qabl an Tanam al-Malika*, 179.
- xl Abraham A. Moles and Elisabeth Romer, "La Psychologie", 91.
- xli Abraham A. Moles and Elisabeth Romer, "La Psychologie", 98.
- xlii Hizama Habayyib, *Qabl an Tanam al-Malika*, 179.
- xliii Nabila Ibrahim, *Fan al-Qas fi al-Nazariyyawa-l-Tatbiq*, (Cairo: Maktabat Gharib, n.d.).
- xliiii Hizama Habayyib, *Qabl an Tanam al-Malika*, 189.
- xliiii Hizama Habayyib, *Qabl an Tanam al-Malika*, 191.
- xliiii Hizama Habayyib, *Qabl an Tanam al-Malika*, 224.
- xliiii Hizama Habayyib, *Qabl an Tanam al-Malika*, 224.
- xliiii Hizama Habayyib, *Qabl an Tanam al-Malika*, 226.
- xliiii Hizama Habayyib, *Qabl an Tanam al-Malika*, 226.
- xliiii Walid Abu Bakr, <http://www.alkarmelj.org/userfiles/pdfs/2-20.pdf>, 2015.
- xlix Hafiza Ahmad, *Baniyat al-Khutab*, 127.
- l Mustafa Jum'a, Tajliyat al-Makan fi al-Riwaya: Al-Mafhumwa-l-'Alamawa-l-Ta'wil. 2015. Nuqtat Du': <http://www.ndawa.com/print.php?id=325>, 2015).
- li Hizama Habayyib, *Qabl an Tanam al-Malika*, 237.
- lii Hizama Habayyib, *Qabl an Tanam al-Malika*, 219.
- liii Hizama Habayyib, *Qabl an Tanam al-Malika*, 303.
- liiii Hizama Habayyib, *Qabl an Tanam al-Malika*, 48.
- liiii Hizama Habayyib, *Qabl an Tanam al-Malika*, 72.
- liiii Hizama Habayyib, *Qabl an Tanam al-Malika*, 79.
- liiii Hizama Habayyib, *Qabl an Tanam al-Malika*, 79.
- liiii Rami Abu Shihab, "Sardiya al-Shitat al-Filastiniyya", 43.
- lix Muhammad Haju, *Al-Majal al-Tarikhi al-Jighrafi "al-Insanna Insijam al-Kawn: Simia'iyat al-Haki al-Sha'abi*, (Algeria: al-Rabit, 2012), 46.
- lx Tami Daghilib, "Mafhum al-Watan Fi al-Adab al-'Arabi." 2017. (al-Jazeera: <http://www.al-jazirah.com/2017/20170527/cm21.html>).
- lxi Tami Daghilib, "Mafhum al-Watan."
- lxii Hizama Habayyib, *Qabl an Tanam al-Malika*, 25.
- lxiii Hizama Habayyib, *Qabl an Tanam al-Malika*, 123.
- lxiv Hizama Habayyib, *Qabl an Tanam al-Malika*, 127.
- lxv Hizama Habayyib, *Qabl an Tanam al-Malika*, 288.
- lxvi Mustafa Jum'a, Tajliyat al-Makan.
- lxvii 'Abd al-Qadir bin Salim, Baniyat al-Hikaya: Fi al-Nass al-Riwa'i al-Magharibi al-Jadid, 149.
- lxviii Khalid Zaghrif, "Jamaliyat Mithiulujiyya al-Sahara' fi Riwayat "Nazif al-Hajar" li-Ibrahim al-Kuni." 2015. (ad-Dustour: www.addustour.com).
- lxix Hizama Habayyib, *Qabl an Tanam al-Malika*, 210.
- lxx Hizama Habayyib, *Qabl an Tanam al-Malika*, 210.