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Palestinian Children’s Literature’s Role in the Battle for children’s Rights

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1. **Introduction: Palestinian Children’s Identity**

Palestinian children’s literature is considered an important stream in the Palestinian literature in general. It should be pointed out that a number of the Palestinian writers in Israel, Gaza Strip, the West Bank and the Diaspora have contributed to its development in significant ways. Palestinian literature in general and children’s literature in particular have been affected by the political reality.,Due to the conflict circumstances, Palestinian children’s literature was born as an ideological literature especially after the year 1967 and reached its peak during the first Intifada in 1987. Ahmad argues that as a result of the suppression of the Israeli occupation and its political oppression, the Palestinian child developed new absolute concepts about “justice”, “injustice” and “fear” of the surrounding reality. Therefore, the Palestinian child started dreaming about having enough power to change the reality,in which he lives constantly in conflict between fear and bravery (Ahmad, 89)

Cohen maintains that the child in general tries to absorb what is happening around him and inquire about the causes of and results of everything that had taken place (Cohen, 2000). Children in general are aware of the political issues because the events that they experience arouse lots of questions in their minds, and consequently, they interact with the events and absorb them , especially if there is someone who is ready to clarify things to them and give answers to their questions (Yahya, 2006, pp. 53–62.).

Some of the effects of the Israeli occupation on the Palestinian children include: the feeling of deprivation and sadness, the lack of the components of decent life, and loss of their dear ones one after anoother, either because they were murdered by? or through arrest, deportation or exile (Miqdadi, 2012, 212).

This reality and this analysis gives legitimacy to many Palestinian writers to write stories that bear several indications that reflect the Palestinian reality. The main feature of these stories is that they concentrate on the subject of the conflict with the Israeli in a direct way and within a context that is characterized by violence, into which writers pour their political attitudes and thoughts. Thus, their stories include lots of words that were commonin the Intifada period, such as shahid (martyr), occupation, arrests, and resistance..

The stories also focus on the image of the “Other”, the violent Israeli as a soldier, a man of war, an intruder and a raider, a jailor or a settler, who takes over land and destroys houses. On the other hand, they describe the Palestinian as a victim and a resisting hero who is presented in a positive way. The embodiment of the national concept and its implantation in the minds of the children is a deliberate mission that all the writers express? in their stories (As'ad, 2007, pp. 34–38).

**A Historical Background of the Palestinian Children’s Literature in the West Bank and Gaza Strip**

The Israeli authorities imposed a total siege on the West Bank and Gaza Strip after occupying them in 1967. That also meant ta cultural siege which negatively affected the Palestinian cultural climate. That siege hindered literary creativity in the occupied areas, with some writers stopping writing completely, or their creative work diminishingslowly, either because of the exceptional circumstances in which they found themselves or because of their involvement in the direct political struggle against the occupation. Besides, a number of writers were deported outside their homeland, as was the case with the well–known writer Mahmoud Shkair (1941- ).

At the end of the 1970s, the literary movement in the West Bank and Gaza Strip managed to go beyond the stage of suffering that prevailed after the Lapse (Naksa) of June 1967 War. The writers started regaining his literary activity without a noticeable change in the style that he got accustomed to during the years of the sixties in the past century.

The writer’s approach in that period was limited to documenting the Palestinian reality and depicting the suffering that the Palestinian people lived through in realistic stories. Such stories were characterized by their courage in dealing with the social and political reality and revealing it to children, pushing them directly or indirectly or symbolically to take part in changing that reality. On the other hand, the national issue occupied a large space of their life and their concrete reality that carries their tragedy within its folds. Consequently, these stories carried indications or hints or implications of war, killing of the enemy and jihad against him.

The stories of that period dealt with the subject of homeland from diverse perspectives, including the historical context and the image of homeland in the past. At the end of 1987, the first Intifada broke up, which increased the suffering of the Palestinian people in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Consequently, it is not strange to see that suffering reflected in the children’s literature of the region..

Two features that are specific to children’s literature appeared in the stories that were published in the West Bank and Gaza Strip: concentration on childhood on the one hand, and concentration on the conflict with the Israeli, on the other, in a clear and direct way in a context that is characterized by violence (A’ienat, 2009, 64).

The stories devoted substantial attention to “childhood” itself, as the writers poured their political thoughts and attitudes into them. As a result, lots of words and terms that are related to the Intifada and its images appeared in those stories, including: the shahid (martyr), occupation, arrests and resistance. Besides, the stories described children’s confrontation with the occupation and focused on the image of the Other, the violent Israeli. The Palestinian, however, is given the image of victim or the image of the hero and the resisting child. Generally, these images are introduced in a positive way.

If we trace the works of the writers who live in the West Bank and Gaza Strip after the Oslo Agreement in 1993, we will find differences between their attitudes that can be attributed to their political affiliations. Their attitudes are reflected in some of their products, and the “Other” started imposing his presence on the agenda of many stories, especially among the local Palestinians and the Palestinians that returned form exile? after the Oslo Agreement (Shukair, 2010, 71).

The Palestinian writer insists on the necessity of stopping? the occupation and, at the same time, as a peace–lover, he builds an image of the Palestinian State that is established on the principle of “pluralism”, which implies finding a way towards tolerance ? t that will result from a number of inevitable developments.

It is worth mentioning here that the stories that were written after al–Aqsa intifada (2000) carried a peaceful imprint and emphasised the right of resistance for freedom.

We can confirm that the national values did not disappear in children’s stories in the period after al–Aqsa Intifada, but they were accompanied by the emergence of new values, such as “openness”, “acceptance of the other”, and “interest in the environment”, perhaps as reflection of a struggle to preserve what remained of the Palestinian land. It seems clear that the policy of “appeasement” is clearly present in children’s stories (Shukair, 2010, 43).

1. **Reflection of the Palestinian Identity in Children’s Literature**

In the last two decades, especially after the first Intifada in 1987, the conflict of “identity” appeared in a strong way, especially in the shadow of the attempt to efface the Palestinian identity by the Israeli Occupation,and the attempt to Judaize the features of the Palestinian identity. All this reinforced the Palestinians’ attachment to their identity instead of giving it up, and motivated them to focus on definingthe characteristics of their national character, which has to be implanted in the consciousness of the children, who constitute the hope of the future.

It is possible here to introduce several queries: how can this child defend his own dreams and aspirations? How can he preserve his threatened heritage? The repeated daily events and scenes contributed in a direct way to introducing questions that are related to one’s “identity” in the minds of the Palestinian children, which made each resisting one of them to feel like a “hero”. In view of all these queries, this study will try to answer the question of “identity” and “belonging” among the children of Palestine through the employment of the past in children’s stories, which represent the most important element of culture and education.

The Palestinian writer contributed to the deepening of the identity and belonging of the Palestinian child in children’s stories through shedding light on the concept of “homeland” and “earth”. The Palestinian child lives in a state of constant alienation that keeps him away from his childhood because the reality that he lives in lacks the conditions that the children of the world live in. The experience of the Palestinian people is considered an experience of deep fear about their physical and spiritual existence. Everything is exposed to threat and danger: the house, the land and human life.

It is possible to say that the national stories that are written for children take part in preserving this heritage and contribute to the growth of loyalty to homeland. Besides, they satisfy the social and psychological needs of the child. Probably, what distinguishes the story of the Palestinian child from what?is that it bears the character of the lived reality in his understanding, his pains and his tragedies through a realistic vision of the Palestinian individual, who is continuously exposed to attempts of effacement of identity. The Palestinian writer succeeded in representingthis reality in an appropriate artistic style. Besides, he took into consideration the characteristics of the childhood period and its direction and this is what appears through the studied texts.

Hence, this study comes to highlight the Palestinian children’s literature and the degree of the writer’s contribution to the development of his feeling of belonging and reinforcement of love of homeland and loyalty to it. The study poses several questions: how can the Palestinian child defend his dreams and aspirations? How can he defend his threatened heritage? The repeated daily scenes contributed in a direct way to raising questions about “identity” in the memory of the Palestinian children, which made them turn into heroes. In view of all these queries, this study tries to give answers to the question of “identity” and “belonging” among the Palestinian children through the employment of the past in children’s stories, which represent the most important elements of the Palestinian culture and education.

1. **The Role of the Child in the Palestinian Children’s Literature**
   1. **Martyr**

The Palestinian writer gave prominence to the truth of the children’s look at the martyrs of their homeland and their attempt to be characterized by it. They expressed this desire either by becoming martyrs or through expressing their feelings in drawing or playing or other childish ways. Daily life events and repeated killings make the Palestinian children the most sensitive people to their reality because they resist the occupier in order to get their freedom and stay on their land .

The Palestinian writer stressed the funereal scene of the martyr in the image of a groom’s wedding procession. For example, in the story of Haniyyeh, Muhammad Naffa’(1940-2021), shows the martyr’s Mom in a different image, which impressed the children profoundly:

Upon the shoulders of the people, Sadek looked big and high. Haniyyeh uttered shrills of trilling for her coming son, carried upon the shoulders; he came to have a last look at the house he grew in (Naffa, 1998, 4).

Besides, the images of the martyr in children’s literature are repeated in children’s stories in various forms, such as the image of the earth stained with the martyr’s blood. In the story of Jamal al–Din, from the collection of al–Walad al–Falastini (The Palestinian Child) the writer Mahmoud Shukair, deals with the image of the earth that is stained with the blood of the martyr:

This is my homeland and I will defend it and then, he threw stones at the enemy. The enemies shot Jamal al-Din and killed him; the land was covered with green grass; homeland that Jamal al-Din became more splendid! (Shukair, 1997,14).

**4.2. Homeland**

Palestinian children suffered from the pain of separation and loss. As soon as they opened their eyes, they found themselves in the midst of war and refugee camps, without a homeland to shelter them, or an identity that attaches them to the land, in which they or their parents were born. When the State of Israel was established, the majority of the Palestinian people were evacuated and driven away from their homes, which led to their escape from homeland and its loss. The people of Palestine lived in fear and suffered from starvation. The Palestinian children continued to feel the loss of homeland, though some of them continued to live inside Israel. And thus, the dream of homeland that lives inside the Palestinian children remained alive in their stories and works.

In his story al–Atfal Yahlamoun Naharan/ Children Dream during the Day, from the collection of short stories Shahadat Sharaf/ A Certificate of Honesty, the writer Muhammad Owais, deals with the children’s vision of homeland and the innocent concept of the children’s visualizations that are represented in the home, the garden and beautiful place are. All these descriptions have meaning that expresses the necessity of man’s need for a “homeland” and indicates the need of cooperation among all its members in order to achieve the establishment of homeland:

While the pupils were playing in the garden, Juana said: we are building a house.

Everyone admired Juana’s idea and started dividing work among them:

Ali collects the stones; Sawsan moves the stones; Khaled builds the stones. Juana passes the stones to Khaled and helps him to build (Owais,1997, 19).

They continue the work in building the house (homeland) in cooperation and devotion, which often takes different symbolical names that ultimately lead to the same consequence, that is the realization of the importance of homeland:

Ali said: This house protects us from rain and cold.

Sawsan said: We marry in this house and live in it.

Khaled said: This house protects us from enemies.

Juana said: This house is a small homeland (Owais, 1997, 20).

In her story Ajmal al–Buyut/ The Most Beautiful Home, the writer Iman al–Tawil depicts the image of “homeland” in a clear symbolism. She refers to the “occupation” as the Hunter and the homeland as the Garden. She showed the Hunter’s going to extremes in preventing the children from playing and spending their time in their garden and depriving them from living their innocent childhood. While the children were about to start their race, the Hunter tried to enter the Garden:

The Hunter said: I want to aim my gun at the large tree; there is a nest over it full of birds.

– But this is our garden, and this tree is our tree and you did not ask for permission to enter. We do not allow strangers to enter it or hunt in it (al–Tawil, 2002, 12).

The Hunter refused to go away from the Garden and assured Fadi and the other children that no one would prevent him from entering and hunting. The following day, after the Hunter tried to prevent them from playing in the Garden,

Fadi said: This is our house and this is our garden and it is you who should leave the place...!

Um Fadi/ Fadi’s Mother went to ask for help from her neighbors, but the neighbors were afraid that Hunter would substitute it for their gardens (al–Tawil, 2002, 12).

The Palestinian writer introduced the image of “homeland” to the child through various names that consist of single words or phrases such as: The Land, the Garden, the Home. Through the employment of these names, the concept of “homeland” got bigger in the children’s souls as a calm and safe beautiful place where the children play with no fear or humiliation.

In her story "Ajmal al–Buyut" (The Most Beautiful House), Iman al–Tawil, introduces the history of the Palestinian cause in a simple way that rises to the children’s concepts, showing in its details the careless attitudes of the Arabs that caused the loss of Palestine. Fadi’s Mother was very sad «because her neighbors stopped asking about her and each one was satisfied with protecting his own home».

In his story "Thawb Susan" )Susan’s Shirt), from the collection of short stories Children Dream during the Day, Muhammad Owais deals with a new symbolic concept of “homeland” through embracing it, through his close and firm relation with it and through the occupation’s robbery of the Palestinian folk costume, besides many other symbols and folkloric aspects that are specific to the Palestinian society.

This story also reviews the memories of the little girl Susan, who was always proud of her embroidered shirt when she was a little girl, when she used to go out to the neighbourhood to play, feeling happy about it, and about her childhood. When she grew up and graduated from the university and boarded the plane to continue her studies abroad.

Susan saw the airhostesses wearing embroidered shirts that look like her lost, robbed shirt; it is the same! It is it! Nothing new except that star! Susan said: the star is not beautiful; it is not in harmony with the original lines and drawings; I do not like the star; I like my shirt without a star! (Owais, 1997,12).

Thus, homeland is represented in the shirt, but it has something new on it; it is the occupation that robbed not only her homeland but its heritage and belonging as well. The image of the embroidered shirt with the logo of the occupation, which is represented in David’s Star, is the new thing that symbolizes the robbery of the land, the heritage and the identity, besides the dreams of children and their innocence.

**4.3. “Land”**

The love of the Palestinian to his land is spontaneous and his yearning for it is natural. It is born in him through his relation with it and remains latent in him from the stage of childhood, in which he entertains himself by its stone, sand and soil. He plays among its trees and flowers and enjoys the beauty of its nature till he grows up carrying in his heart and mind a large number of memories from his innocent childhood which he yearns for constantly.

Homeland for him is his “land” and “land” is his warm homeland that embraces his memories and the place in which he brings up his children. Therefore, we find that the word “land” has various connotations and indications, mainly, the connection between “land” and “happiness”. Besides, it is the historical Palestinian heritage, which is passed from grandfathers to fathers in an uninterrupted sequence in time.

The Palestinian writer created an image of his land that he called “Paradise Lost”. It is no wonder, then, that he bears feelings of revolution and resistance to regain his beautiful paradise and rewrite history, as it should be written from his point of view. “Land” for the Palestinian is the foundation of his national, cultural, social and human identity.

Another story, "al–Mawsim al–Qadim" ("The Next Season") by Asa’d al–Asa’d (1944 -), deals with the grandfathers’ interest in their land and offers their lessons and messages about how to protect their land and not leave it to fall prey to strangers. Plowing it, planting it and taking care of it keeps fear away:

Abu al–’Abed drew his aba off his shoulders, spread it out under the olive tree, under which he used to shade himself; he loved that place because from there he looked onto his land that extends till the bottom of the steep. He looked for his stick. He lent his chin on its tip, and started moving his eyes on the hills; wild flowers climb them; the firmly–established olive trees stand in their center (al–Asa’d, 2003, 3).

He smiled when he saw his son moving behind an old bull and plowing the land at the foot of the hill. He muttered discreetly and said: no fear as long as there is someone to plow it.

There is a spontaneous natural relationship between the child and nature. Therefore, the children’s writer employs this feature in order to get through it to the child and arouse his feelings in an attempt to create a strong relationship between him and the land on which he lives and to make the child ready to defend it and protect its soil. In the story of al–Ashjar la Tamut/ Trees Do Not Die, Abd al–Salam A’bed, deals with the wills of grandfathers regarding the importance of the land and protection of its soil. The importance of land appears in this exciting dialogue between the old man and his grandson. The land constitutes a valuable treasure in man’s life. The old man’s memories regarding his playing on this land when he was a child cross his mind and he remembers how many trees he planted:

Grandfather said: O Karim. These trees are dear to me and I don’t want to see anyone attack them. He pointed with his finger to a number of trees and said: Do you see these trees in front of us?

Karim replied: Yes, what’s the matter with them?

Grandfather: I planted them with these two hands fifty years ago and now, they give fruit and have lived long; they will stay firm in the land for a long time.

Karim asked: Do trees remain alive? and do not die?

Grandfather replied: If the person continues to take care of them, they will stay upright and will not die.

Karim: Oh Dear! How wonderful these trees are!

Grandfather: Look at this tree under whose shade you are sitting; I remember it as a big tree since I was a little child, as you see it now; when I was young, I used to climb it and swing on its green branches, as you do now (A’bed, 2003, 12).

**5.Conclusions**

Finally, we conclude that the children’s stories played a vital role in consolidating the national belonging and deepening the conflict views at an early stage among children in Palestine. Besides, some of these stories expressed their aim in a suggestive way, which intended to deepen the child’s awareness of his attachment to land and the importance of protecting it from the aggressor without referring to him in a direct way.

The children’s stories are also characterized by their “realism”. The writers derived their narrative subjects from the historical reality of the Palestinian Cause and the daily events that took place in reality.

Highlighting in a clear way what happens in the Palestinian reality is considered practical activation of the children’s emotions and feelings, and a positive exposition of the image of the Palestinian cause in all its form — those that are specific to their painful reality.

The writers of children’s literature in Palestine play a significant role in feeding their children with concepts that are related to their land and homeland, and thoughts that contribute to the crystallization of their human character and urges them to attach to their land and take care of it. Besides, those concepts deepen their “identity” through their attachment and belonging to their land and homeland.

The story writers were interested in the employment of several artistic narrative styles that aim to achieve a good educational level for the children and is in harmony with their psychological and perceptual levels.

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