

**Analysing Palestinian Oral History and Subaltern Voices in *The Palestine Nakba: Decolonising History, Narrating the Subaltern and Reclaiming Memory* by Nur Masalha**

**Dr. Savitha Sukumar**

*Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, G. M. Momin Women's College, Bhiwandi, (M.S.) India*

**Ms. Hawai Aasiya Imran**

*MA- II, Dept. of English, G. M. Momin Women's College, Bhiwandi, (M.S.) India*

**Abstract**

The following research paper focuses on the beginning of the Palestinian literature, poetry of resistance and post-colonial Palestinian literature with examples from the works of Ghassan Kanafani and Nur Mashala. The main focus of this paper is analysing Palestinian oral history and subaltern voices from the book "*Palestine Nakba: Decolonising History, Narrating the Subaltern, Reclaiming Memory*" by Nur Mashala. Palestinian literature is at the heart of the Palestinian struggle whether it be from the British mandate or the 1948 Nakba or the 1967 war and the continued occupation by Israel. Palestinian writers use their writings to talk about the genocide, apartheid, loss of homeland and lives. These writers write about their personal experiences. The poets of Palestine started the movement "Poetry of Resistance" to fight and resist the Israeli occupation of Palestine. This paper also talks about the Palestinian post-colonial literature through the writers Ghassan Kanafani and Nur Mashala. Kanafani talks about the aftermath of colonialism and its impact on the lives of the Palestinians through his fictional writings. While Mashala talks about the history of Israeli occupation of Palestine and gives importance to Palestinian oral history and voices of the subaltern.

**Keywords:** Palestine, Nakba, Literature, Poetry of Resistance, Post-Colonial Literature, Subaltern and Oral History

**The Beginning of Palestinian Literature**

Palestine was a prominent place for Arab Muslims and Christians but it was never a centre for literature. During the mandate period [1922-48], Palestinian writers started to write in local magazines and newspapers to express their discontent with the mandate authority, the sale of land and the Jewish migration. Before the 1960s most of the Palestinian literature consists of love poetry, historical and religious essays and translations from different languages. Palestinian writers focused on translating English, French and Russian literature. They translated all kinds of literatures: novels, short stories,

literary criticism as well as the modernist poetry of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. During this period literary journals also started and they became a forum for the rising writers.

During the early decade of the 20th century, journalistic writing was very political but it eventually started to part ways with the political trauma that befell Palestine. Palestinian literature of this period was sentimental, romantic and classical with the exclusion of only few of the patriotic poets such as Mahmoud al-Hout, Mouin Tawfiq Bseiso, Abdul-Karimal -Karmi [Abu-Salma]. The poetry of the 1940s and the 1950s depicts the

Palestinian departure and their anger with the Arab governments and the international justice. Some of Bseiso's poetry depicts the themes of honesty, realism and the resistance spirit. His poetry played a major part in the 1960s movement "Poetry of Resistance" that started as the aftermath of the 1948 Nakba. The popularity of the poems of Mahmoud and Abu-Salma was because of their call for patriotism, sacrifice and unity for their homeland. Both of their poems revolve around the fact of the loss of their homeland and their love to fight for their homeland with the hope for return.

Palestine witnessed major political social and literary changes during the first half of the 20th century. The Palestinian writers felt the need to change their literary modes to express the historical circumstances of that time. During this period the poets of Palestine started the "Poetry of Resistance" to counter the colonial threat and to keep their identity and history alive. Mahmoud Darwish and Samih al Qasim are the two main poets of resistance. Through their poetry they joined the Palestinian people's effort to articulate a conscious identity out of the oppression they experienced since 1948. This creative writing was a response to the establishment of a foreign state on the 2/3 of the Palestinian land. The "Poetry of Resistance" focuses on the themes of nationalism and the role of literature in their struggle for liberation. Inspired by the early poetry of resistance many Palestinian writers started a new genre known as resistance literature. Other diasporic writers such as Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, Ghassan Kanafani and Fawaz Turki among others also joined the vision of poets of resistance and contributed in the making of Palestinian culture and identity.

Almost all the literary critiques share the opinion that the most patriotic Palestinian poet of that time was Ibrahim Tuqan because of spontaneity, clear expression and accessible diction which is found in his works. According to Jayyusi, he was the only poet of his generation who appealed to the aesthetic value of Palestinian poetry by blending the humours with the sarcastic and patriotic with the personal. Tuqan through his poetry, directs his anger and frustration towards the British Zionist leaders as well as towards the Palestinian and Arab leaders.

To question the Zionist colonial ideology the Palestinian poets used western literary modes. Different poets used different literary modes whether it be romanticism or classicism. The literary traditions of romanticism, symbolism and surrealism were very popular during the first half of the 20th century. But later on, poets started to find fault in these traditions for example; romanticism was very sentimental and used adjectives excessively, symbolism was believed to be abstracted and uncommitted. The practitioners of symbolism consist of elites who failed to depict and respond to the turmoil faced by the Palestinians in their struggle for freedom. Most of the patriotic poetry of this period was written in neoclassical mode.

After 1948 the Palestinian poets started to alienate with the polished language and proper subjects for their poetry. From the 1960s, they started to use the simple language of the people to depict a more realistic picture of the Palestinian life under the Israeli rule. The most remarkable feature of the Palestinian poetry is that each poet writes about their own personal experiences and sufferings, they talk about

the region from which they come and the culture which they practice. This in turn helps with the diverse identity of the Palestinians. The Palestinian poets inside of Israel have operated under two political realities: one being the reality of the Israeli state and second being the reality of the Arab nationalist movement. They expressed their anger at being unjustly treated as a minority in their own homeland and demanded equal rights like the Jewish citizens of Israel. Mahmoud Darwish's early poems from the 1960s contain two major themes: the faith in Arabism and the success of rebellion against the injustice.

During the first half of the 20th century Palestinian writers did not produce distinctive forms of literature in the genre of fiction. The Palestinian and Arab writers turned towards the western literary model for fiction writing. It started with the translation of fictional novels from European languages into Arabic. Khalil Ibrahim Baydas, who is known as the father of Palestinian fiction believed that fiction was "the greatest foundation of civilization" as it emphasized the morals, customs and values of people. Ahmad Shakir al-Karmi also had the same beliefs. He focused on the benefits that fictional writings would bring to the society and the Arabic language.

"*Al-Warith*" [*The Heir*] by Baydas is the first known Palestinian fiction novel which was published in 1920. It tells the story of Astire, a beautiful young Jewish actress and singer and Aziz, a Syrian orphan who was raised by his uncle. The novel focuses on their destructive love story but it never goes beyond the stereotypical behaviour of Arabs towards the Jews. Another prominent novel of that time was "*A Chicken's Memoir*" by Ishaq

Musa al-Husaini which was published in 1943. This novel focuses on the socio-political conflicts between the Palestinian and Jews but the novel lacked political consciousness. These early attempts at fictional writings by Palestinian writers were experimental but entertaining.

The Palestinian writers had to learn new art forms as well as to keep in mind the political restrictions imposed on them by the Zionist to produce a valuable piece of fiction. The Palestinian writers neither had the opportunity nor the education or institutions that would have generated political consciousness among them. It was because of different empires ruling over them for example, they were under the Ottoman rule since 1516 and then under the British mandate from 1922. Khalidi believes that the lack of Palestinian state resulted in the late rise of political consciousness among the citizens.

Significant improvements in the literary writings of novels and short stories happened in the 1950s and 1960s. The Palestinian writers who contributed to these genres are: Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, Samira Azzam and Ghassan Kanafani. The Palestinian fiction writings were dominated by these writers who were living in diaspora. The works of Jabra and Kanafani are widely recognised and are also available in English. On the other hand, the voice of Samira Azzam represents the voice of the feminine in fiction writings. Her collection of stories in "*Al-Zill al-Kabeir*" [*The Long Shadow*] which was published in 1956 depicts the human relations and human characteristics in a realistic setting. But the majority of the stories in this collection focus on the social-economic issues and the relationships of ordinary people. It also

focuses on issues of gender roles and expectations.

In West Bank, and Gaza proper fiction writing resulted as an aftermath of the 1967 war. The writers who emerged during this time in Palestine were Mohammad Naffa, Mohammad Ali Taha and Tawfiq Fayyad. Naffa and Taha both used the medium of short stories for their writings. Both of them had the same subject as they both depicted the life of Palestinians under Israeli rule but the differences in their style of writing adds diversity to Palestinian fiction. Taha depicts his work in a realistic setting, for example, his short story "Faris Rateeba" tells the story of a young Palestinian boy, Faris. He resists the Israeli authorities and succeeds in making the timid villagers on Um al-Hajira do the same. Though the main message of the story is resistance to authority; it also gives the detail story of the life of children, their schooling as well as their coming of age. As for Naffa, he narrates his stories through the medium of monologues, for example, in "The Uprooted" he presents a series of sketches which narrates the loss of family, land and roots. He combines various styles and techniques as they range from abstract monologues to realistic renderings of the village life which was destroyed by the arrival of Zionist militia.

#### Palestinian Postcolonial Literature

Post colonial refers to the previously oppressed and colonised groups especially by the Europeans. The writings that emerge after the independence of these groups is known as post-colonial writings. Post colonial writing covers the themes of slavery, resistance, representation, diversity and many more. Authors of post-colonial literature are often recognised for being historically marginalised. These authors usually come from the countries

which were oppressed by the Europeans. These writers convey their feelings and the sufferings through the themes of genocide, apartheid and annihilation of their community through the medium of their writings. The post-colonial approach to Palestinian literature is illustrated with the examples from the work of Palestinian authors Ghassan Kanafani and Nur Mashala.

- Ghassan Kanafani

Ghassan Kanafani is a, Palestinian political activist, journalist and an author. He believes that Palestinian's sense of self is defined by the experience of displacement and exile that they faced after the Nakba of 1948. His writings focus on Palestinian nationalism and the theme of national identity is central to his work. Kanafani very vividly expresses the social and historical circumstances that his protagonist faces. His assassination in the car bombing by Mossad shows how powerful his writing was.

In his novel "*Men in the Sun*", he depicts the reality of the lives of the Palestinian people. The novel focuses on the sufferings and death of the Palestinian people. Three refugees hide in the closed water tank so that they can leave Palestine and find work outside to fight the poverty. The novel ends with the death of these three refugees. The bodies of these refugees were dumped on a desert landfill after dying inside the closed water tank. Through this novel Kanafani very effectively conveys how hard it is for the Palestinian people to uproot their life from their home, from their village and from their country. The novel is an allegory of the Palestinian tragedy that came with the Nakba of 1948. It depicts the suffering, defeat, dispute, death and the political corruption that led to the destruction of the

Palestinian people and the Palestinian nation.

- Nur Masalha

Nur Masalha is a Palestinian historian and an author. He has written many books on the history of Palestine – the sufferings, displacement and the illegal Israeli occupation of Palestine. Masalha's book *"The Palestinian Nakba: Decolonising History, Narrating the Subaltern and Reclaiming Memory"* appeals to people who are interested in the Palestinian and Israeli history as well as oral history practitioners. In the book, Masalha explores the formation of the Israeli identity that came with the erasure of Palestinian history and identity. The underlying theme throughout the book is oral history's role in historical reclamation but in the starting chapters Masalha does not openly discuss it. Masalha argues in the book that oral history is at the center of the challenge to the hegemonic Israeli discourse as well as to reasserting Palestinian memory.

Masalha's introduction and the following chapter places Zionist nationalism which is very prevalent in Israel firmly under the European tradition of inventing nations and promoting the separation of people of a common descent. The destruction of cultural patterns is what Masalha documents in the next three chapters. Starting with the politics of renaming, he explains how Israel changed and reinterpreted the Palestinian landscape and how it systematically destroyed and disappeared records, archives and libraries that contained Palestinian histories. For the final part of the book Masalha talks about the role of oral

history in decolonizing Palestine history. From the very beginning the Palestinian oral history has been marked directly by the displaced. Despite the participation of others, Masalha points out the feminist concerns that excludes the Palestinian women. For the Palestinians inside of Israel who are essentially displaced refugees, the memory of their villages of origin has become another way of resisting memoricide.

Analysing "Palestinian Oral History and Subaltern Voices"

Oral history gives new perspective to historical methodology as it brings to light hidden and suppressed narratives of the victims. Oral history is like a written document. It is never free from errors. The written documents and Israeli archives are less liable to distort the records than interviews with Palestinian refugees. But archival documents are also based on memory and these can easily omit or fabricate information. Palestinian oral history, is a very significant methodology not only because it gives an alternative and counter hegemonic narrative of the Palestinian Nakba but it also gives information on the ongoing Palestinian lives and practices after being displaced. In the recent years, Palestinians have devoted their attention to village history and oral traditions as a reminder of their continuous village life and living practices even after being displaced.

During the twentieth century, the majority of the Palestinians left in villages were peasants. The literacy rate was about 15%. The experiences of these Palestinians during the time when they were in their fields, when they were in their villages, during the Nakba and when in exile is absent from written history. Moreover, the



Nakba itself and the political instability faced by the dispersed Palestinian community since 1948 has delayed the Palestinian research and study. In "*Palestinian Identity*", Khalid Rashidi argues that the modern Palestinian historiography has suffered because of the bias as it favours the views of the literates and the written records above those of the illiterates.

Mashala believes that this methodology gives voices to the subaltern: peasants, the urban poor, women, refugee camp dwellers and the Bedouin tribe. The most important feature of the Palestinian oral history is the direct participation of the previously marginalized community. Because of this methodology we have the information about the events of the Nakba from the perspective of the previously marginalised in Palestinian elite and male centred society. There was a total silence on the Palestinian Nakba except for a few sympathetic books in English language but these books emphasised the loss of property in 1948 and were largely legal and abstract. They recorded the Palestinian elite voices but never of the people who suffered and were displaced. The Palestinian voice went largely unheard until the 1970s.

Mashala goes on to mention few of the books that focuses on the subaltern and previously marginalized community. Khalidi founded the Institute of Palestinian Studies in 1963. And under his guidance the IPS has produced a number of publications in Arabic and English. "*All that Remains*", 1992 is an encyclopaedic work of Khalidi on the Palestinian villages occupied and depopulated by Israel in 1948. This work of collective memory contains several hundred photographs. The

works of the Palestinian oral historians benefited in compiling this book.

For nearly three decades Rosemary Sayigh has been working on oral history projects with Palestinian women who are refugees living in camps in Lebanon. "*In voices: Palestinian Women Narrate Displacement*" tells the stories of loss of home because of displacement, life in refugee camps, deportation, imprisonment, Israeli shelling and the siege of refugee camps in Lebanon. The book talks about the unjust suffering and displacement of the Palestinians.

Elias Khoury in his novel "*Bab al Shams*" narrates the voices of Palestinian women and oral history. These were the survivors of destroyed villages in Galilee. This novel tells the story of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon since the Nakba. Khoury spent much of the 1980s in these refugee camps to get the stories of the displaced Palestinians. The novel is about love and survival. It is narrated by a doctor named Khaleel who works in a hospital in Shatila refugee camp in Beirut. It involves a Palestinian fighter named Yunus and his wife Naheeleh, an internal Palestinian refugee living in the Galilee. Their relationship forms during secret visits across the Lebanese – Israeli border to a cave named Bab al Shams. This cave is a house, a village and the country for them as it is the only Palestinian territory that's been liberated.

Khoury and Mahmoud Darwish both were very critical of the Palestinian elite and male-dominated narrative. In the poem "*Memory of Forgetfulness*", Darwish criticises the Palestinian leadership during the Lebanese period and that of the Arab leadership during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the Israeli shelling of Palestinian refugee camps and suffering of

the people in Beirut in 1982. He also criticises the construction of a state within a state in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon.

Mashala goes on to mention the Palestinian women and their position within the subaltern group. Palestinian women continue to be excluded even within the subaltern narrative. Many writers have shown the women's voices and contribution to collective Nakba memory within the Palestinian refugee story. But many a times women's memories are silence because they complicate the Palestinian nationalist narratives. Michel Khleifi and Rachel Leah Jones have interviewed with women and have recordings of women voices they still present men as the main protagonist in their works "*Ma'loul Celebrates Its Destruction*" and "*500 Dunam on the Moon*" respectively. More accounts of memory and further oral history research are needed to bring to light the events surrounding the Nakba and its traumatic aftermath from the perspective of the non-elite majority of the Palestinian society.

### Conclusion

Palestine was never a literary centre. Before the 1960s Palestinian literature consists of love poetry, historical and religious essays and translations from different languages. Some writers complained about the mandate authority, the sale of land and the Jewish migration through their writings in local newspapers. After the 1948 Nakba, the writers of Palestine felt the need to change their literary modes and the need to express their historical circumstances. This resulted in the movement called "Poetry of Resistance". This movement inspired the other writers and they started a new genre of literature known as "The Resistance

Literature". These writers and poets express their own experiences of suffering, loss and resistance through their writings.

Post colonial writings are very popular today. They convey the operation faced by the marginalised communities. Palestinian writers convey their sufferings and the destruction that they face even today through their works. Both Ghassan Kanafani and Nur Mashala writes about the genocide and apartheid that is generally omitted from the official documents. Kanafani narrates the life of the Palestinian living under the Israeli rule through his frictional writings. His nationalist writings let him to his eventual death at the hands of the Mossad. Nur Masalha in his book "*The Palestinian Nakba: Decolonising History, Narrating the Subaltern and Reclaiming Memory*" explores the foundation of the Israeli identity that came with the erasure of Palestinian history and identity. He argues in the book that oral history is at the centre of the challenge to the hegemonic Israeli discourse as well as to reasserting Palestinian memory. He talks about Zionist nationalism, destruction of Palestinian cultural patterns and the role of oral history in decolonising Palestinian history.

Palestinian oral history is a very significant methodology not because it gives an alternative and counter hegemonic narrative of the Palestinian Nakba but it also gives information on the ongoing Palestinian lives and practices after being displaced. This methodology gives voice to the subaltern: peasants, the urban poor, woman, refugee camp dwellers and Bedouin tribe. Because of oral history we have information about the event that happened during the Nakba from the perspective of the previously marginalised in Palestinian elite and male centred

society. Most of the records voices the view of the Palestinian elite but never of the people who suffered and were displayed. Writers like Khalidi, Sayigh,

Khoury and Darwish brings the voices and experiences of the people who were displaced and unheard.

### Works Cited:

Jambhulkar, Prashant. Vivek, Joshi. “*Subaltern Theory: Delineating Voices of Victims in Literature.*” International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts. Volume:10. Issue:5. Year:2022.

Khoury, Laura. “*Nur Masalha. The Palestine Nakba: Decolonising History      Narrating the Subaltern, Reclaiming Memory*”. Pluto Journals, 2012.

Masalha, Nur. “*The Palestine Nakba: Decolonising History, Narrating the Subaltern Reclaiming Memory*”. Zed Books, 2012.

Rashid, Burhan Rashid, Saud Ghalib, Abed, Atheer Makki AbdAli,

Aljasim “*Palestinian Literature after the Post-colonial*”. International Journal of English and Studies. Volume: 6. Issue: 1. Year: 2024.

Salman, Mir. “*Palestinian Literature: Occupation and Exile*”. Arab Studies Quarterly. Volume: 35. Issue: 2. Year: 2013.