

## **To Write is to Resist: Sketching the Literary Map of Palestine**

**Shahina Mol A K**

Assistant Professor of English

KAHM Unity Women's College, Manjeri

### **Abstract**

The strong determination to stay on the land clearly marks *Palestinianness* in their history, nationality and cultural productions which act as a key to the analysis and understanding of everyday Palestinian struggle for life and existence. Struggling for and clinging to the land is a part of collective Palestinian national consciousness. *Sumud* i.e. Resistance or steadfastness has become a national symbol for Palestinian way of self-defense which carries their unique way of their existence through expressions. *Demographic struggle* became the method of declaration of their philosophy of everyday life as 'to exist is to resist' culturally, literally and artistically. Palestinian resistance has taken varied shapes, through history over the seventy years' against the Wall, land confiscation, house demolitions and settlements. Literary figures in Palestine have immensely contributed to shape the national consciousness and to raise the people both politically and aesthetically. An understanding of the literary map of Palestine would help in foregrounding the modes of resistance operate in the Palestinian land to re make meaning of their existence and to relocate them sociologically, culturally and spatially.

**Keywords:** (Literary map, Palestinian national consciousness, resistance, relocation)

Reflections on war between Israel and Palestine continue to take different dimensions and realms as the years go by. The interrelated epistemological political conditions and religio-political shifts of Palestinian struggle for existence have always been a paradigm in the socio cultural and literary arena of Palestinian world of letters. One can observe that as the historical and diachronic study of the political turmoil in Palestine continue to be a discourse with not much progressive turns; the literary discourse of Palestine proves to be reinvention of what has been lost through the much destructive *Al Nakba* of 1948. Hence one can observe that the political map of Palestine is shrinking while the literary map is widening and widening in its own way.

The literary activity of Palestinian community takes different turns in the pre- *Nakba* and post- *Nakba* periods so as to make clear demarcations in its form, content and themes. As *Nakba or Catastrophe* of 1948 that marks itself as a crucial year of loss and dispossession for Palestinians, since the year announces the legal formation of Israel in the Land of Palestine, much of the literary imaginations are centered on *Nakba* in Palestine. The glorifications and romanticism of the land which is visible in the pre *Nakba* period take varied routes in the post *Nakba* literatures so as to move to the diverse literary and cultural pathways bringing critical and analytical meta- discourses and researches into the literary map of the land.

Occupation and settler colonialism imposed by Zionist regimes and Israeli militancy have nothing more than dispossession, dislocation, displacement and depopulation to give which result in both the confiscation of memory and history of the Palestinian lives. External occupation imposed by Israeli regimes aims at homogenizing the land and the culture evacuating the footprints of whatever is left by the Arabs, so that it gives rise to a group of people who don't share anything common to share their belongingness to the country/ land. It is accelerated by the internal exploitation imposed by the Palestinian authority too.

When the whole land is taken to *de Palestinisation* and *de Arabisation* day by day, bringing the massacre of thousands of people and species, the people of Palestine are only endowed with the 'words' to create a sense of belongingness to their country. Palestinian literary activity cannot be seen only as a sociological artifact but historical and political too. The successive stages through which the *literaryscapes* of Palestine has traversed would prove the creative mindscapes are active even while country/people are *walled-in* by the oppressive forces.

Palestinian literature seems to be receiving Palestine as a country at least textually so as to bring a national identity for the displaced through a shared common 'literary space' though they are unable to catch a space of their own geographically. Erased from the space and consciousness of a land, the people of Palestine are in continual expulsion from a territory which is called home, creating a situation of exile in own homes. As Edward Said rightly puts:

"Exile is strongly compelling to think about, but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in the exile's life, these are no more than efforts to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever (Said 58)". This terrible experience of internal displacement, refugee hood and exilic status are written into the literary map of Palestine.

Literary activity of Palestinians all over the world is to be observed as an act of keeping themselves alive to make their voices audible to defend the ongoing settler colonialism in the non-violent manner resisting the aggressive acts of ejection from homeland. As Ilan Pappé, Israeli historian and social activist, rightly observes: "Massacres accompany the operations, where they occur they are not part of a genocidal plan: They are a key tactic to accelerate the flight of the population earmarked for expulsion. Later on the expelled are then erased from the

country's official and popular history and excised from its collective memory (Pappe15)". Ethnic Cleansing takes clear political advancements on the people of Palestine.

How the literary activity does provide a room for formation of socio cultural identity in Palestine? What are the shared common features of literary map of Palestine? The literary phases of Palestine can be identified as moving through three different stages and has reached the fourth phase, which the contemporary Palestinian literatures of home and exile by a group of writers range from the internally displaced people to the diasporic group of writers who are scattered around the world. It can be identified as pre-*Nakba* literature, post *Nakba* literature up to 1980s, post 1980 Palestinian literature up to second *intifada* of year 2000, and contemporary literary phase with more virtual forms of writing.

The romantic affinity to land and glorification of land in pre *Nakba* literary period is taken through the fear and grief of losing the land and culture in the post *Nakba* literatures. Thus Ibrahim Toqan's patriotic poems that belong to pre – *Nakba* literary phase, have helped in framing Palestinian national culture for the agricultural societies. Later Jabra Ibrahim Jabra explored the world of loss and showed a parallelism between his departure from Palestine to Bagdad and the country's departure due to *Al-Nakba* catastrophe. In his *A scream in a Long Night* (1946) one can detect the notions of an impending catastrophe.

Pre *Nakba* literature characterized farmers, traders, etc, with lots of patriotic fervor freedom of movement and never expressed a threat of being. But in post- *Nakba* literature, people are represented as immediate victims of *Nakba* catastrophe, which razed four hundred and twenty villages creating seven lakhs of refugee population. Unlike that, post 1980- 2000 years literature of Palestine presents the refugee issue more extensively with less hatred but with more hopes of repatriation. Feeling of loss of post *Nakba* period is intertwined with joy of hope of return. Portrayal of real life as it is or lived experience is the focus of Palestinian post 2000 literatures. ....

It is seen that Palestinian novels seem to take different dimensions as romanticizing the land as a *Missiah* in pre *Nakba* era, the dream of return to the historic land in Post *Nakba* period, which then divert to the themes of exile, alienation and refugee hood in the post 1980 fictions. Shift from politics to everyday life is the major aspect of post 1980 fictions. Thus the road blocks, curfews, military checkpoints, assaults etc. are part of common imagery among post 1980 writings. Life writings, blogs, diaries, memoirs, travel literature etc. became prominent in post 2000 Palestinian literary field with much insistence on virtual space of literary activity too.

Palestinian Poetry also has been vehicles of free thoughts- both political and aesthetic. Fadwa Tuqan, Mahmoud Darwish, Mahmoud Shukair, Samih Qasim, Hala Shuroof, etc are some of the distinctive voices which echoed the sounds of the land and its memories. Short stories of Samira Azzam, Ghassan Kanafani, Prose writings of Mourid Bharghoti, Hussein Bharghoti and other noteworthy non-fictions by Raja Shehadeh, Penny Johnson, Refaat Alareer etc Mark the contemporary *literaryscapes* of Palestine. Memories, Diaries, Blogs, Biographies, Travel writings, autobiographies and other life writings etc. also chart a prominent literary arena of Palestinian territory. The intense bonding with the land and a romantic affinity with its every

aspect can be read from the poetry as Darwish sings: “My homeland is not a travelling bag/ Nor I am a passing traveler/ It is I who am the lover/ And the land is my beloved” in his ‘Diary of a Palestinian Wound’ ( Darwish, 1996: 347)

Palestinian women writers came out with the letters of truth and everyday life in their fictions and non-fictions. Adania Shibli, Liana badr, Sahar Khaliefeh, Leila Abu Lughod, Hanan ashrawi, Gada Karmi, Suad Amiry, Sumaya Farhat Naser etc belong to the post 1980 literary field while enormous writing comes out day by day from the new generation Palestine tongue. Apart from a feministic view point, female writers majorly focused on the themes of nationalism, motherhood, politics of motherhood in a dispersed land, resistance, everyday catastrophe and the trauma of exile and alienation. Amy Zalman writes: “The Image of women as a passive land or as a willing mother attempts to construct femininity in a particular way with respect to a political order” (Zalman 49). But such a passive representation goes to active phase of female era in Palestinian literature in the post 1980s.

Fida Jiryis, Hedaya Shamun, Sarah Ali, Asmaa Al Ghul etc are the representations of such contemporary female writers who come out with their own everyday life experiences with absurdities of occupation and colonialism. Palestinian literatures shift from being political to aesthetic and sociological with a note on everyday micro powers in localities. The armed struggle phase of Palestinian literature (Literature of guns) gives way to lived realities of daily lives. One can observe that the contemporary women writers use the virtual space or digital space to express their harsh realities of daily lives and to converse with the outer world.

Meaninglessness of lives and the resistance are two seminal focus of the contemporary literary activity of Palestine. Voices of resistance are audible not only from the writers of occupied territories but also from the Palestinian Diaspora. Salma Dabbagh, the British Palestinian; Susan Abulhawa, Adania Shibli, Hala Alyan and Mariam Bharghoti who are American Palestinians; Hannah Khalil, Irish Palestinian, Sara Saleha, Egyptian Palesstinian etc are clearly making their strong presence for the devastated country echoing their angst for their homeland , through their literary presence. As Rana barakat, Palestinian contemporary literary figure opines in *The Right to Wait: Exile, Home and return*, “ Palestine in exile is an idea, a love, a goal, a movement, a massacre, a march, a parade, a poem, a thesis, a novel and yes, a commodity as well as people scattered, displaced, dispossessed and determined” (Shehadeh 134).

The literary map of Palestine, thus vividly portray the richness of letters by which Palestinians defend their existence in the troubled geography. Various literary devices used in their writings are the part of experimentation with pen to re appropriate the land, culture and the people for the cause of essence in existence. The unconventional literary methods are also could be viewed as an artistic way resistance. For example, the use of Arab words is part of reclaiming their identity and resisting the cultural colonialism. The use of first person plural form *We* in their writings, can be read as the method of insisting collective identity which is lacking in the geographical territory.

Through their writings the poetic persona describes “the villages in the ways that are meaningful to them today; the location of the villages, the livelihood of their inhabitants their

agricultural practices, historic sites, natural resources, family genealogies, folklore traditions and cultural customs ( Davis 1)”. This kind of a writing practice which envisages the preservation of their land and their culture is an act of resistance through writing. Writing everyday experience, writing history, memory flashbacks, traversing through the land, celebrating the unique cultural aspects like clothing, culinary experience, using the virtual space to converse with the outer world etc. are certain modes of re affirmation of self , identity and the land while Zionism works to detach Palestinian from any experience of Palestine as a home .

Palestinian writers view writing as a personal and political means to declare their existence. Susan Rahman in her book reports the experience of Fulla, a Palestinian woman who was born on 19 March 1990 in Tulkarem City: “I work in the *Natar* Resort, which is the biggest museum in West Bank. And although it does not pay much I find it pretty inspiring because I get to show the world that Palestine has always existed. In the war of existence, to exist is to resist. Which is basically we got to a point we had to prove to the world that Palestine existed before 1948” (Rahman 12)

Palestinians have a long history of colonization. As a community living in a region that has been occupied first under the Ottoman Empire, then by the British and presently by the Israel, these occupations have been central to the way in which their lives are circumscribed. Military occupation is a fact on the ground that Palestinians cannot overcome easily. “Palestinians are the largest refugee population in the world and their situation is the longest unresolved one in the history” (Ibid 24). Susan Rahman points out that “In Gaza alone there are 1.8 million refugees living in a walled-in space, which has been called largest open-air prison in the world” (Ibid 24).

For Palestinians to write is to resist and to resist is to exist. Writing the experiences into their text is method Palestinians have found to defend the occupation, the brutal and absurd face of it. It creates a space for them. Their writings are ‘ethno autobiographical’ (Rahman 76) and ‘auto bio geographical’ (Anjum 80) in nature as the resistance inbuilt in the strategy of rewriting their land by decentralizing the colonial histories and stories propagated by the colonizers. The myth of ‘a land without people for a people without land’ justified by Jews is questioned by the Palestinian writers/natives revisiting history and proving the history of their own existence.

Contemporary writers of Palestine use the digital space/ virtual space effectively in these days as a powerful tool of resistance. Virtual mobility has become a tool to overcome geographic and spatial immobility. Leleh Khalili’s research is very poignant one in this regard. She argues that “embodied identities, territorialized spaces and real world institutions extend deeply into the realm of cyberspace, and that Palestinian virtual culture has non- virtual roots and histories (Khalili 126)”. Though Israel’s digital occupation of Palestinian territories is threatening, internet writing has a crucial role in keeping Palestine alive in the midst of their death- in- life , life- in – death , situation.

## **Bibliography**

- Amiri, Suad. *Sharon and My Mother in Law: Ramallah Diaries*. Qatar: Bloomsbury, 2005. Print.
- Anjum, Shakeel. *Politics of Space and the Question of Palestine*. New Delhi: Adroit Publishers, 2018. Print.
- Davis, Rochelle. A. *Palestinian Village Histories*. California: Stanford University Press. 2011. Online.
- Khalili, Laleh. *Time in the Shadows*. California: Stanford University Press. 2013. Online
- Pappe, Ilan. *Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*. Oxford: One Word Publications. 2011. Online
- Rahman, Susan. *To Resist is to Exist: The Voices of the Women of Palestine*. 2015. Online.
- Said, Edward W. *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 2000. Print.
- Shehadeh, Raja and Penny Johnson. *Seeking Palestine: New Palestinian Writing on Exile and Home*. New Delhi: Women Unlimited. 2012.
- Zalman, Amy. "Gender and the Palestinian Narrative of Return in two Novels by Ghassan Kanafani" *Literature and Nation in the Middle East*. Ed, Yaser Suleman and Ibrahim Muhawi. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2006. 48-78. Print