

GAZA, TELL US YOUR STORIES

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Abstract

This paper takes a pscho-literary approach in discussing a collection of lightly fictionalized short stories by a group of new young Palestinian women creative writers and how they convey through personal accounts of lived experiences in their homeland that truth and hope cannot be silenced by injustice and oppression. It also seeks to throw some light into recent questions raised by American researchers in the area of personality psychology as to whether the narrative identity present in stories narrated by people in other societies and cultures are similar to those narrated by Americans who draw on their own life narratives to make sense of their lives and to cope with life's challenges (McAdams & Guo, 2015). This paper discusses the collective narrative identity of emerging women writers living in the Gaza Strip whose creative resistance to injustice make up most of the 23 short stories in the anthology *Gaza Writes Back* (2014). As politically-oriented news dominate much of what the world listens to, much of the complex layers of war torn societies are brushed over and unfamiliar to the outside world. In discussing the very own narrative written in the English Language of a people who have been geographically and politically isolated and who have witnessed and been subjected to horrific violence in the form of military brutality for years, this paper seeks to generate further discussions and interest in their stories and hinder attempts to silence them.

Keywords: Palestinian Women, Short Stories, Gaza, Narrative Identity

1. Introduction

Stories are one of the most powerful tools people can use to change themselves and the world (Bosak, 2015). For instance, in Native American culture, vivid narratives are often told by tribal elders to the younger generations, teaching them where their people came from and what their culture expects of them—both of which pave a way for the latter to remain connected and to keep the cultural legacies alive (Rajotte, 2012). This pre-literate, oral tradition of presenting self-narratives to the younger generation was, of course, not limited to Native Americans. The indigenous cultures of Africa and Australia (Smith & Watson, 2001, *Reading Autobiography*, p. 83), and even the native communities in Sarawak, Malaysia, namely the Ibans, Bidayuhs, Penans, Kenyahs and Melanaus, practice this oral tradition of telling stories (Yeoh, 2007, p. 252).

Ruddick stresses that “[o]ur maternal stories tell us who we are, as well as what we do” (1980, p. 306), as she believes that a mother meets the emotional needs of a child in terms of love or empathy, it is a role that requires “reflection, knowledge, and the capacity for reason” cultivated in social practice (Maihofer, 1998, p. 389). It is not unusual to come across some adult Malaysian Chinese, Indians or Malays who would say that their grandmothers, their aunties and even their mothers are fond of telling stories of their past experiences. Having experienced life in Malaya under British rule (which began 1786 with the occupation of Penang by Francis Light), the Japanese occupation of Malaya during World War II (1941-1945), and the experiences of migrating from their birthplace to other states in Malaya after the war in search of a better life and experiencing the birth of a new nation called “Malaysia” in 1957, their stories usually contain episodes of personal and family struggles and tragedies, difficult lessons learnt along with rewarding and joyous moments. The universal magnetism towards the telling of stories and their connectedness to life experiences is aptly illustrated by F. Michael Conelly and D. Jean Clandinin, who state that, “[h]umans are storytelling

organisms who, individually and collectively, lead storied lives. The study of narrative or narrated stories is the study of the ways in which humans experience the world” (2).

Betty Ann Bergland notes that life narratives of ethnic groups offer stories “with greater justice and accuracy than have been shown in stories told by those in power” (1994, p. 93). She says stories narrated by Native Americans, African Americans, Chicanos or Asian Americans allow them to represent “their own histories, identities, and representations of truth and accuracy,” and correct representations found in Western discourses (77-8).

Palestinians too do not lack in their own stories as at family gatherings stories of the good old days are told to the younger generations. Now, young Palestinians are into writing their stories as an “act not only of preserving history and human experience, but also of resistance to intruders and colonizers” (Alareer, 2014).

Out of the murder of more than 1,400 Palestinians and the injury and disablement of thousands mostly children, women and elderly folks, has immersed a collection of 23 short stories (a story for every single day of the 23 days of Israeli aggression in 2008) as counter attack for the military aggression (524). More than 20,000 Palestinians had been forcibly made homeless 5 years before, some for the 4th and 5th time in their lives in a long siege that Israel is still imposing on Gaza.

Edited by Refaat Alareer, *Gaza Writes Back* marks the creative respond of emerging writers to Israel’s repeated acts of aggression against Gaza. Young and new to the arena of literary writing, these writers comprising mainly of women, have written genuine short stories in the English Language despite their geographical and political isolation and having witnessed horrific violence in the form of military brutality. Refaat, who has been teaching at the English Department of the Islamic University of Gaza since 2007 and who has been responsible in encouraging his students and friends to write creatively, says As a Palestinian, I have been brought up on stories and storytelling. It’s both selfish and treacherous to keep a story to yourself – stories are meant to be told and retold. If I allowed a story to stop, I would be betraying my legacy, my mother, my grandmother and my homeland. To me, storytelling is one of the ingredients of Palestinian *sumud* – steadfastness. Stories teach life even if the hero suffers or dies at the end. For Palestinians, stories stimulate the much-needed talent for life. (Alareer, 2014, p. 526)

Gaza Writes Back (2014) is a revolutionary mode of resistance that hopes to bring about social justice, an act of life capable of shaping memories (14). This paper aims to generate academic interest in the stories of these young Palestinian women from Gaza and trigger further academic discussions into this new form of resistance and the desire for survival.

2. Discussions

Under Political Occupation

Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) states that “[t]he right to education is a fundamental human right and basic to human freedom”. Preserving the right to education is crucial as a means to achieve social, political and economic justice. Yet, in conflict zones, the education of young women is also under attack.

During the war years in Malaya, the majority of the population found themselves caught in a conflict between outsiders. Open resistance to the Japanese invasion or participation in anti-Japanese guerrilla organizations among the locals of various races was small; and even then, their struggles and sacrifices have not received much notice. What was of course more important at the time, however, was the need for the locals to protect their families and communities (Kratoska, 1995). During the occupation, an estimated 100 000 people were killed.

As one of the four books on Japanese atrocities in Malaya published almost immediately after the end of the war, *No Dram of Mercy* contains the earliest accounts by a woman on the brutal treatment of women. Kathigasu's use of her autobiography as a platform to express her condemnation of the fate of women under military dominance affirms her ability to find a form of empowerment within the constraints of a patriarchal society. Her abhorrence of this most heinous of war crimes allows her voice to resonate not only as one from the past, but also one that is carried to the present and right through to the future. The link between military activities and violence against women is all too common, and arises from the fact that whether implicitly or explicitly, women are the 'other'. Consequently, it becomes necessary in the eyes of those who seek power over to control and belittle women, and all aspects of womanhood. In many cultures, women are viewed as the possessions of their men. Therefore, when a woman is raped, it is effectively an attack on the manhood of her man. Using this reasoning, women became the targets of war in order to attack the honor of the men of a particular culture, ethnic group or country. For these reasons, rape and other forms of sexual assault against women are always a part of the war and conflict. When women are assumed to be possessions that can be attacked, stolen and dishonored, they become a means of feminizing and degrading the enemy. (Marshall, 2004, p. 1)

Sadly, to younger generations of Malaysians, World War II is a distant memory passed down from the stories of their grandparents and great grandparents, learned from lessons in school or read from books. But, there is hardly any public commemoration of the war in this part of the world. As historian Wang (2000) states, "people in Southeast Asia do not seem to be keen to remember the war" (14). Diana Wong, meanwhile, observes that the "war reveals itself as many, and as different, wars, its meaning refracted through varying subject positions and different temporalities" (2).

During Israel's Operation Cast Lead (2008-09), a 23-day large scale offensive war on Gaza, more than 1,400 Palestinians were killed and thousands comprising mainly of children, women and elderly people were injured. In an article *Gaza Writes Back: Narrating Palestine* (2014), Refaat writes:

Many of the injured are now disabled for life, and many of the martyrs left children and wives orphaned and widowed for life. Israel targeted infrastructure, schools, universities, factories, houses and fields. Everyone was a possible target. Every house could be turned into wreckage in a spilt second. There was no right time or right place in Gaza. The whole of Gaza was the bull's-eye for Israel's most sophisticated military arsenal. It was clear as crystal to Gazans then that Israel was deliberately and systematically targeting life and hope, and that Israel wanted to make sense that after the offensive, we had nothing of either to cling to, and that we are silenced forever (525).

In a study of the effect of the attack on education on young Palestinian women, Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian records the following excerpt of an interview with a 13 year old Palestinian schoolgirl,

I really want to continue going to school, but the soldiers and the *MishmarHaguul* [border patrol] keep on harassing me and my family. As you see, we live very close – one minute away – from the racist separation wall and the soldiers do not bother me on my way to school, but do not allow me to come back home after I am done. I am now sneaking around and reaching home from school through the sewage pipes that are still open. Every time they refuse to allow me to come back home, they know that I will reach home either by walking more than five kilometres, or by sneaking through the sewage pipes. All I wish, is that my school mates won't discover this, for they always hurt me when they ask me whether I use those pipes ... and sometimes I end up walking long hours under the rain or in the heat, either fearing being caught by the soldiers, laughed at by my school friends and teachers, or

hit by my father for being late. But ... What would happen to me if they use those pipes, or decide to close all the roads?(Reem, 13-years-old, Bethlehem area, December 2006)(61)

The violation of Reem's educational space and path on a daily basis, according to Nadera, is challenged by her ingenuity and perseverance so her educational needs are not compromised (61). Harassed by militaristic, patriarchal and other powers, girls and women, Nadera observed they have "always devised strategies to combat the limitations they have encountered and thereby keep their spirits alive" (61).

Women's studies developed in academia have identified the need to recognize that survivors of conflict have their own good knowledge of their lives and experience, that their survival has more often than not been based upon their agency and intelligence, and their ability to adapt, improvise and innovate. (*Women, War, Violence and Learning* 5)

Stories of Women Living Under Political Occupation

In a vivid and detailed style of expression, Kathigasu captures the gruesomeness of the Japanese mode of crime investigation as she tells of the suffering that victims had to endure, raising our awareness of oppression under imperial rule:

Suspects usually underwent one or other of the following tortures: a medley of wild kicking, boxing, slapping, judo and ju-jitsu throwing; flogging on bare bodies until they bled or else the victim fainted; hanging the victims upside down or else with their hands tied behind their backs and the full weight of the body rested on raised toes. Then, there was the 'Tokyo wine treatment' or the 'water treatment,' which meant the pumping of gallons of water into the victim through a hose direct from the water tap down the victim's throat, followed by a violent stamping on a board laid across the victim's stomach, until water (frequently with blood) ran out of every orifice in the victim's body—and, if this had not killed the victim, he was put out in the blazing sunshine to dry. (2006, *No Dram of Mercy*, p. 32)

Kathigasu does not hide her abhorrence to the treatment of women by Japan's occupying forces, when she describes the intense fear and helplessness that women had to face under the cruel hands of the Japanese soldiers—representing both imperial dominance, as well as patriarchal dominance. In a clear tone, Kathigasu firmly informs her readers that during this period of Malayan history, the most unimaginable and horrific fate was the kind that the young women had to confront. Her empathy for the plight of women during this reign of terror and her repulsion at the behaviour of the Japanese soldiers is reflected in her narrative expression—which, in a way, ensures that the atrocities of the Japanese occupiers are never forgotten. Kathigasu's ferocity in denouncing the ill-treatment of women also suggests a kind of justification of her determination never to give in to her interrogators and torturers as a show of resistance against the Japanese occupation of Malaya, and her willingness to die for the cause. Readers of stories of women living under political occupation can relate to Alareer's view that "the reality that civilians in a time of war experience can be more horrifying and unreal than fiction" (Alareer, 2014, p. 531).

While Kathigasu had decided to have her experiences told in the form of an autobiography, Alareer has chosen to present Palestine in a collection of short stories and just like Kathigasu, believes that literature has the ability to reform, make us grow and connect people across time and place. Kathigasu made a vow that she would write about her war experiences if she survived the war. She did write her autobiography, however she succumbed to her serious war injuries in 1948 and her memoirs, *No Dram of Mercy* was posthumously published in 1954. Alareer explains that although his compilation of stories are fictionalized, they are deeply rooted in reality (2014, p. 531). The following are the women writers of *Gaza Writes Back*: Wafaa Abu Al-Qomboz, JehanAlfarra, Sarah Ali, Nour Al-Sousi, ShahdAwadallah, Nour El Borno, SameehaElwan, HananHabashi, TasnimHammouda, ElhamHilles, AyaRabah and RawanYaghi. RefaatAlareer, Yousef Aljamal and Mohammed Suliman are the male contributors and just like the female writers,

their stories too are told from memories that shape their world. The choice to highlight the stories of the women writers of *Gaza Writes Back* does not in any way suggest that the stories of the male writers are less significant. As Alareer explains, “[t]he young women are not included at the expense of young men, but because the fact that on the ground more young women writers in Gaza use social media and write, particularly in English, than do their male counterparts” (534).

Tapping Women’s Wisdom in their Stories

Psychologists have noted three forms of “experienced wisdom” that older adults tend to reveal in their reported autobiographical memories: empathy and support, self-determination and assertion, and knowledge and flexibility (Glück et al., 2005). Wisdom here involves “fundamental events and is elicited chiefly in response to life decisions and negative life events (206). In theory, wisdom is implicitly seen as a virtue (i.e., based on good intentions, concern for the common good), and individual differences in wisdom can be put down to age (198). It is interesting to note that women tend to reveal empathy and support more often than men (206). Although these studies on wisdom have emerged from observations done on narrated experiences of older American adults, this paper suggests that stories narrated by young Palestinian women through lived experiences of terror and pain imposed under occupation also reveal wisdom as the writers are also driven by an instinctual drive to leave a legacy behind.

Regardless of whether the story writer is able to live long enough to witness the kind of impact her story may have, her story (legacy) has the potential of being “put to use by generations and generations of successors” (Kotre, 1995, *Generative Outcome*, p. 38). The positive outcome may come in the form of a single story that affects “the developmental requirements of people of different stages of life (39) – such as for children or adults within a family or community. Another type of generative outcome described by Kotre may come in the form of “changing the heritage for our children” (40), so that future generations will not have to suffer as their parents did. As Alareer explains,

Stories enable us to make sense of our past and relate it to our present; stories can be the main thread attaching us to our past; and they can take the form of a dream yet to be fulfilled....Writing back is also an act of life, of hope and of resistance; it fulfils an obligation to humanity as it raises awareness among people throughout the world...(Alareer, 2014, p. 532)

Alareer tells of one of his students whose short story is found in the *anthology* as one of the most significant success stories (*Biography* 37.2,529). Hanan Habashi’s story is entitled *L for Life* and is the first story the reader encounters. An excerpt from Hanan’s story reads:

I sit in my room, which is fully exposed to the sun, gazing at the tiny mark of the gunshot and the ugly crack it left there. Yes, that very same crack on the wall caused by his rifle. Such an eyesore! Other times, I would gaze at it trying to recall how that soldier might look like. That huge creature grabbed you out of my bed and didn’t give you the chance to finish my bedtime story. I cannot remember anything but his dusty, black boots and the frightening rifle. So many times, I tried to imagine how he would look like and always ended up believing he is no more than a faceless monster. Maybe I have gone too far, thinking of him, of his life, of his family, of his wife whom he “loves,” of his smart kid who can get a good grade in math, of him laughing and crying. Baba, what would make this kind of human rejoice over the fact that I am living agony of being fatherless, with an uncompleted story?” (Gaza Writes Back, 32)

Described by Alareer as being quiet in class with no previous experience of writing “anything in English let alone fiction”, Hanan has become more confident and mature after the completion of her story. Alareer explains:

Her story tells of a girl very much connected to her father, as well as impacted by the fact that he was ruthlessly snatched by heavily armed Israeli soldiers when he was about to finish telling her most favourite story.... But, she does not let this defeat her. Endurance, or *sumud*, has long translated into taking action and seeking an ending to plights rather than just patiently enduring what the occupation imposes. Much as the protagonist seeks closure, Hanan herself seems to be seeking a place for herself as a young female writer. The story thus, becomes a journey of initiation, self-discovery and growth, both for the writer and the protagonist.(Alareer, 2014, p. 529)

In Hanan's own words, she says:

Because my people around the world think they have the right to speak on their behalf, Palestinians are suffering two opposing stereotypical images that are equally disturbing and doing the just cause injustice: the Palestinian as a helpless victim, a mere object of sympathy, or as a bloodthirsty savage. Palestinians are neither. (*Gaza Writes Back*, 197)

In Sarah Ali's *The Story of the Land*, we read a Palestinian's own narrative, one that reveals the sheer pain and suffering Palestinians are made to experience and the anguish the operation had caused and how through writing she becomes the voice of her generation:

During those twenty-three days of the Israeli attack on Gaza, we were constantly receiving news of Land being run over by Israeli bulldozers. We were told thousands of trees were gone. We were told my uncles' trees were gone. We were told our trees were gone. We were told Sharga, the whole district of eastern farmland, was gone. But these were rumours – or so my father wanted to believe..... (60)

“You hear me? They were 189 olive trees. Not 180. Not 181. Not even 188. 189 olive trees.”

He left the room a few minutes afterwards. Guilt was all I could feel.

That an Israeli soldier could bulldoze 189 olive trees on the Land he claims is part of the “God-given Land” is something I will never comprehend. Did he not consider the possibility that God might get angry? Did he not realize that it was a tree he was running over? If a Palestinian bulldozer were ever invented (Haha, I know!) and I were given the chance to be in an orchard, in Haifa for instance, I would never uproot a tree an Israeli planted. Not a Palestinian would. To Palestinians, the tree is sacred, and so in the Land bearing it. And as I talk about Gaza, I remember that Gaza is but a little part of Palestine. I remember that Palestine is bigger than Gaza. Palestine is the West Bank; Palestine is Ramallah; Palestine is Nablus; Palestine is Jenin; Palestine is Tulkarm; Palestine is Bethlehem; Palestine, most importantly is Yafa and Haifa and Akka and all those cities that Israel wants us to forget about. (64)

3. Conceptual Framework

Narrative Identity

Much research interest in the concept of narrative identity (McLean, Pasupathi & Pals, 2007; Adler, 2012; McAdams & McLean, 2013) has developed in recent years, however, the focus has mainly been on how Americans idiosyncratically make narrative identity of life in the form of stories that make meaning of their lives and which are strongly shaped by personal experience (Josselson, 2009) and culture (Hammock, 2008). McAdams and his team say that these stories are internalized and evolving and the reconstruction of the past and imagined future is presented as an “ongoing story with setting, scenes, characters, plots and themes” (*Narrating the Generative Life*, 476). McAdams also highlights Singer and Salovey's identification of self-defining memories as key components of narrative identity (243). These self-defining memories represent very clear and intense emotionally charged experiences in one's life, that then manifest as repeated concerns (243). It is people with these concerns for

and involvement in contributing towards a better future for succeeding generations that McAdams and his peers have labelled as highly generative adults.

Personality psychologist Dan McAdams and his team in looking at the “quint essentially American story about how to live a good life” told by adults who display tendencies of good mental health and desire to bring about a positive impact on the next generation identified narrative identities running through five prominent themes: “(a) *early advantage* (the protagonist is singled out for positive distinction), (b) *sensitivity to suffering* (the protagonist is moved by the suffering of other people or by oppression, inequality or some other social ill), (c) *moral steadfastness* (a strong moral framework guides the protagonist’s actions), (d) *redemption sequences* (negative events turn positive) and (e) *prosocial goals* (the protagonist expressingly aims to improve the lives of other people or society more generally). *Narrating the Generative Life*, 476).

4. A Legacy of Stories

Personality psychologist John Kotre observes that positive and proactive adults tend to have “a desire to invest one’s substance in forms of life and work that will outlive the self” (1984, *Outliving the Self*, p. 10). He says this desire does not arise from a fear of death, but rather from the “exuberance and expansiveness of life” (35). Kotre’s work highlights the need for such individuals to pass on a legacy through stories that are capable of transforming experiences of personal hardship, disappointment or pain into narratives that help redeem the past and provide understanding and wisdom for those in the present and the future. At the same time, Manheimer (1995) says that reliving and retelling are activities that help storytellers validate their own lives and hence form activities that provide a source of strength and meaning in their later lives, as well as for other generations who read these stories (19).

Gaza Writes Back contains stories that aspire to educate both Palestinians and the world and readers can sense that there are more stories that the writers wish to share about their plight as Palestinians living under Israeli occupation. Their continued resilience in the face of ongoing obstacles is reflected in their narrative as they resist and defy through their creative literary works attempting to silence them.

Conclusion

Without a doubt, stories told by our mothers, grandmothers and great-grandmothers help shape our lives as they make meaning out of their lives. The stories in *Gaza Writes Back* are mainly told by young Palestinian women, but what they lack in terms of years of life experiences, they make up in terms of the urgency to voice their dreams, views, pains and concerns as their future and their very lives and those of their loved ones continue to hang on a balance. There is a culture brought up on stories and storytelling which make up the very ingredients of Palestinian steadfastness (Alareer, 2014) and cleverly kept vividly alive by the women folk. At this unique position in history and during the aftermath of the Israeli Operation on Gaza, a collective narrative identity evolved from personal experience, transformed into a creative act of resistance to oppression and produced in the form of *Gaza Writes Back* is timely. Just like Americans have their stories of the American Dream, Palestinians, too, have their stories and their dreams, they dream of a free Palestine.

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