ROOTED CHARACTERS IN UPROOTED NARRATIONS:

Trees in Contemporary Palestinian Writings

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ABSTRACT • The topic of trees is usually overlooked in narrative in spite of their being a ubiquitous element of any landscape. When it comes to Palestinian trees, though, a further consideration is due. In recent times, trees have actually become a common topic in any political discourse regarding both Palestinians and Israelis. Hence, their presence in Palestinian writings is usually interpreted as applying to one of the two political positions involved. By tracing and analysing the representation of trees in Palestinian literature, this paper will demonstrate how intrinsically important trees are, not only in the everyday lives of the Palestinian people, but also within Palestinian culture, to the point that the respect for trees is passed down to the new diasporic generations of Palestinians scattered around the world. What is about to be discussed aims at showing the strong connection that all Palestinians have with the places and culture of their origins, this feeling of belonging emerging especially from writing dedicated to trees. By doing so, this paper intends to offer a reading of Palestinian literature that highlights the cultural bond that the Palestinian people have with the trees.

KEYWORDS • Anglophone Literature; Palestinian Literature; Trees; Sense of Belonging.

One touch of nature makes the whole world kin.
W. Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, Act III, Sc. iii.

Sudden and unexpected change is the trademark of our society. We thought we were used to it. However, the Covid19 pandemic has brought about so much change that 2020 will always be remembered as a historical turning point, for our view of the planet, of our individual communities and of our place within them has been completely reshaped. This is the first year in history when the entire human race has found itself so much at a loss as to what to do next. While, on the one hand, the pandemic has given us the opportunity to rethink and reconsider what humanity has achieved so far, on the other hand, the resulting constant state of uncertainty and insecurity have produced global chaos and a common sense of impotence, instability and isolation. Lockdowns have, in fact, created an atmosphere of fractured communities and the impression of belonging not to a nation but rather to smaller, more localised support groups. Our roots have been shaken.

Palestinian literature, mirroring the forced changes, chaos and instability suffered by the Palestinian people in the recent and distant past, is in a position to provide, better than others, a fertile source for insights into how literature at large can predict what to expect next, in terms of human reactions, feelings and new ways of approaching an irrevocably transformed lifestyle.

This paper intends to offer an interpretation of literature that goes beyond political and historical issues and an anthropocentric dimension by concentrating on an indirect approach to the geographical isolation and emotional state of the Palestinian people.

Specifically, by tracing and analysing the representation of trees in Palestinian literature, this paper will demonstrate how intrinsically important trees are, not only in the everyday lives of Palestinian farmers, but also in Palestinian culture, as if the roots of their trees bound together the uprooted Palestinian people, whether residing within the Palestinian Territories or elsewhere. Thus, what is about to be discussed aims at showing the strong connection that all Palestinians, including those who were born in diaspora, have with the places and culture of their origins, and how this feeling of belonging emerges from their writing.

I will refer to 'places' as being the multiple spaces endowed with meaning for those who are emotionally attached to them. Human geographers discussed at length the dichotomy 'space-place', mainly in terms of movement and stasis; particularly, this contradiction is emblematic of a symbiosis, since one depends on the other for a definition (Tuan 1977: 6). This dichotomy is also representative of the Palestinians as a people, for they find themselves moving to and from different geographical spaces, without being able to develop a long-lasting emotional attachment to them. Scattered in every corner of the world, Palestinians are often described – or define themselves – as 'uprooted'. Even those who now live in other countries often speak about their longing for their homeland, their constant feeling of being outsiders without any sense of belonging, in other words, their being without roots.

This phrase, 'sense of belonging', takes on both a positive and a negative meaning for the Palestinians, since it confines them to a perpetual state of insecurity and instability. Their writings, along with all their artistic works, expose an inner dualism that contrasts their strong feeling of belonging to the land of Palestine, to their sense of being *out* of every aspect of life in any other place that is not their homeland. Not surprisingly, Edward Said defined Palestinians as *insiders* turned into *outsiders*: a process that is still going on with new generations of young Palestinians and that is strictly connected with the common *topos* 'in and out' that can be traced in their form of art (Said 1986: 53; Rushdie 2010: 168).

Palestinians are, indeed, the embodiment of Anderson's 'imagined community'. They will never meet or hear most of their fellow Palestinians since they can never share the same geographical space, and yet they exhibit a strong sense of community, of being a nation, notwithstanding the fact that no Palestinian nation exists, in a strict political sense (Anderson 2006: 6). Given the aforementioned scenario, the way Palestinians depict themselves in their writing, whether fictional or otherwise, is almost inevitable. "Uprooted","displaced","unsettled" are words Palestinians cannot avoid as they reflect the sentiments they are constantly living with. And yet, their writings are not only an expression of their insecurities and frailties: they show how much, despite those feelings, in order to survive, they must hang on to their hopes and inhabit the memories of a past life they did not experience personally.

The Palestinians who fled from the country in 1948 have, in fact, passed down to the new generations a remarkable sense of community, of belonging to the land now mainly owned by Israel. This sense of connection emerges from their writing, especially with the descriptions of Palestinian landscape. In those descriptive passages, feelings of stability prevail, particularly when it comes to the descriptions of trees; as a matter of fact, Palestinian writers spend as much care in depicting trees as they do with the description of the characters in their stories.

As the ubiquitous element of any landscape, the tree embodies a focal point around which the constantly changing Palestinian identity revolves and evolves. Hence, trees can be rightfully

considered, not only as characters of a story, but also as members of the Palestinian community. This reading, however, is susceptible to layers of interpretations that usually result in a political discourse which pertains both to the Palestinians' and the Israelis' rhetoric.

Not just a metaphor, not merely a symbol, the tree is, in fact, a means of both expression and vindication for two ethnic groups, for it characterizes the habitat that the Palestinians and the Israelis claim as their own. In the construction of their national narratives – in order to define a collective identity – both Palestinians and Israelis have used (and still use) trees as symbols that may help support their claims. References to the past are therefore ever-present in their narrations through the descriptions of a Palestinian landscape 'inhabited' by olive trees, or the reminiscing of the time when the orange trees blossom. Even the act of the planting of a tree in memory of an event or a person is an extension of this sentiment.[1]

One might argue that this narrative approach to national history and identity can be properly understood only through a political interpretation. This would be true if Palestinians had adopted the 'tree talk' only *after* the occupation of Israel in 1948. But records of tree descriptions as a meaningful part of the land and of the Palestinian people's lives have been referred to in numerous sources (literary, archaeological, historical) throughout the centuries.

At the beginning of the Twentieth Century, the studies of the physician and ethnographer Tawfiq Canaan illustrate how, under Ottoman rule, Palestinians used to revere trees in their sacred places as much as saints to whom those places were dedicated.[2] A common practice was the association of a specific species of tree with a saint, to the point that there was almost no distinction between the two: "[i]n many cases, where the old tree was cut down, the inhabitants of the village, to whom that particular saint belongs, have planted a new one of the same species" (Canaan 1927: 30-31). Even nowadays, specific types of trees are associated with specific geographical areas: a connection that has contributed to building a sense of place for the Palestinian people, as well as a sense of belonging.

As mentioned before, despite the events that have led to the present situation, in contemporary Palestinian writing this attachment to the landscape, and particularly to the trees in it, is still strong.

In one of the most iconic works on Palestinian landscape, *Palestinian Walks. Notes on a Vanishing Landscape* (2007), Raja Shehadeh describes a landscape always shifting between past and present, but with a constant:

> There was a time, I'm told, when the hills around Ramallah were one large cultivated garden with a house by every spring. Olive trees dotted their slopes and grapevines draped the terrace walls. But by the late 1970s, when I returned from my law studies in London, these hills were no longer being cultivated. Except for the indomitable olive trees nothing that had been planted was growing in them. They had become an extensive nature reserve, with springs and little ponds where frogs hopped undisturbed and deer leapt up and down the terrace walls, where it was possible to walk unimpeded. (Shehadeh 2007: 5)

[1] Israel adopted the same rhetoric. The "Jewish National Fund" started a campaign of reclaiming of the Palestinian land with a widespread afforestation of the occupied territories to support their claim to the land and their historical ties to it (Bardenstein 1998: 162-163).

[2] Of course, the practice of worshipping trees was not exclusively Palestinian. As pointed out by James Grehan's work about agrarian religion, trees were the most common symbols of saints and their holy shrines across the entire Middle East area. As such, they were revered as much as the saint they were associated to (Grehan 2014: 134-140).

The beginning of the excerpt opens like the *incipit* of a mythical story, with the aside ("I'm told") that reinforces this first impression on the reader; the comparison of the Palestinian landscape to a "cultivated garden" in which men and Nature (represented by the houses and the olive trees, respectively) coexist in perfect harmony, draws the outlines of a bucolic, idyllic landscape even while evoking the mythical Garden of Eden. Throughout this timeless description, the voice of the narrator-Shehadeh is perceived in each word, corroborating the intended effect of a knowledge shared between the writer and the reader. The adversative 'but' that comes along, though, breaks this literary spell, bringing the reader in a definite time-space where man and landscape seem to part ways: man disappears from the landscape owing to the Israelis' more pervasive Occupation,[3] while the land becomes wilder, an "extensive nature reserve". The only unvaried element of this scenery is represented by the "indomitable olive trees": a fixed element in an ever-changing landscape. Moreover, the adjective 'indomitable' connected to the olive tree conveys the image of a giant, thick – and therefore old – tree, solidly rooted in the soil; an element of the landscape that cannot be tamed, either by Nature, or by man.

This representation of trees, especially olive trees, can be found in almost every Palestinian artwork or literary piece, whether the artists or writers reside within the Palestinian Territories or elsewhere. The studies of Juliane Hammer emphasise how in the case of Palestinians living in diaspora, their works of art and literature often depict "the Palestinian himself as a tree, rooted in the soil, having a long history, and unwilling to give up his homeland" (Hammer 2005: 65).

It can be noted that Shehadeh's style itself is always shifting between past and present: a device that mimics the changes in the landscape. This mode of narration is not unique to his writing, but is a shared feature among Palestinian writers. In addition, change as a theme is quite common in Palestinian narrative appearing at first sight as a negative feature, but undergoing a revaluation in the eyes of the characters, of the narrative and of the reader. Ultimately, the continuous shift between past and present gives insight into the Palestinians' ability to transform adversity into a resource. 'Rebirth' for Palestinians starts from the land in which they have left their roots and from the trees with which they identify, as Hammer has argued. It is therefore not surprising that the descriptions of landscape always focus on natural elements – hills, fields, flowers, trees – whose presence is familiar and reassuring, even when it is subjected to change due to the Israeli Occupation.

Land and its elements are, therefore, rather a character than a setting in every Palestinian story. The Palestinian 'national' poet Mourid Barghouti, for one, has never failed to represent images of 'all things Palestinian' by personalizing trees and highlighting the relationship that man establishes with them. Barghouti's novels markedly abound in descriptions of the arboreal character of the Palestinian landscape while he often emphasises the importance that fruit trees (mainly olive, but also orange, fig and lemon trees) have in the life and culture of his people. In *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here*, he writes:

> The olive in Palestine is not just agricultural property. It is people's dignity, their news bulletin, the talk of their village guesthouses during evening gatherings, their central bank when profit and loss are reckoned, the star of their dining tables, the companion to every bite they eat. It's the identity card that doesn't expire with the death of the owner but points to him, preserves his name, and blesses him anew with every grandchild and each season. (Barghouti 2011: 10)[4]

[3] The reference is to the Six-Day War, from the 5th to the 10th of June 1967, at the end of which Israel seized the Golan Heights, the Gaza Strip, the Sinai Peninsula and the West Bank. The outcome of this short but decisive war is still effective nowadays.

[4] Translated from Arabic by Humphrey T. Davies, 2011.

Descriptions of trees such as this one are mainly cultural-related. Only the beginning of the last sentence, "It's the identity card that doesn't expire with the death of the owner", carries a clear political statement. The rest of the passage portrays an agricultural society solely focused on the land as a means of livelihood. As a result, the fragmentation of landholdings – or their total disappearance, which Shehadeh aptly conveys in the excerpt above, – implies not only an irreversible change in the landscape, but also the destruction of a farming culture. Although Barghouti above refers especially to the fruit of the olive tree as an item that symbolises the life and the folklore of an entire community while retaining its economic and gastronomic value, the entire passage must be extended to the tree that produces it.

In his previous narrative work, *I Saw Ramallah* (2005), after thirty years of exile, Barghouti recounts his visit to his family house in Dar Ra'd, in the Deir Ghassanah village, focusing on a different tree in a different context:

> The Barghoutis live in seven neighbouring hillside villages called the villages of Bani Zeid, and at their center is Deir Ghassanah.
> We went to Dar Ra'd. A big house with a large, square courtyard, three sides of which are bordered by rooms; the fourth is part of the wall of the mosque in the village square. If you look down at the house from above you will see the cement domes that form the ceilings of the rooms surrounding the courtyard. A huge fig tree with a massive trunk and spreading branches dominated both house and courtyard. This tree fed our grandfathers and our fathers – there was not one person in the village who had not tasted its delicious fruit.
> The gate of Dar Ra'd looks out over vast fields and olive groves that slope down gradually, their paths branching out and becoming more and more rough until they form the fertile valley watered by 'Ein al-Deir. 'Ein al-Deir is the source of water, of stories, and of the livelihood of the village. (Barghouti 2005: 54-55)[5]

The prominent feature of the house and its surroundings is, again, the presence of the trees and their fruits. This peculiarity is heightened by the concentric spatial arrangement of the elements in the places described: the village of Deir Ghassanah is set at the centre of seven villages scattered on the hills near Ramallah. The Dar Ra'd house mirrors this structure; its square courtyard is surrounded by bedrooms on three sides, while the fourth side borders the village mosque, acting as a bridge that connects the private life of a Palestinian family to the public one. The position of the courtyard, right at the centre of the house, although it is undoubtedly the core of the building, has a focal point of its own, represented by the huge fig tree at its centre. With its grandeur, the tree 'dominates' the house, the courtyard and, ultimately, the scene. The last element of the house described, the see-through gate, opens onto vast, cultivated fields up to the Ein al-Deir stream. In this description, space appears boundless; not even the horizon can contain it. The house, for example, is clearly not limited to its masonry, but ideally it stretches beyond its structure.

The spatial arrangement gives prominence to the huge fig tree, a symbol of well-being, of life and also a memento of history and tradition: "[t]his tree fed our grandfathers and our fathers". The fruit gathers in itself an historical memory of both the place and the personal history of the inhabitants and the landscape that hosts it, partly natural, partly artificial, forms a consistent whole, with its sequence of "fields", "paths" and "valleys" that connect the village to its life source: Ein al-Deir "source of water, of stories, and of the livelihood of the village".

[5] Translated from Arabic by Ahdaf Soueif, 2000.

The space-time of the narration is firmly anchored in the past, allowing the reader to collect the details described one by one; time does not expand nor shrink, but flows at the same speed of the narrator's gaze and of the memories arising from the elements of the landscape. Barghouti's writing enhances the natural features of the landscape, giving them a value that is, at the same time, personal and collective for all Palestinians. The most distinguished feature of this excerpt is the sense of continuity: each element of the landscape, natural or artificial, is connected in an ideal continuum. Also, the nature described is clearly a part of the Palestinian community, that possesses a 'vitality' of its own.

As noted by the geographer Parmenter:

> The landscape of Palestine was alive with meaning and value for its inhabitants just as it was for Western Christians and Jews. For Palestinians, however, these meanings and values arose from the daily personal and communal interactions of people with their environment. (Parmenter 1994: 25-26)

Further on in her study, Parmenter underlines how, since the 1950s, Palestinian literary production presents physical attachment to the land as a recurring *topos*: the territory is no longer seen as an abstract homeland but as *the* mother of the Palestinian people, and therefore a symbol of shelter and protection for its children (1994: 44). In Barghouti this parental role is entrusted to the fig tree and the river Ein al-Deir. Although dated, Parmenter's study can still be considered to be one of the few analyses more concerned with the geographical and anthropological aspects of Palestinian literature and culture, than with political issues.

Undoubtedly, in recent times, trees in the land of Palestine have acquired a political value that complements the bond Palestinians have with them in their works of art. To force Palestinian farmers from their land, Israeli settlers and soldiers have routinely uprooted trees. In 2009, Haaretz journalist Gideon Levy wrote about the grief of Palestinian villagers whose olive trees had been uprooted or damaged by Israeli settlers in the village of Burin (Nablus Governorate). To fight this practice, Palestinians plant trees to protect their land from confiscation: a new form of peaceful activism called "Green Intifada" which has turned agriculture into resistance to the Israeli Occupation (Van Hollen 2012). According to law scholar Irus Braverman, these acts of tree-planting and landscaping are "acts of war" because they symbolise "the embodiment of Palestinian nationhood" as well as "the Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation" (Braverman 2009a: 2-3; 2009b: 3).

According to the Israeli journalist Levy, farmers considered their trees primarily as family members, as living, innocent beings that cannot fend for themselves. Rather than taking a political stance, Levy lingers on the grief of the farmers who have witnessed the wanton destruction of their trees by reporting their touching complaints: "If I had been there, I'd have told them, cut off my hands, but don't cut down my trees – What did the tree do to them, for them to treat it like this?" or "These trees are like my children" (Levy 2009).

In the same vein, Pamela J. Olson, an American journalist and writer, described the uprooting of olive trees she witnessed during the stay in Ramallah evoked in her memoir, *Fast Times in Palestine* (2012):

> Each tree was like a member of the family, raised and cared for and climbed and combed over many lifetimes, an endlessly, renewable source of dignified income and indispensable olives and oil. I'd heard families have bitter arguments over the fate of a single tree. Losing thirteen at once must have felt like a massacre. (Olson, 2012: 147)

Quite unique in its kind, Olson's work can be described as a coming-of-age story of an American woman (Olson herself) who backpacked across the Palestinian Territories with only a few scarce notions of their history and political situation. Throughout her heartfelt work, Olson was

confronted with an unforeseen reality that led to the reshaping of her understanding of Palestinians and of the Middle East. The reader undergoes a similar journey, experiencing the same emotions and calling into question principles and feelings as much as the writer had. Olson's work with its humane perspective leads the reader to empathise with the Palestinians under the Occupation.

What is interesting in these 'foreign' points of view is that they never fail to notice the bond existing between Palestinians and the trees in their land, a bond that goes beyond any economical or materialistic considerations. Returning to native accounts, such as those by Raja Shehadeh, currently based in Ramallah, and Barghouti, Palestine-born but living in Cairo, we may note that they confirm the impressions non-Palestinian observers registered about Palestinians' feeling of place, bringing to their reports however, direct experience of the places they write about and the sense that their feelings are shared by most Palestinians.

The excerpts presented so far in this paper were sourced from the works of Palestine born authors. The two writers share a common view of Palestine as a land, for they have both experienced the places they write about. The same can be said about the works of authors of Palestinian origins who have never lived in the places of their ancestors, and yet, they are able to convey the same sentiments, impressions and descriptions of place reported in the writings analysed so far. For instance, in the novel *Mornings in Jenin* (2011), the American-Palestinian writer Susan Abulhawa portrays the love of a *fellah* (an Arab peasant; plural, *fellahin*) for his land and trees in the same terms described by Levy, Olson and Barghouti:

> Sixteen days later … Yeyha had made his way back to Ein Hod, undetected by soldiers. "That terrain is in my blood!" he proclaimed. "I know every tree and every bird. The soldiers do not."
> For days he had roamed his fields, greeting his carob and fig trees with the excitement of a man reuniting with his family. He had slept contentedly in their shade, as he had done at afternoon siesta all his life.
> … Yeyha had left the camp with stubborn solemnity, wearing his most dignified clothes, and he returned looking like a jolly beggar with as much fruit and as many olives as he could carry in his keffiyeh, his pockets and his hands. Despite his vagabond appearance, he came invested with euphoria and the people lifted him to heights of esteem befitting. (Abulhawa 2011: 43-44)

A fictional, multi-generational story about a Palestinian family forced to flee Palestine, *Mornings in Jenin* is also an accurate account of the human aspects of the conflict. The setting of the passage is the aftermath of the events of May 1948, the Palestinian *Nakba* (The Catastrophe). The patriarch of the Ablulheja family, Yeyha, was forced to flee with his family, leaving behind all his property. From that day on, he had aged visibly, and as time went by, he became more miserable every day as Abulhawa painstakingly describes. The sudden decision to go back and see, touch, feel his plants and trees, though, gave him a renovated vitality, transforming him into a "jolly beggar … returning with his family".

The comparison between trees and family echoes the above mentioned words spoken by the *fellah* whose trees were uprooted. Yeyha's attachment to his land and his trees is so strong that it affects his mental and physical health. From the excerpt above, we can note that the connection with trees encompasses also their fruit: what Yehya carried on his way back were his most proud possessions, almost as if they were his children.

In short, trees in Palestinian writings, are at the centre of a rich web of significance, to use Geertz' terminology, symbolising Nature and embodying collective feelings and experiences. They act as a sort of indicator of the state of the nation. In the past, when they were looked after and respected, they thrived. In the present, when they are abandoned or uprooted, they strive to stay alive or even die. They play both a political and a sentimental role. While the "Green Intifada" helps the Palestinians residing in the Territories to re-assert and re-establish their presence in their

lands, Palestinians born in diaspora consider trees as depositories for collective memory helping reaffirm the existence of the Palestinian people *before* the foundation of the State of Israel in 1948.

Yehya's story is but an example of an all-pervading theme in the writings of Palestinians who were born in diaspora; respect toward trees seems, in fact, to have been passed down from one generation to another, creating a form of continuity in a community in which discontinuity prevails.

The Palestinian-American poet Naom Shiab Nye, despite growing up in the States, offers another example of this legacy. Her poem, *My Father and the Figtree* (1980), tells of her father's love for his homeland and his culture, a cultural heritage that he passed onto Nye:

> For other fruits my father was indifferent.
> He'd point at the cherry tree and say,
> "See those? I wish they were figs."
> In the evenings he sat by my bed
> weaving folktales like vivid little scarves.
> They always involved a figtree.
>
> At age six I ate a dried fig and shrugged.
> "That's not what I'm talking about!" he said,
> "I'm talking about a figtree straight from the earth—
> gift of Allah!—on a branch so heavy it touches the ground.
> I'm talking about picking the largest fattest sweetest fig
> in the world and putting it in my mouth."
> (Here he'd stop and close his eyes.) [Nye 1995: 20]

A few lines after the description of her father savouring figs through memory, Nye speaks about the family's constant moving from place to place in the United States. In this life of wandering, the exiles used to plant everything from vegetables to fruit trees although her father always refused to plant a fig tree. Such a refusal is emblematic of the identification of a Palestinian with a tree, and therefore with his homeland. The tree here symbolises an entire culture; it represents a land that lives mainly in "folktales like vivid little scarves". The same kind of tree planted in a different soil cannot be the same tree, nor its fruits could have the same taste. In this passage, the regret for the loss of the tree and the refusal to replicate it in the new country is connected to the loss of Palestinian cultural heritage.

Another example along the same lines can be found in the novel *Mornings in Jenin*. In the following excerpt, the main character, Amal, is reminiscing about one of the most significant memories of her childhood, an old olive tree, which is also a character in her story, even the main protagonist in some pivotal scenes:

> Old Lady was a fifteen-hundred-year-old olive tree with serpentine arms that twisted into the air like Samson's locks bursting from the center of a grazing pasture. Fruit dangled from hundreds of knobby little twigs on an enormous misshapen trunk, which was also a resting spot for local shepherds.
> Baba once told me that no one owned Old Lady. "This old girl was here long before any of us, and she'll be here long after we're gone. How can you own that, habibti?"[6] …

[6] Standard font in the text. It means, "my beloved" (female).

> "No one can own a tree," he continued. "It can belong to you, as you can belong to it. We come from the land, give our love and labor to her, and she nurtures us in return. When we die, we return to the land. In a way, she owns us. Palestine owns us and we belong to her." (Abulhawa 2011: 62)

The description of the tree is akin to those seen in some of the earlier quotations: it projects an image of grandeur, of strength, which is impressed on the reader thanks to the analogy with the biblical figure of Samson.[7] Just like the hair of the Israelite hero, the branches of Old Lady emanate strength, while its thick trunk (its body, so to say) is firmly rooted in the centre of a grassy pasture (a sign of the lushness of the place of which the tree is the focal part). The 'strong' character of the tree and its centenary presence in the place, as its thick and deformed trunk shows, turn it into a comfort and rest spot for shepherds who find safety and refuge in its forked branches.[8]

The sense of belonging that emerges from this passage brings together three recurring and already discussed elements present in narratives related to Palestinian landscape: trees, land and man's bond with them. These fundamental elements of contemporary Palestinian identity have been passed on, as Abulhawa's and Nye's writings show, to the generations born in diaspora.

Even in an autobiographical text such as *Sharon and My Mother-in-Law* (2004), written by the Palestinian architect and writer Suad al-Amiry, that follows the life of the citizens of Ramallah from 1995 to 2004, under the Occupation, the author's passionate interest in the landscape inevitably stands out. In her writing, as in the writing of other exiles, the quiet but relevant presence of a tree in the Palestinian landscape can make its appearance at any moment with its features but also metaphorically, for its role in the community.

Whatever the scenery, trees are described, not only in their characteristics, but also for the role that they play; whether they are in an open field or in the city centre, in the writing there is always a focus on them that does not escape the reader's attention, as the following excerpt shows. It is taken from the aforementioned work *Sharon and My Mother-in-Law* (2004). In this autobiography, the narrator Amiry is mainly focussed on how people reacted to the life under Israeli military rule, although her passionate interest in the landscape inevitably emerges from her writing.

> For one reason or another, I always felt sorry for housewives. Every morning as I drove my car to the university, I would see Um Samir[9] on the balcony hanging out the laundry of her seven little ones, Um Maher taking her two handicapped sons to sit in her sunny garden, Um Mustafa polishing the marble steps of their nouveau riche house. It was only watching Um Sa'ad, who often sat in the shadow of the gigantic walnut tree embroidering a beautifully colored dress or destemming thyme leaves, that made me weary of the rhythm of my and Salim's lifestyles,[10] which involved continuous rushing in and out of our house. (Amiry 2005: 51)

A peculiar feature of the landscape depicted in this excerpt is its fixity, in spite of the point of view of the narration, which is in motion, as Amiry, driving in a car, observes various characters rooted in a specific space. The stillness of the living creatures in the landscape ("on the balcony",

[7] *Judges*, XIII, XVI.

[8] It is interesting to note that the name of the tree – which both in English and in Arabic is a masculine noun – is here feminine. «Old Lady», is meant to inspire respect, devotion, care. The stress about its production of fruits, "from hundreds of knobby little twigs", makes it the embodiment of mother-Nature.

[9] In Arabic, '*Um*' means 'mother'. Followed by a name, it means 'mother of'.

[10] Salim is Suad Amiry's husband.

"in the garden",) seems to equate them to trees both being rooted in the territory. The normalcy of the everyday life of Ramallah's inhabitants, appears to be 'rooted' in *that* specific landscape.

The appearance of "the gigantic walnut tree" in the scene seems, therefore, inevitable. Embroidery and destemming are the common deeds performed in its shadow: two traditional acts characterized by slow, methodical and repetitive gestures conflicting with the movement of the observer. This last detail also seems to iterate how deeply rooted the inhabitants are in the place, to the point of adopting the habit of carrying out traditional activities around a natural element. The tree in this passage serves as a catalyst for the narrator, the reader and especially for the characters in the scene, since it contributes to building up a sense of community as well as a sense of place.

Palestinian narrative is rich in these kinds of representations of trees. Aside from their predictable presence in the landscape, trees are also portrayed as living beings into which Palestinians pour their feelings, turn to for solace, almost as if they were part of their family and their community.

In her first novel, journalist-writer Claire Hajaj – of mixed Palestinian and Jewish heritage – tells a story in which trees trigger the events that involve the main character. *Ishmael's Oranges* (2015) begins shortly before the *Nakba*, with the seven-year-old protagonist Salim, the youngest child of a Palestinian farming family, anxiously waiting for his first harvest. The relationship between the boy and what he considers *his* trees fills the first pages of the novel, along with the ominous sense of doom that will change History and his life forever. In this part of the novel, what Salim, and the entire community of his village, feel for their trees, echoes what has been described so far in this paper. When the idyllic life in the village is broken by the arrival of the Jews, the fear and disbelief of the people are reflected in the trees:

> Back in their house, the long, slow Sunday morning dawned and gradually the noise of the shelling stopped. A dull silence fell. No mosque called the morning or the noon prayers. As the heat of the day rose, so did the sound of car horns, the rumble of engines and the babble of frightened voices. Salim thought they were coming from the port. Isak Yashuv was right. The whole of Jaffa was in flight.
> Salim sat with his mother and brothers in the kitchen listening to the radio. … The heat of the afternoon became too much for Salim, and he went to pace around the garden. A yellow haze filled the sky. It seemed to him that the trees themselves were trembling, their leaves shuddering in the still air. Did trees feel frightened? He rubbed his hand on the bark of his tree, feeling the notches marking his growth. 'Don't worry,' he whispered into the wood. 'It will be over soon. Just keep growing, until the next harvest.' He stood there into the uncertain afternoon, saying it again and again under his breath. Don't be afraid. Don't be afraid. (Hajaj 2014: 31-32)

The setting of the scene is the family house of the main character. Its position on the top of a hill lets the family – as well as the reader – witness what happens in the rest of the village. As a prelude to an imminent disaster, silence dominates the scene described in the first part of the excerpt, effectively creating a disruption with the previous, lively account of life in the village. Silence represents also a truce for the inhabitants of Jaffa, for it signals the possibility of an escape. What follows, in fact, is the opposite of silence: it is a cacophony that changes once again the place and the feelings of the people in it. In the midst of this transition from silence to chaos, the inhabitants of the house become spectators of the birth of a new place that is mainly observed and explored by the sense of hearing: hearing the silence, then the noises of frightened voices, car honks all directed to the port, escaping from a place that was serene just a few hours before, triggers emotions of fear and insecurity that force the young protagonist to seek refuge in the only place that seems to be still unspoiled by chaos, the orange orchard. Here, while Salim walks through it in order to retrieve a sense, any sense, of security, the narration focuses on the trees that seem to

'tremble', as if they can feel what people feel, in an ideal connection of both Nature and Man. In order to placate his fears, the child attempts to reassure the trees: this act represents Salim's realization that life, as he knew it, has changed forever. In this instance, trees act as a prism through which the Palestinian character can try to cope with the harsh, "uncertain" reality he's living, just like the whole Palestinian nation is.

In conclusion, what emerges from the Palestinian writings presented in this paper is primarily a strong bond between the Palestinian people and the symbols of their land, which come to epitomize identity, rootedness and resilience. In the excerpts analysed, the trees may be overlooked by the reader, since their presence is taken for granted in such landscapes, but then an adjective used to describe them, their position in space, or their communion with the people and their everyday lives, make the trees stand out from the scene and from the text. Trees and their roots unite and sustain the Palestinian people and their presence in their writings transmits a more profound understanding of their culture and identity which is not necessarily connected with politics. Thus, the phrase "family tree", which so evocatively represents a family history, acquires a more literal sense in the Palestinian vernacular, for it usually refers to a tree that belongs to the family or is considered a family member. As a member of the family then, a tree is rightfully a proper character in every Palestinian story.

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