



## NARRATIVE STUDY OF RABA'I AL-MADHOUN'S *THE LADY FROM TEL AVIV*

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### ABSTRACT



"Sometimes a homeland becomes a tale. We love the story because it is about our homeland and we love our homeland even more because of the story."

— Refaat Alareer, Gaza Writes Back

Literature, an amalgamation of facts and fiction, always plays a pivotal role in translating the pain, agony and sufferings of humans by portraying the depth of human psyche and revealing their hidden dependencies and wounds. Telling a story is technically known as narrative in literature. Among the three main kinds of narrative writings such as: personal, imaginative and narrative, the personal narrative is the most celebrated narrative writing in which the writer's own life and experiences are presented.

This paper is a narrative study of Raba'i al-Madhoun's elegy on the Palestinian Nakba i.e. *Lady from Tel Aviv* reflecting how stylistic technique of narrative, stream of consciousness in the form of interior monologue, story within story and metaphor of house and shadow help the writer in portraying the personal experiences and pangs of exile.

**Keywords:** *Palestine Literature, Narrative Technique, Metaphor, Stream of Consciousness.*

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Human beings have always been in the habit of telling stories through various means of communication i.e. art, dance, music, painting, sculptures, cinema, and literature. Literature, an amalgamation of facts and fiction, has always played a pivotal role in translating the pain, agony and sufferings of humans by portraying the depth of human psyche and revealing their hidden dependencies and wounds. Telling a story is technically known as narrative in literature. It can be in the oral, written or imagined form transforming a piece of work in to a living organism. Moreover, Barthes has rightly said,

“Under the almost infinite diversity of forms, narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor been a people without narrative. All classes, all human groups, have their narratives, enjoyment of which is very often shared by men with different, even opposing, cultural backgrounds. Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, trans-historical, trans-cultural: it is simply there, like life itself.”(Barthes 237-272)

Therefore, the success of a literary piece lies not only in the theme or story but also in its way of expression or narration. Although Gerald Prince defines narrative as ‘the recounting (as product and process, object and act, structure and structuration) of one or more real or fictitious events communicated by one, two or several narrators to one, two or several narrates’ (Prince186) but narrative stands for more than this. For Umberto Eco it is like playing game ‘by which we give sense to the immensity of things that happened, are happening, or will happen in the actual world. By reading narrative, we escape the anxiety that attacks us when we try to say something true about the world. This is the consoling function of narrative — the reason people tell stories, and have told stories from the beginning of time.’(Umberto Eco 87)

Among the three main kinds of narrative writings such as: Personal, Imaginative and Narrative, the personal narrative is the most celebrated narrative writing in which the writer’s own life and

experiences become the outcome of this kind of narrative.

Under the light of narrative techniques used by the Palestinian Diaspora writers, Raba’i al-Madhoun’s *The Lady from Tel Aviv*, an elegy on the Palestinian Nakba and a major movement in the history still shaping its present, is worth exploration. The catastrophe of Nakba is not about the people who were exiled from their own homeland rather; metaphorically it is about the whole land that was exiled culturally, religiously, socially and economically. Arnold Toynbee, the well-known British historian expressed this harrowing horror of Nakba as,

“The tragedy in Palestine is not just a local one; it is a tragedy for the world, because it is an injustice that is a menace to the world’s peace”. (John and Hadawixiv)

*Through The Lady of Tel Aviv*, Raba’i al-Madhoun has portrayed how Israel and British Government’s lunatic belief of ‘Land without a people for a people without land’ turned the whole paradise like Palestine into purgatory. It is a kind of memoir of Raba’i al-Madhoun who through his main character Walid Dehman, a London-based Palestinian born journalist, reflects his own experiences of his return to his homeland for after thirty eight years with his British passport because he was a Palestinian that’s why he was not ‘able to go back since 1967’.(Madhoun: 84).

The aftermath of the Nakba catastrophe shaping the horrific present in the form of nakba in continuum decades after is the central theme of this semi-autobiographical work. At the backdrop, it also reflects the complexity and ambiguity of this catastrophe through Dana, an Israeli actress who is on her way back to Tel Aviv meets Walid Dehman. Both Walid and Dana are ordinary characters presented to showcase the most gruesome Nakba experienced by people from both sides of the border. The strength of this novel is in Madhoun’s powerful portrayal of Walid’s expectations and desires from Palestine and his experiences after landing and during his stay in Palestine. His focus is on desires, home, memories, nakba in continuum, identity complexity and socio-political situation in Palestine.



### THE BACKGROUND OF THE NOVEL

In the first half of the twentieth century especially in the year 1948, Palestine witnessed major changes in the form of al-ghurba (exile or Diaspora), al-nakba (disaster or calamity) and, the birth of the state of Israel which led to the slaughter of ten thousands of Palestinians and exodus of hundreds of thousands of them as the consequent of Zionist movement of Israelis. Aoude writes,

"In the year 1948, about 750,000 Palestinians were uprooted from their homes and fled to neighboring Arab Countries and other parts of the world". (Aoude 153:167) In the year 1967, Palestinians living in the refugee camps were again forced to set out for another exile and banishment from their homeland. Most of these Palestinians living in the West Bank, Gaza are still facing the voluntary exile and deportation while many others have been living in the Diaspora in other Arab or Western countries. Because of these tragic events leading to the discontinued lives of Palestinians, literature produced by Palestinians after 1948 was mainly and famously known as the Literature of Exile as migration from Palestine and Israel occupied areas make up a large percept of Palestinian Diaspora. Ahmad H. Sa'di describes the effect of the Nakba on the Palestinians in these words:

"Al-Nakba was the moment in history when the Palestinians' world order, which had been considered part of the "laws of nature", was violently and dramatically altered: their legal rights as having Personae – that is, as being legal subjects – were greatly diminished or obliterated altogether. Their cultural and physical environment underwent a dramatic transformation; and their existence as a national community ceased to be taken for granted (Sa'di 185).

Palestinian literati, through varying shades of writing have been expressing the alarming horrors of this catastrophe and the sufferings of the exiled people. Among those great Palestinian Writers who wrote the literature of exile are Mahmoud Darwish (1941-2008), Ghassan Kanafani (1936-1972), Jabra Ibrahim Jabra (1920-1994), Emile Habiby (1921-1996), Edward Said (1935-2003) Jabra Ibrahim Jabra (1919-1994) etc.

Among these luminaries in the world of Palestinian literature is the award-winning author Raba'i al-Madhoun (1945), who was born in al-Majdal in Palestine. In 1948 Palestinian Exodus, he along with his family was displaced for sixteen years when he had to live in the camp at Khan Younis. In 1956, he witnessed first-hand the slaughter of two hundred and fifty people at Khan Younis and almost a decade later, he went to Alexandria University for his studies. Then in the year 1980, he went to London. As quoted by Elison Flood in *The Guardian*, he revealed this pain and suffering,

"As a Palestinian novelist, I was born and raised during 'the catastrophe' [Nakba] that spanned the period since before 1948 until now. Consequently, I never lived a normal life in my homeland. I have been, as a result, hugely concerned with the Palestinian cause." (Flood)

Although he himself witnessed the sufferings and trauma of the painful Nakba but it took him almost three decades to pen down this pain, agony, and trauma born out of the unprecedented Nakba in the form of his semi autobiographical work *The Lady from Tel Aviv*. It is constructed with a technique and unique literary style that makes it best seller.

How a story is narrated is commonly known as point of view. Percy Lubbock defines the point of view as:

"The whole intricate question of method, in the craft of fiction, I take to be governed by the question of the point of view-the question of the relation in which the narrator stands to the story and his book. The novelist can either describe the characters from outside, as an impartial or partial onlooker, or he can assume omniscience and describe them from within or he can place himself in the position of one of them. The question of point of view is directly related to the power of the writer-the creator." (Lubbock 12-16)

As far as *The Lady from Tel Aviv* is concerned, the first two sections are narrated by the third person narrator to give the background



information about Walid's childhood memories, experience and his relationship with paradise like Palestine and its people and the second part of these first two sections i.e. Departure deals with his departure to Egypt for his further studies and his intricate relationship and loss of his homeland and the people in it. These details help the readers to feel closer to Walid and connect his feelings when he returns to his homeland after almost forty years.

The rest two sections are narrated in first person narrative to describe the incessant events took place in Walid's life after returning to homeland. Walid tells his own story in the third section i.e. Return: beginning with his meeting with Dana, an Israel actress and his flight mate, his arrival to Tel Aviv and his encounter with conflicting feelings, sufferings, nostalgia during the Israeli- controlled BeitHanoun crossing and finally ending with his return and reunion with his mother, relatives and his homeland and later on in the fourth section i.e. Epilogue dealing with his return to London.

To present the theme of loss of home and Palestine-Israel conflict, Raba'i al-Madhoun used the technique of stream of consciousness, interior monologue, hypodiegesis, metaphors and humour.

The term 'Stream of Consciousness' was first coined by philosopher and psychologist William James in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) and is commonly interchanged with interior monologue to present the consciousness and psyche of the character through the first person narrative in a seemingly transparent and uninterrupted way. In *The Lady from Tel Aviv*, Raba'i al-Madhoun has used interior monologue extensively to portray Walid's dilemma, complexity and doubts of revealing his Palestinian identity,

"The question surprises me. From the moment I sat down in my seat until the moment she asks the question, it has been bothering me. At first I am nervous, too unsettled to choose an answer. I could say, for instance, that I am Greek or Cypriot or Lebanese, or anything. I could pick any other nationality-anything but Palestinian. I am afraid someone might overhear and shout: 'Palestinian! This man is a Palestinian!' what if someone got up and made a public

announcement, 'Ladies and Gentlemen: please be advised that there is a Palestinian on board.'" (Madhoun: 83)

The use of Hypodiegesis i.e. story within a story has symbolic and psychological significance. It 'may disclose the background of characters or events, tell of myths and legends that influence the plot, or even seem to be extraneous diversions from the plot'. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Story\\_within\\_a\\_story](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Story_within_a_story))

In *The Lady from Tel Aviv*, on his way to Israel airport Walid meets Dana and shares his unfinished story of Adel and Leila who experiences their love in exile as they belong to the different sides of the border. This story helps the writer to reinforce the sense of exile in love, trauma, and pain of the people of both sides of the countries. Walid looks forward to complete this story through his own experiences during his stay in Palestine. The title for this unfinished work is suggested by Dana as 'One House and Two Shadows' which is again symbolic and metaphorical in nature. Walid relates this with the situation of Palestine,

"Throughout history, this land was a field for sowing shadow and light. Only in their essential opposition do light and shadow take shape and last. Look at shadow. It is born in light, and it dies in darkness. What a strange and fragile thing: it comes to life as soon as light is born, and disappears when the light dies. Shadow is patient. It is like Job. It bears us and perseveres when it is high noon and our footsteps crush the shadows underfoot." (Madhoun: 93)

It is clear that when sun rises, everything gets one shadow. But to highlight the occupation of Palestine, Madhoun has compared the situation with one house that has two shadows. The light i.e. freedom which is for everyone on this earth has been stolen from Palestinians. The shadow of the Sun rising from the direction of Israel is presented as death, destruction, pain, suffering, deprivation, isolation, restrictions, darkness, conflict and problems faced by Palestinians. This shadow is also compared with Job, the Prophet who once was good and prosperous family man but later on was 'beset with horrendous disasters that take away all that he



holds dear, including his offspring, his health, and his property. He struggles to understand his situation and begins a search for the answers to his difficulties'. (Wikipedia)

It is said 'to have humour, you have to have hope'. Madhoun has portrayed the troubles with humour and irony as he is hopeful for the future of Palestine. During the attacks on the houses of Palestinians by Israeli army, Walid started yelling at them,

"What do you think you are doing boys? Don't you have any better place to go? People live here, you know- and now they are going to shoot at us. As soon as I say this, the missile hits. I watched myself do two somersaults through the air and land far from the house. It was God's mercy that the missile landed inside the house, or I would have died along with those two boys. This was the fourth time that my house was destroyed by Sharon. God damn Sharon and everything to do with him- does he think my house is a military post, a training camp? Every time I build a new house, he blows it up- does he think that Hamas leaders follow me around each time I move? (Madhoun:19)

Like Job, through Walid's character, Raba'i al-Madhoun also undergoes the pangs of exile, searches and regains his own Palestinian identity. The stylistic technique of narrative, stream of consciousness in the form of interior monologue, story within story and metaphor of house and shadow helps him to portray the personal experiences and pangs of exile and present the amplified contrast between two worlds i. e. Israel and Palestine.

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