

Identity and Resistance in Bassem Khandakji's *A Mask That is the Color of the Sky*: A Thing Theory Perspective

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Abstract

*This article explores Bassem Khandakji's award-winning novel **A Mask That is the Color of the Sky**, through the lens of Thing Theory. It argues that objects within the narrative reveal deeper insights into Palestinian identity, resistance, and cultural memory. Central to the analysis are the symbolic roles of the mask, archaeological relics, and other artifacts, which transcend their materiality to embody complex histories and personal struggles. Thing Theory, as articulated by scholars like Bill Brown and Arjun Appadurai, posits that objects are active participants in shaping human experience. In Khandakji's novel, the mask becomes a metaphor for the fluidity of identity, while the relics connect the protagonist to his heritage, illustrating the dynamic value of objects. This study highlights the power of material objects in association with identity and historical narratives, showing how Khandakji uses objects to deepen our understanding of the Palestinian experience. By transforming everyday items into potent symbols, the novel addresses broader discourses on identity, resistance, and cultural memory, underscoring the relevance of Thing Theory in literary analysis. This investigation offers a richer, more nuanced interpretation of the novel, inviting readers to reconsider the interplay between objects and meaning in shaping human consciousness.*

Keywords:

Thing Theory; Palestinian identity; resistance; Bassem Khandakji; *A Mask That is the Color of the Sky*; cultural memory.

الهوية والمقاومة في رواية "قناع بلون السماء" لباسم خندقجي: من منظور نظرية الشيء
المستخلص

تهدف هذا الورقة البحثية استقراء رواية باسم خندقجي "قناع بلون السماء" من خلال عدسة نظرية الشيء. وتبين كيف تكشف الأشياء المادية الموجودة داخل السرد عن رؤى عميقة للهوية الفلسطينية وحركات المقاومة والذاكرة الثقافية. من الأمور المركزية في التحليل الأدوار الرمزية للقناع، وبعض القطع الأثرية، وغيرها من الأشياء التي تتجاوز أهميتها المادية لتجسد تاريخاً معقداً للهوية والنضال والمقاومة وأيضاً الصراعات الشخصية. نظرية الشيء، كما عبر عنها النقاد مثل بيل براون وأرجون أبادوراي، تفترض أن الأشياء المادية لا تقتصر أهميتها على الدور التقليدي الذي تستخدم فيه بل هي مشارك نشط في تشكيل التجربة الإنسانية. في رواية خندقجي، يصبح القناع كناية عن ميوعة الهوية، بينما تربط الآثار واللقى الأثرية بطل الرواية بتراثه الفلسطيني الذي يحاول العدو الصهيوني طمس ملامحه، مما يوضح القيمة الديناميكية للأشياء. تسلط هذه الدراسة الضوء على قوة الأشياء المادية في التوسط بين الهوية والسرد التاريخي، وتعرض كيف يستخدم خندقجي الأشياء لتعميق فهمنا للتجربة الفلسطينية والمعاناة المستمرة عبر الأجيال. من خلال تحويل العناصر اليومية إلى رموز قوية، تتعامل الرواية مع قضايا أكبر حول الهوية والمقاومة والذاكرة الثقافية، مما يؤكد أهمية نظرية الشيء في التحليل الأدبي. تقدم نظرية الشيء تفسيراً أكثر ثراءً ودقة للرواية، وتدعو القراء إلى إعادة النظر في التفاعل بين الأشياء والمعنى في تشكيل الوعي البشري بصورة عامة.

الكلمات الدالة:

نظرية الشيء؛ الهوية الفلسطينية؛ باسم خندقجي؛ قناع بلون السماء؛ الثقافة المادية؛ الذاكرة الثقافية.

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Palestinian writer Bassem Khandakji, born in Nablus in 1983, studied journalism and media at An-Najah National University. His literary career began with short stories and poems but was abruptly interrupted by his arrest in 2004 by the Zionist entity when he was only 21 years old. Khandakji defies the stereotype of the helpless prisoner. Despite being sentenced to three life sentences, he continues his resistance by pursuing education and writing. He earned a degree in political science from Al-Quds University while in prison and continues to write under harsh conditions, often smuggling his works out in small batches to be compiled and published. Khandakji's dedication to his craft, even under oppressive circumstances, underscores his resilience and commitment to the Palestinian cause, literature, and culture. *A Mask That is the Color of the Sky*, Khandakji's latest novel, was published in 2023 by Dar Al-Adab in Beirut and won the Arab Novel Award in 2024, selected from 133 nominations. The narrative centers on a Palestinian archaeology researcher and aspiring author living in an unnamed camp outside Ramallah. The novel is considered the first part of Khandakji's Mirrors Quartet, aiming to correct Western and Israeli narratives about the events in Palestine. The protagonist, Nour, represents the struggles and resilience of the Palestinian people through his journey.

In his article "Point Blank: Bassem Khandakji," Mohamed Salmawy, a renowned Egyptian writer and journalist, predicted the potential impact of Khandakji's work before it won the prestigious International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF), commonly known as the Arab Booker Prize. Salmawy noted that although Khandakji's name might not have been widely recognized at the time or nomination, it was likely to gain international fame if he secured the prize. According to the Palestinian Prisoner's Society (PPS), "Khandakji won the award after being subjected to a rampant incitement campaign by the Israeli media subsequent to his nomination" (WAFA). After winning the prize, Khandakji reportedly faced increased torture and inhumane treatment in prison for smuggling out his manuscript. Branded as a "terrorist" by the Israeli occupation, he

has continued to write and publish, with his works resonating strongly within the Palestinian literary landscape (Salmawy).

The head of the jury for the Arab Novel Award praised the novel for its experimental narrative structure, intertwining themes of self-consciousness, other-consciousness, and world-consciousness. The jury highlighted how Khandakji's work delves into the complex realities of displacement, genocide, and racism, blending history and myth to illuminate human aspirations for freedom and liberation ("Arab Novel Award"). Khandakji's literary achievements, particularly under the severe constraints of imprisonment, underscore the profound impact of his work on Palestinian literature. His novel offers not only a compelling narrative but also a powerful commentary on the socio-political struggles faced by Palestinians.

Khandakji has written poetry collections—including *Rituals of the First Time* (2010) and *The Breath of a Nocturnal Poem* (2013)—as well as three earlier novels: *The Narcissus of Isolation* (2017), *The Eclipse of Badr al-Din* (2019), and *The Breath of a Woman Let Down* (2020). Some of his works have been translated into French. Additionally, he has written numerous newspaper articles articulating the resilience and nationalism of the Palestinian people. According to Salmawy, these articles are feared by Israel even more than militant actions (Salmawy).

Why Thing Theory?

Thing theory refers to an approach that scholars use to investigate human-object relations in art, literature, culture, and everyday life. Though commonly thought of as a way to study physical artifacts, thing theory explores the dynamics between human subjects and inanimate objects. Emerging from scholarly concerns with commodity capitalism, thing theory has many antecedents in anthropology, art history, and museum studies. The phrase "Thing Theory" came widely into use in 2001, in Bill Brown's introduction to a special issue of *Critical Inquiry* titled "Things," in which he describes the questions that thing theory raises as queries not into objects alone, but into subject-object relations in particular spaces, at particular times (Brown 1). Literature is central to these queries because it is a privileged medium for revealing the force of inanimate objects in human experience. In other words, literature makes the "thingness" of objects visible.

In his novel *A Mask That is the Color of the Sky*, Bassem Khandakji places his young Palestinian protagonist, Nour, in the position of an Israeli young man, Or, through acquiring Or Shapera's Israeli ID card,

referred to as the mask in the title and throughout the narrative. The coincidence of finding and acquiring the mask helps him avoid suspicion because of a set of circumstances. Through this “thing,” the writer delves into the condition and identity of the enemy on political, ideological, and psychological levels and comes to assert his own identity and heritage in the process. For instance, Nour reflects, "Wearing Or's ID card, I felt a strange mixture of fear and empowerment, as if the mask could either betray me or save me" (Khandakji 45).

According to Heidegger, objects become things when they can no longer serve their common or intended function. When an object breaks or is misused, it sheds its conventional role and becomes visible in new ways: it becomes a thing, not just an object. Thing theory draws upon this notion of productive estrangement to consider the meaning that physical artifacts can have for human subjects (Heidegger 3). While thing theory entails discussions of “real” artifacts, it has primarily been used by scholars in the humanities to discuss the representation of such things in art and literature—specifically to understand what meaning such representations hold (Brown 5). In Bassem Khandakji's novel *A Mask That is the Color of the Sky*, thing theory is particularly relevant because the central object, the mask, serves as a powerful symbol of identity and transformation.

Throughout the narrative, the mask is not merely a physical object but a catalyst for Nour's psychological journey and transformation. Initially, it represents the enemy's identity with all its connotations, yet it allows Nour to delve deeply into himself while exploring the world of the Zionist other. The mask's significance evolves throughout the story, highlighting the complex interplay between self-perception and external perception. By adopting the mask, Nour is initially distracted and unsure of his path, but his experiences eventually lead him to a profound understanding of his Palestinian identity. The act of renouncing the mask at the end symbolizes Nour's readiness to face the world with his authentic identity, emphasizing that what matters is not the external features but the essence of what lies within. This exploration aligns with the core tenets of thing theory, which examines how objects influence human behavior and thought processes. By analyzing how the mask and other objects function within the novel, we can uncover deeper insights into the themes of identity, resistance, and self-realization that Khandakji weaves into his story. As Nour states, "The mask gave me a glimpse into a world I despised, but it also made me realize the strength of my own heritage" (Khandakji 102).

Thesis Statement

In Bassem Khandakji's novel *A Mask That is the Color of the Sky*, the use of the mask, along with other excavated objects such as clay pots and the Star of David necklace, exemplifies the principles of Thing Theory by illustrating how inanimate objects can profoundly influence human identity and psychological transformation. The mask, together with his Ashkenazi features, allows Nour to cross the border from the West Bank into Israel, facilitating his participation in an archaeological excavation in a Jewish settlement built atop the ancient city of Megiddo.

By assuming Or's identity, Nour attempts to understand the mentality of the occupier while reconnecting with his ancestral heritage, which is largely inaccessible to Palestinians in present-day Israel (Salmawy). Through Nour's interaction with these objects, the novel explores the tension between external appearances and internal truths, ultimately demonstrating that the essence of identity transcends physical disguises. This analysis reveals how the mask and the finding of clay pots in the Palestinian villages hidden under the Israeli forests serve not only as tools for navigating the socio-political landscape of the Palestinian self and Israeli other but also as means for Nour to confront and affirm his Palestinian identity and celebrate its heritage, thereby highlighting the powerful interplay between human subjects and material objects in shaping personal and cultural narratives. Incorporating Thing Theory into the analysis of *A Mask That is the Color of the Sky* allows for a deeper understanding of how Khandakji uses objects like the mask and archaeological findings to explore themes of identity and resistance. The novel's portrayal of these objects underscores their symbolic power in shaping the protagonist's psychological journey.

The Plot in a Nutshell

Nour Mahdi Al-Shahdi, a Palestinian researcher specializing in history and archaeology, finds a blue identity card belonging to an Israeli young man named Or Shapira inside the pocket of a leather coat he bought from a flea market. Nour, whose name means "light" in Arabic and "Or" in Hebrew, is blond with blue eyes, traits inherited from his mother Nora who died while giving birth to him. His appearance and fluency in Hebrew and English allow him to convincingly adopt an Ashkenazi identity without arousing suspicion.

Nour's only friend, Murad, who is serving a life sentence in prison, is a pragmatic counterpoint to Nour's idealism. Unlike the romantic Nour, Murad is practical and grounded, disapproving of Nour's ambition to

write a novel exploring the history of Mary Magdalene to counter the falsified historical narratives perpetuated by Israeli and Western discourses. Nour frequently imagines conversations with Murad, recording voice notes on his mobile without ever sending them, envisioning Murad's harsh responses to his "soft" resistance through writing, as opposed to Murad's advocacy for direct resistance of the enemy.

Emboldened by the identity card or the "Mask," Nour joins an American institution's excavation project at the "Mishmar HaEmek" kibbutz, an Israeli settlement on the land of the displaced village of Abu Shusha, site of a significant 1948 Nakba battle. He rationalizes this risky endeavor to himself and to Murad as a means to search for Mary Magdalene's box, which he believes holds artifacts that could prove historical truths about "Al-Lajjun" or Messianopolis, and the Megiddo settlement. Despite Murad's advice to focus on more pressing issues like confirming the ownership of Sheikh Jarrah's lands, Nour remains steadfast in his quest.

Throughout the narrative, Nour grapples with his dual identity, engaging in internal dialogues with "Or," each holding firm to their viewpoints until Nour confronts Or with the moral implications of the Zionist movement's exploitation of the Holocaust to do what Hitler has done to them with the Palestinians in an attempt to erase their history and presence. Or, in turn, expresses fear of losing his identity if Nour's humanity as a Palestinian prevails. At the kibbutz, Nour meets Samaa Ismail, a Palestinian woman from Haifa participating in the excavation. Samaa openly declares her Palestinian identity, resisting the imposed Israeli identity and voicing her stance against Zionism while sympathizing with the victims of Nazism. Nour's sense of alienation is palpable as he questions his identity and purpose, contemplating how he would be treated if his true identity was revealed.

Nour eventually confesses his identity to Samaa, who responds with regret, highlighting the irony of her lifelong struggle to shed her imposed Israeli identity while Nour adopts a false one. The novel critiques the notion that the oppressed become like their oppressors, as Nour references the work of Israeli novelist A.B. Yehoshua, who depicted the erasure of Palestinian villages by forests planted by Israel as a cover-up.

In a dream, Nour envisions finding Mary Magdalene at a well near the kibbutz, where she resembles Samaa and exudes light among her disciples. He records a message to Murad, reflecting on his novel's transformation from a historical exploration to revelations about his reality. The novel concludes with Nour leaving the kibbutz after the Battle of the Flag Parade in Jerusalem, which cancels the excavation. As

he departs, Samaa offers him a ride to Ramallah, and Nour symbolically reprograms his phone from Hebrew to Arabic, discarding Or's identity and throwing it out the window together with the star of David necklace.

The Mask as a Symbol of Identity and Transformation

The blue identity card that Nour adopts as a mask to hide his identity and assume the identity of the other becomes a central symbol of identity and transformation in Bassem Khandakji's novel. According to Thing Theory, objects can take on significant meaning in human life, influencing behavior and self-perception. This theory, as articulated by critics like Bill Brown, emphasizes the "thingness" of objects, where they transcend their physical forms to embody new, potent meanings (Brown 5). In this context, the identity card is not merely a blue piece of paper and plastic but a mask that enables Nour to navigate and infiltrate the world of the oppressor.

By assuming the identity of Or Shapira, Nour can move freely and explore archaeological sites otherwise inaccessible to Palestinians. This act of wearing the mask highlights Heidegger's notion of objects becoming "things" with new meanings beyond their conventional use. The mask symbolizes deception and survival, allowing Nour to challenge the barriers imposed by the Israeli occupation and to go unnoticed. As he dons this mask, the narrative journey of the novel unfolds, illustrating Thing Theory's assertion that objects can embody new meanings and functions.

Khandakji effectively portrays Nour's transformation through his relation to the mask. From the outset, the novel emphasizes Nour Al-Shehdi's historical and archaeological research on Mary Magdalene and his sense of failure due to numerous obstacles. The most significant obstacle is the "dull and almost non-existent presence of Magdalene in the texts of official history, and history that is also kept silent about" (Khandakji 37). To overcome this failure, and in response to Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, Nour, a Palestinian refugee displaced in a Ramallah camp, decides to write a novel about Magdalene, searching for her hidden secrets.

However, the Israeli occupation and apartheid laws severely restrict Nour's mobility, preventing him from conducting the necessary research. One possible solution is to write through imagination, as "history, in the end, is nothing but a rationalized imagination" (Khandakji 42). Yet, Nour himself is uncertain how to proceed, asking, "How will I write the novel? And what style will I adopt?" (Khandakji 45). The mask, or the assumed identity of Or, provides him with the means to circumvent these

restrictions, embodying the transformative power of objects as posited by Thing Theory.

The identity card, therefore, is more than a mere object; it is a symbol of Nour's struggle and ingenuity. It represents his ability to subvert the oppressive structures that confine him, using the mask to access spaces and knowledge otherwise barred to him. This act of transformation underscores the fluidity of identity and the profound impact of objects in shaping human experiences and narratives. By adopting the mask, Nour navigates the complexities of identity and survival under occupation, illustrating the critical role of objects in the interplay between self-perception and societal constraints.

Nour's inner turmoil is palpable as he wears the mask of the enemy. While enabling him to pursue his goals, the identity card also forces him to confront the stark contrast between his true self and the persona he must adopt. This duality creates a constant tension within Nour, as he is torn between his Palestinian identity and the Israeli facade he must maintain. The psychological burden of living a lie, coupled with the moral dilemma of using the oppressor's identity to fight against oppression, weighs heavily on him. Nour's internal conflict is evident in his recurring questions about his identity and purpose, reflecting his deep sense of alienation and struggle for authenticity.

The blue color of the identity card holds additional layers of symbolism. Blue is the color of the Israeli flag, representing the state and its power. By donning this blue mask, Nour is not only assuming the identity of an Israeli but also confronting the pervasive and omnipresent nature of the Israeli state's control over Palestinian lives. Moreover, blue is also the color of the sky, a symbol of freedom and vastness. This juxtaposition serves to highlight the irony and tragedy of the Palestinian experience. Even under the wide sky of their homeland, Palestinians are metaphorically imprisoned by the Israeli occupation. The sky, which should represent boundless freedom, becomes a symbol of their entrapment, as their movement and opportunities are severely restricted.

This turmoil is further exacerbated by his interactions with Samaa Ismail, a Palestinian woman who openly resists her imposed Israeli identity. Samaa's forthrightness and unyielding sense of self highlight the contrast between her authenticity and Nour's forced duplicity. Her response to Nour's confession about his false identity—"I have been waiting a whole life to get rid of this identity, and you have lost your whole life to wear this mask"—underscores the psychological cost of his masquerade. As Nour grapples with these complex emotions, the novel's structure reinforces the theme of identity and transformation. The narrative is

layered, with Nour's quest to write a novel about Mary Magdalene mirroring his personal journey of self-discovery. This novel-within-a-novel structure allows Khandakji to explore multiple dimensions of Nour's character and the broader implications of his actions.

Archaeological Findings and Their Symbolic Significance

In addition to the mask, other objects within the novel further demonstrate that it can be interpreted through the lens of Thing Theory. The archaeological findings that Nour uncovers during his excavation serve as more than mere artifacts; they are imbued with historical and cultural significance. These objects, such as clay pots and ancient relics, connect Nour to his Palestinian heritage and the long history of the land, proving that whole Palestinian villages had been erased by the enemy. The forests grown above these villages serve as a way for the Israelis to disguise their racial cleansing crimes. Through Thing Theory, we understand that these objects become "things" that reveal deeper truths about the past and present (Brown 8). They challenge the dominant Zionist narrative by underscoring the continuous Palestinian presence and heritage in the region. As Nour uncovers these items, he gains a deeper understanding of his roots and the historical injustices faced by his people.

These archaeological artifacts are not merely remnants of the past but active participants in the narrative. Each object uncovered by Nour serves as a testament to the history that the Israeli occupation seeks to erase. The clay pots, ancient tools, and other relics are imbued with the memories and lives of the Palestinian people who once inhabited the land. They transform from simple historical artifacts into powerful symbols of resistance and resilience. As Nour handles these objects, they become conduits of memory and identity, bridging the gap between the past and the present.

The act of unearthing these artifacts is itself a form of resistance. By bringing these hidden objects to light, Nour is reclaiming the narrative and asserting the Palestinian presence that the occupiers attempt to obliterate. This process of excavation is emblematic of the broader struggle for recognition and justice. The objects become witnesses to the atrocities committed and serve as evidence of the enduring Palestinian connection to the land. Through these "things," the novel emphasizes the importance of material culture in preserving and asserting identity.

Khandakji also makes use of historical and archaeological studies and lectures, as well as synoptic and Gnostic Gospels, integrating these elements seamlessly into the narrative. These research or religious passages enter the text of the novel smoothly and intelligently, so the reader does not feel separated from the work but rather feels their importance and aesthetic value. This integration is a testament to Khandakji's skill in weaving complex historical and cultural threads into the novel, enhancing its depth and resonance.

Moreover, the relics of Mary Magdalene that Nour seeks hold profound significance. They symbolize the intertwining of personal and collective history. Nour's quest for Magdalene's box, believed to contain her braid and perfume, represents his search for truth and validation of Palestinian heritage. These relics are not just religious or historical objects; they become central to Nour's mission to uncover and reclaim a narrative that has been suppressed and distorted. In this way, the novel demonstrates how objects, through their "thingness," acquire new layers of meaning and become integral to the characters' identities and struggles.

The juxtaposition of these objects with the present-day reality of occupation highlights the ongoing conflict between memory and erasure, past and present. The physical remnants of the past confront the constructed narratives of the occupiers, creating a dialogue between what was and what is. This dialogue is central to Thing Theory, which posits that objects can embody and communicate complex human experiences and histories. The novel's use of these objects underscores their role in shaping and challenging collective memory and identity.

Nour's findings, particularly the clay pots, are subject to conflicting interpretations by archaeologists in the novel itself. Nour and a Dutch archaeologist argue that these artifacts belonged to Palestinians who inhabited the buried villages. The Israeli and American archaeologists, however, deny this connection, asserting alternative origins for the artifacts. A heated discussion in the novel highlights these divergent perspectives. While Nour cannot passionately defend the Palestinian origin of the findings because of the disguise he is maintaining in front of the group, Khandakji lets the reader into his mind as he thinks "These pots carry the fingerprints of our ancestors. Their lives, their stories, are etched into the clay" (Khandakji 145). In contrast, an Israeli archaeologist dismisses the claim altogether, arguing, "These artifacts could belong to any number of ancient civilizations. There's no definitive proof of their Palestinian origin" (Khandakji 147). This tension reveals the broader struggle over historical narrative and memory. The differing interpretations of the clay pots indicate the ongoing conflict between

recognizing Palestinian heritage and the feverish efforts of Israel to erase it. Through the lens of Thing Theory, the clay pots become powerful symbols of this struggle, embodying the contested history and identity of the Palestinian people.

The Star of David Necklace: A Symbol of Assumed Identity

Another significant object in the novel is the Star of David necklace that Nour wears while assuming the identity of Or Shapira. This necklace, much like the blue identity card, serves as a potent symbol of Nour's assumed identity and the lengths to which he must go to infiltrate the world of the oppressor. The Star of David, an emblem of Jewish identity and the Israeli state, is a stark contrast to Nour's true Palestinian identity. By wearing this necklace, Nour deepens his disguise, fully embodying the role of an Israeli archaeologist. Nour acquires the necklace as part of his transformation into Or Shapira. It is an essential element of his disguise, ensuring that his assumed identity is convincing. The necklace, therefore, is not just a piece of jewelry but a critical tool in his subversive mission. Wearing the Star of David, Nour experiences a profound internal conflict, symbolized by the constant physical presence of the necklace against his skin. This object forces him to confront the dissonance between his true self and the persona he has adopted.

The importance of the necklace is evident throughout the novel. It serves as a reminder of the duality of Nour's existence and the sacrifices he makes in his quest for truth. As Nour delves deeper into his archaeological work and uncovers relics that testify to the Palestinian presence, the Star of David around his neck becomes a symbol of the irony and tragedy of his situation. The very symbol of the oppressor is worn by the oppressed, highlighting the complexities of identity and resistance.

At the climax of the novel, Nour's decision to throw away the Star of David necklace alongside the blue identity card is highly symbolic. This act of discarding both objects represents a rejection of the false identity he has been forced to assume and a reclamation of his true self. As he leaves with Samaa, Nour symbolically sheds the layers of deception and embraces his Palestinian identity. The novel describes this moment poignantly: "Nour took out his phone and reprogrammed it from Hebrew to Arabic and threw Or's identity out the window. The necklace followed, a final severance from the persona he had inhabited" (Khandakji 238). This act exhibits Nour's liberation from the oppressive facade he had to maintain. The fact that Nour discards the identity card and necklace while

riding with Samaa in her car as they hastily depart from the excavation site in the Israeli settlement symbolizes the end of a significant chapter in their lives and the commencement of a new one, wherein Nour finally determines his true path in life.

The necklace, like the mask, embodies the principles of Thing Theory by transforming from a simple object into a complex symbol of identity, resistance, and transformation. Its presence and eventual rejection accentuate the novel's themes of memory, heritage, and the struggle for self-assertion. Through the lens of Thing Theory, these objects are integral to the narrative, shaping Nour's journey and highlighting the broader socio-political context of the Palestinian struggle.

In summary, the blue identity card, the archaeological artifacts, and the Star of David necklace in Khandakji's novel exemplify the principles of Thing Theory, demonstrating how objects can transcend their physical forms to influence human identity, memory, and action. By weaving these objects into the narrative, Khandakji enhances the depth and complexity of the story, providing a powerful commentary on history, heritage, and resistance.

Transitioning from the significance of these objects, the next point of analysis will focus on how the novel's structure as a meta-narrative deepens our understanding of Nour's identity crisis and the broader themes of history, memory, and resistance. Khandakji employs all elements in the novel, including structure, narrative voice and dialogue and other techniques to serve his initial goal: asserting the Palestinian Identity and claiming its heritage while revealing the struggle under which Palestinians live under the occupation to the world at large.

A Novel Within a Novel: Identity and Self-Perception

The structure of Bassem Khandakji's novel demonstrates the author's skillful narrative techniques, which are essential in exploring the protagonist's identity crisis and broader themes of history, memory, and resistance. The novel's structure as a meta-narrative deepens our understanding of Nour's struggle and ultimate resolution of his identity dilemma. The novel employs a meta-narrative framework, presenting a story about a hero who contemplates writing a novel. This layering of narratives allows Khandakji to explore the complexities of identity and self-perception. The protagonist, Nour, records his thoughts and plans for writing his novel in voice notes on his mobile phone, detailing his intended temporal and spatial paths. The narrator in the first section of the first chapter is Nour himself, explaining his writing process, including the reasons for his initial ideas and subsequent revisions. Through this

technique, the reader gains insight into Nour's internal deliberations and creative journey.

Khandakji then transitions from Nour's first-person narration to a more omniscient perspective, introducing a general narrator who animates Nour and the other characters. This shift allows for a broader exploration of the characters' experiences and the socio-political context in which they live. The narrative device of discovering a blue identity card belonging to an Israeli named Or Shapira provides a pivotal plot point. This ID card enables Nour to assume an Ashkenazi identity, facilitating his movement through Israeli checkpoints and participation in an Israeli archaeological excavation with experts from America and Europe. This narrative solution not only advances the plot but also underscores the novel's exploration of identity and disguise. This is Khandakji's way of asserting that the Palestinian protagonist, Nour—disguised as the Israeli Or Shapira—possesses sufficient expertise to be selected for such a prestigious archeological group. By portraying Nour in this manner, Khandakji underscores the theme that Palestinians, despite decades of enduring occupation and suppression, are clever, well-educated, and possess a level of professionalism that allows them to compete effectively. This narrative choice challenges stereotypes and highlights the resilience and intellectual capability of the Palestinian people, asserting their rightful place within the broader academic and professional communities.

Identity Question and Psychological Transformation

Nour's assumption of an Israeli identity is fraught with internal conflict and psychological turmoil. As a Palestinian whose family was displaced and uprooted, living as an Israeli person involves profound emotional and ethical challenges. The text frequently references the Zionist occupation and its impact on Palestinian lives, highlighting the pervasive influence of the occupiers on everyday life. For example, the narrator describes how Palestinian families visit prisoners in "Zionist occupation detention centers" (Khandakji 88) and refers to "a special force for the Zionist occupation army" (Khandakji 92). These references emphasize the constant presence of the oppressor in the lives of the oppressed.

Nour's internal conflict is intensified by his displacement and the horrors faced by his family. Nour's father undergoes a profound transformation after his imprisonment by the Israelis, where he was accused of acting with activists. Before his imprisonment, he was an active participant in the resistance, driven by a sense of duty towards the Palestinian cause and

by hope. However, after his release, he returns home with a changed outlook, choosing to stay away from politics and rejecting any assistance from his former activist friends who now hold prestigious positions as Palestinian officials. This shift signifies his disillusionment and desire for a quieter, less tumultuous life in the midst of conflict. He remains silent, even with his wife and son, and settles into a humble existence, selling tea and coffee in the camp where he lives, symbolizing his withdrawal from the larger political struggle and his deep disillusionment and inability to act or even to care for his family. This change in the father's personality is poignantly captured in the novel:

When he returned, he was a different man. The fire in his eyes had dimmed, and he no longer spoke of resistance. He chose silence and the humble task of selling tea, avoiding his old friends who had climbed the political ladder. 'The enemy has taken enough from me,' he would say, 'I will not give them my spirit as well' (Khandakji 120).

This quote reveals the profound impact of imprisonment on his spirit and the broader effect on his family's life, illustrating the personal cost of the ongoing conflict.

The novel displays the status of Palestinian refugee camps as they go unnoticed and unnamed by the world, noting that they only gain notoriety through massacres. As the text states:

There is no meaning to the name of the Palestinian camp except when a massacre is committed in it, and it becomes one of the names of tragedies in the history of humanity. (Then) its name becomes the Tal al-Zaatar camp, or Sabra, or Shatila, or Jenin, or al-Shati. As for his camp, no massacre has been committed in it yet" (Khandakji 102).

Nour and his family live in one of those unnamed Palestinian refugee camps, which the writer vividly describes as a suffocating and crowded environment. The camp is portrayed as a place where the physical conditions mirror the oppressive reality of its inhabitants' lives. The overcrowding, lack of basic facilities, and unhealthy living conditions create an atmosphere of despair and confinement. Khandakji emphasizes this harsh reality through his detailed descriptions: "The camp was a maze of narrow, winding alleys where sunlight rarely reached. The air was thick with the smell of decay, and the crowded houses seemed to cling to each other for support, as if they might collapse if left alone" (Khandakji 45). This imagery highlights the physical and psychological restricting nature of the camp and the constant struggle for space and cleanliness and privacy:

In the camp, we lived on top of each other, every breath shared with the next. Disease spread quickly, and the lack of proper sanitation made every day a battle to stay healthy. It was a place where dreams were stifled by the weight of survival" (Khandakji 67).

These quotes testify to the dire living conditions and the impact on the residents' well-being and aspirations. The physical confinement leads to psychological confinement and the weight of the place leaves its marks on the souls of the Palestinians. It is not only the Palestinians confined to Israeli prisons, such as the writer himself and Nour's friend Murad, who experience severe oppression; this plight extends to all Palestinians living in the refugee camps. These camps, with their overcrowded and deplorable conditions, serve as a symbol of the broader imprisonment and systemic hardship faced by the Palestinian community. The narrative stresses that the entire Palestinian population, whether behind bars or within the confines of these camps, is subject to the relentless grip of occupation and its associated struggles.

Khandakji skillfully interweaves the stories of characters such as Nour, his father, his deceased mother Noura, Khadija, Sheikh Morsi, and Samaa within Nour's to-be novel and his own narrative. These characters grapple with questions of identity and place, illustrating how occupation alters destinies and transforms lives into a nightmare. All of these characters move within the question of identity and place, and how occupation can change destinies, places, and identities, and how it makes life a hard question without provoking solutions or answers. Nour, after assuming Shapira's identity, lives under the greater burden of the identity question. He keeps wondering: Is he still Nour? Or did he become Shapira? The reader is left with the question will Nour, having abandoned Shapira's identity and his Star of David necklace, easily return to his original identity? Doesn't this other personality and identity bother him, even if he takes it off? These questions appear as separate dialogues between Nour and Shapira; Nour faces the burden of his dual identity even when he is alone, he confronts the difficulty of shedding the other persona and reclaiming his identity.

Dialogues between Nour and his assumed identity, Shapira are crafted to show the intensity of his internal struggle. These dialogues, interspersed throughout the 240-page novel, highlight the psychological impact of Nour's disguise and the broader implications of his identity crisis. Questions keep rattling in his mind like a racket ball between Nour and Or Shapira. Khandakji's use of this technique effectively conveys the

protagonist's internal conflict and the overarching themes of the novel and keeps the reader involved in it to the last page of the novel.

In summary, the meta-narrative structure of Khandakji's novel, combined with the symbolic significance of objects such as the mask and archaeological relics, and the internal dialogues provides a profound exploration of identity, memory, and resistance. The novel's intricate narrative layers and psychological depth offer a compelling commentary on the complexities of Palestinian identity and the enduring struggle for self-assertion in the face of occupation.

The Free and the Prisoner: Identity as a Construct

Another technique used by Khandakji is the juxtaposition of Nour and Murad. Nour's deepest thoughts and his plans for the writing of his novel come in the form of recording of voice cards by his hero, Nour, through which he leaves messages for his friend Murad, who is serving a life sentence in the occupation prisons. These voice notes cover a wide range of topics, including daily life, Nour's conflicting emotions, hopes, and fears, as well as the broader issues of occupation and colonialism. Murad, who is conducting research for a doctoral degree on colonialism while in prison, is a key figure in the narrative despite his physical absence. His presence is felt strongly through Nour's reflections and the messages he records for him.

Murad serves as the mouthpiece for the author, embodying Khandakji's own courageous and steadfast resistance against the enemy. His character is clear, practical, and unwavering in his commitment to the Palestinian cause, providing a sharp contrast to the more internally conflicted Nour. Murad's resilience and intellectual rigor highlight the ongoing struggle and the importance of maintaining a strong, consistent stance against oppression, even from within the confines of prison, just like his creator. The juxtaposition of Nour and Murad enhances the narrative's depth. While Nour grapples with his identity and the challenges of living under occupation, Murad represents a figure of unwavering resistance and clarity. This dynamic emphasizes the different ways individuals can engage in resistance according to their nature: Nour's struggle is more personal and psychological, whereas Murad's is ideological and steadfast:

Murad's letters were a lifeline, a constant reminder that even in the darkest of times, the spirit of resistance could not be extinguished. His words were filled with determination and a clear vision of a free Palestine, a stark contrast to Nour's wavering doubts and fears (Khandakji 153).

This quote illustrates Murad's role as an inspirational figure, reinforcing the narrative's central themes of resilience and resistance. Murad provides a counterpoint to Nour's journey, highlighting the various forms of resistance and the ways in which individuals navigate their struggles for identity and freedom. Through this interplay, Khandakji explores the complexities of resistance, offering a nuanced portrayal of the Palestinian experience under occupation.

Objects as Bearers of Cultural Memory

The novel's narrative spans various historical periods, allowing Khandakji to delve into the enduring impact of historical events on contemporary Palestinian identity. The mask and the relics are poignant symbols that transcend time, linking his personal journey to the broader historical context of Palestinian resistance and resilience.

Nour's emotional connection to these objects is heightened when he learns about the archaeological findings of the excavation he is involved in. These relics, discovered in Tell of Shepherds, hold profound significance as they are linked to the history and memory of Palestinians. They are not merely historical artifacts; they embody the cultural and spiritual heritage of the Palestinian people. Khandakji's cleverness also debates the implications of the words themselves. According to the terrain of thought about the word "mask", Nour notices that it is pronounced "mask" in English and "maskah" in Hebrew, and if we sprinkle a bit of Arabic on it, can be pronounced "maskh" in Arabic, meaning "distorted features" (Khandakji 211). This wordplay underscores the distortion and erasure of Palestinian identity by the Israeli occupation. The mask serves as a powerful symbol of this distortion and the struggle to reclaim and assert one's identity.

Nour reflects, "The mask I wore was not just to hide my face but to confront the distorted reality imposed on us" (Khandakji 158). By using objects like the mask and archaeological relics, Khandakji emphasizes the deep connection between history and identity. These objects are not just remnants of the past; they are active symbols of resistance. The novel's narrative techniques and symbolic objects create a rich tapestry that reveals the depth of Palestinian identity and the complexities of living under occupation. Khandakji's use of objects to navigate and articulate these themes demonstrates his skill in using the right techniques and structures to express the major themes of his narrative through a well-written piece of literature. Through these objects, he captures the intensity

of the Palestinian struggle and their continual efforts to break free from the occupation and assert their identity.

Conclusion

In *A Mask That is the Color of the Sky*, Bassem Khandakji masterfully uses narrative techniques and symbolic objects to navigate and articulate the complexities of Palestinian identity, resistance, and cultural memory. Thing Theory provides a valuable lens through which we can understand the profound symbolism and multifaceted roles these objects play within the narrative.

Thing Theory, as articulated by Bill Brown, asserts that objects are not passive; they "disclose a deeper truth about the human subject" (Brown 5). In Khandakji's narrative, the mask transcends its materiality, becoming a pivotal symbol of Nour's struggle with identity and the Israeli occupation. This aligns with Brown's assertion that objects can "assert their presence, demanding their due as things" (Brown 16). The mask, a simple object, evolves into a significant entity that shapes Nour's journey, reflecting his internal conflicts and his defiance against the oppressive political landscape.

The archaeological relics Nour discovers serve as tangible connections to his Palestinian heritage, reinforcing the notion that objects are "active participants in the making of human history" (Brown 8). These artifacts are not merely remnants of the past; they actively influence Nour's perception of his present and future. As Jennifer Brody suggests, objects can "mediate our relationship to the world, influencing how we understand ourselves and our place in it" (Brody 23). The relics play this mediating role, bridging the gap between Nour's personal quest and the broader historical and cultural narrative of Palestinian identity.

Furthermore, Khandakji's narrative exemplifies Arjun Appadurai's assertion that "things have social lives" and their value is dynamic, shaped by their context and usage (Appadurai 3). The mask, and archaeological findings in *A Mask That is the Color of the Sky* illustrate this dynamism, embodying the complex histories and identities of the characters and their community. These objects encapsulate the struggles and resilience of the Palestinian people, offering a counter-narrative to the dominant Israeli and Western discourse.

By transforming ordinary objects into symbols of profound significance, Khandakji enriches the narrative and deepens our understanding of the Palestinian experience. The mask, in particular, becomes a powerful metaphor for the fluidity and complexity of identity, challenging readers to reconsider the boundaries between self and other, past and present, and

object and meaning. Through this narrative strategy, Khandakji not only tells a compelling story but also engages with the broader discourse on identity, resistance, and cultural memory.

In conclusion, *A Mask That is the Color of the Sky* is a profound exploration of identity and resistance through the lens of Thing Theory. The novel's nuanced depiction of objects and their impact on the characters features the theory's relevance in understanding the interplay between materiality and meaning. By highlighting the significance of objects in shaping human experience, Khandakji contributes to the ongoing conversation about identity, resistance, and the power of cultural memory. The novel invites readers to reflect on the profound ways in which objects mediate our understanding of the world and ourselves, offering a richer, more complex view of the Palestinian narrative. Moreover, Khandakji's skill in using just the right techniques and structures and symbols reveals the major themes of his narrative and the intensity of the Palestinian struggle. His narrative portrays their continual efforts to break free from the occupation and assert their identity, depicting the nature of their daily struggle.

Literature's Role in Revealing Truth and Resilience of Palestinian

Currently, in Gaza, these themes are poignantly relevant. For months, the region has been subjected to relentless violence, with the Israeli state blatantly violating international laws and human rights and claiming that they are defending the safety of their people. The ongoing conflict underscores the harsh reality of occupation and the enduring resilience of the Palestinian people in their fight for justice and recognition. The violence inflicted upon Gaza, marked by indiscriminate attacks and severe humanitarian crises, starkly reveals the brutal impact of occupation and highlights the courage and tenacity of those who continue to resist despite immense suffering. In this context, Khandakji's novel serves as a powerful testament to the role of literature in reflecting and revealing the truth about nations and their struggles. Literature transcends mere storytelling; it becomes a vital tool for documenting and articulating the lived experiences of individuals and communities. Through the lens of fiction, writers like Khandakji can bring to light the realities of oppression, resistance, and identity that might otherwise remain obscured. Khandakji's body of work demonstrates how literature can bear witness to the trials and tribulations of people under occupation. It exposes the raw and often painful truths of their experiences, offering readers a deeper understanding of the human cost of conflict. By capturing the

nuances of personal and collective struggles, literature provides a platform for voices that might otherwise be silenced. It becomes an act of resistance in itself, challenging dominant narratives and highlighting the resilience and dignity of those who face adversity.

The novel at hand also emphasizes the importance of literary expression in preserving and communicating cultural identity and historical memory. In times of crisis, literature offers a means to assert and reaffirm one's identity, to resist erasure, and to keep the spirit of a community alive. As Gaza endures ongoing suffering, the role of literature in documenting, critiquing, and bearing witness becomes increasingly crucial. It not only sheds light on the realities of the occupation but also honors the enduring spirit of resistance and the quest for justice. In essence, Khandakji's novel stands as a poignant reminder of literature's capacity to illuminate the truth and offer solace, insight, and resistance in the face of overwhelming adversity. It displays how literature can shape our understanding of conflict and identity, ensuring that the struggles of the oppressed are recognized and remembered.

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