

## Cities in Life-Writing Narratives: A Geocritical Reading of Hadiya Hussein's *Beyond Love* (2003) and Radwa Ashur's *Al-Tantouria* (2010)

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### Abstract

The present paper investigates the topographical aspects of literature that have gained an outstanding academic attention within the last decades acknowledging the "spatial turn" in social sciences and humanities. My study espouses a "polysensuous" approach to places and the spatial-temporal scheme addresses postcolonial identities, exile and geographic displacement to argue forcefully the role of the subjective experience of places so as to enhance a textual geographic reading of colonial/postcolonial histories. The present geocritical reading examines the "reassertion of space" in Hadiya Hussein's *Beyond Love* and Radwa Ashur's *Al-Tantouria* to present, hopefully, a key contribution to the growing body of work in spatial literary studies within the paradigm of life-writing narratives to interrogate the "where" of postcolonial terrains. As such, a geospatial story-telling is a key trope to feature the interest in the interaction between spatial practices and life-

writing narratives that depict the two Arab women writers as postcolonial cartographers. The two narratives have been selected since they are relevant to explore life-writing postcolonial geographic critiques to offer a montage of the Self within wounded nations and to blur the borderline between memoirists' personal stories and postcolonial turbulent histories. Within this rationale, the present paper interrogates the spatial discourse as a geographic rupture which represents the core of postcolonial critiques. This post-national comparative literature questions multiethnic zones as well as diasporas to map the postcolonial terrain of the speaking subaltern. The *affective* literary mapping offers an insightful illumination of poetic *topos* to experience cities through senses, to inspire spatial transgression and to record personal sensations.

**Keywords:** Literary Cartography, Geocriticism, Postcolonial Geographies, Life-Writing Narrative

## Cities in Life-Writing Narratives: A Geocritical Reading of Hadiya Hussein's *Beyond Love* (2003) and Radwa Ashur's *Al-Tantouria* (2010)

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### 1. Introduction: On Geocriticism

"There never was an is without a where".  
(Buell 55).

Topographical aspects of literature have gained an outstanding academic attention within the last decades acknowledging the "spatial turn" in social sciences and humanities:

After the spatial turn, geocritics, spatially oriented critics, and others working in the spatial humanities can offer new interpretations, analyses, and evaluations of these ways of making sense or giving form to our lives. By paying particular attention to the spatial imagination, its motivations and its results, we may come to see the world, and ourselves, in interesting new ways (Tally 2014: 11).

"The spatial turn is irreversible" (2009: 11), Edward Soja remarks, to pave the path for a novel aesthetic sensibility associated with a postmodernist critique to emphasize the "reassertion of space" (Tally 2017: xvi). Fredric Jameson addresses "new spatiality implicit in the postmodern" (418) and Edward Said's *Culture Imperialism* (1993) proposes a "geographical inquiry into historical experience" (6) to underlie the significance of spatial experiences especially that of exile and diaspora. Postcolonial cities are literary mapped not as "an inert container, but [as] an active force, that pervades the literary field and shapes it in depth" (Moretti 3), hence, troubled Iraqi and Palestinian cities are a source of stimulation, inspiration and

provocation to ponder about the geo-political sensibilities of the literary process.

Geopolitics unleashes the spatial/temporal perception to enhance "the senses of smells, sounds, tastes and textures of a place" (Westphal xiv). It is a "polysensuous" approach to places and the spatial-temporal scheme examines postcolonial identities, exile and geographic displacement to argue forcefully the role of the subjective experience of place so as to enhance a textual geographic reading of colonial/postcolonial histories. This poses a stimulating question: When do topographies and cities emerge on a literary map? Hadiya Hussein's *Beyond Love* (2003) tackles ethnic and religious sub-identities to expose the Iraqi national pitfalls that have led to geographical ruptures especially in the south: "The most serious erosion is evident in the absence of a national Iraqi movement, the failure to agree on a national leadership and the fragmentation of its main political groups along ethnic lines" (Kubba 142). Radwa Ashur's *Al-Tantouria* (2010) depicts the apex of the brutal Israeli imperialism; the partition of Palestine, the establishment of a Jewish homeland after the 1948 Nakba and the banishment of thousands of Palestinians. Literary geography has a vital strength to release his(tories) from subjugation to colonial or ruling regimes through the act of remembering. In the selected narratives, the two female protagonists, Huda and Ruqaya, are engaged in history not only as agents, but also as story-tellers to reclaim the past which has been experienced in dislocations to investigate the intersection of politics, place and identity in postcolonial Iraq and Palestine.

Within the geopoetic terms, life-writing narrative is "a genre in which the self is the center stage" (Brosseau 18) since autofiction deepens the perception of place, narrative and the writers' reflexivity. Michel Foucault's inspiring 1967 quote "The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space" (22) marks the paradigm shift to spatial studies. The quote is still valid for the twenty-first century to critique cartographic anxieties to offer "a new perspective that seems particularly momentous in the twenty-first century *as borders and boundaries seemed to be transgressed, erased, redrawn, or reconceived almost daily*" (Tally 2017: 2; emphasis added). The two selected life-writing narratives provide an opportunity to rigorously reveal the convergence of subject, narrative and place since the literary cartography is a timely endeavor to "regain the capability to act and struggle" (Jameson 54) within the engagement with life-writing narratives that reside in three interwoven poles: self-place, self-narrative and narrative-place. As such, a geospatial story-telling is a key trope to feature the interest in the interaction between spatial practices and life-writing narratives that depict the two Arab women writers as postcolonial cartographers.

### 1.1. Rationale and Scope

Aesthetically, the setting's relation with fiction is not an oddity. It is a pivotal literary element to convey subtly themes, to mirror the characters' inner turmoil and to explore notions of homeland and displacement. The temporal-spatial coordinate is a significant trope of real and imaginary geographies: Wordsworth's Lake District, Dickens's London, Joyce's Dublin, Dostoevsky's St. Petersburg, Twain's Mississippi River, Tolkien's Middle Earth, C. S. Lewis's Narnia, Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, to name just a few. What is unique is that the "'where' of texts is variously located in the historical matter of

social space" (Thacker 32). The interpretation of the literary texts geographically enhances the "the materiality of socially produced spaces" (32) since material locations are examined historically and with a consciousness of how these locations or places can produce or resist the practices of a ruthless power.

The "reassertion of space" (Soja 1989) in fiction stands in contrast to the nineteenth century's preoccupation with "a discourse of time, history, teleological development and a modernist aesthetic of the early twentieth century [which] enshrined the temporal dimension, especially with respect to individual psychology, and – apart from interest in mere setting, regionalism, or local color, perhaps – matters of geography, topography, or spatiality played a subordinate role in critical scholarship and teaching" (Tally 2017: xvii). Approaching spatiality is an incitement to step outside the ostensible closure of the written text. This concurs with Susan Stanford Freidman's belief of "how the geopolitical axis informs and inflects all cultural formations and identities, our own as well as that of others. It requires spatial, geographical thinking to complement temporal, historical analysis" (130). The dynamic interplay of literary cartography and literary criticism underlies "the reciprocal process" that has initiated "changes in geography itself, stretching its traditional boundaries and applications in new directions" (Richardson xix). This synergistic relationship explains the diverse theories of space and place – from Heidegger's Phenomenology to Soja's Thirdspace, Foucault's Heterotopia, Bakhtin's Chronotope, Deleuze's Geophilosophy and Jameson's postmodern thinking of Cognitive Mapping. Geohumanities, accordingly, is a key interdisciplinary field to interrogate modes of knowing the world marking the move beyond the mere practices of cartography to a

metaphorical mode within the postmodernist paradigm.

The present study investigates post-national comparative literature to question multiethnic zones as well as diasporas mapping the postcolonial terrain of the speaking subaltern to address a number of research questions: 1) Can fiction and cartography converge? 2) How can life-writing narrative disrupt the straightforward line of narrating postcolonial histories? 3) How far do imaginary/documentary accounts nurture the postmodernist techniques? 4) Can the refugees' geospatial story-telling map the critical cartography? Therefore, the comparative concern is geo-centered and the polysensuous approach captures the spatial-temporal scheme of postcolonial identities. The "geocentric" turn, as proposed by Bertrand Westphal, interacts with "literary studies, geography, urbanism and architecture" (Tally, *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces* xiv) to explore, dig into, touch, smell and taste spaces as explained by Yi-Fu Tuan: "What makes a place a place, what distinguishes it from the undifferentiated sweep of scenery, is the pause, the resting of the eye, in which the viewer suddenly apprehends the discrete portion of space as something to be interpreted" (161). The *affective* literary mapping offers an insightful illumination of poetic *topos* to experience cities through senses, to inspire spatial transgression and to record personal sensations.

Finally, the "reassertion of space" in *Beyond Love* and *Al-Tantouria* hopefully represents a key contribution to the growing body of work in spatial literary studies within the paradigm of life-writing narratives to interrogate the "where" of postcolonial terrains since "none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography that is at the basis of imperialism and colonialism" (Said,

*Culture and Imperialism* 7). The geographical/historical fact of Iraq, Palestine and Jordan speaks fervently of the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement that was intended to redraw both Iraq and the Levant by France and Britain to identify their shares using colors drawn on maps:

To France went the "blue area" (coastal Syria, currently Lebanon and part of southern Syria and southern Turkey) and Area A, the white area surrounded by a blue belt (currently Syria and the northwest Iraq). Britain got "the brown area" (Palestine), "the red area" (the greater part of Iraq) and Area B, a white area surrounded by a red belt (stretching from al-'Aqaba in the northwest, and to Basra in the west and south, passing through Amman (Ashur 2008: 204).

The two selected narratives signal new borders and cultural repercussions that have led to geographical ruptures and cartographic anxieties. They are structured in an epistolary form through diaries, documents and letters as well as the sub-narratives of the Iraqi and Palestinian refugees' oral testimonies that bear witness to troublesome political events. The present paper explores the spatial politics of representation, in so doing, geography is at the core of postcolonial critiques.

## 1.2. Arab Women Writers as Postcolonial Cartographers

*Beyond Love* and *Al-Tantouria* provide an impetus to examine the politics of identity to explore multiple dislocations in order to yield places as literary texts and to bridge the gap between literature and spatial studies. It is noteworthy that the field of Arab women's life-writings in association with literary cartography is still scarce. Memoirs – in both narratives – recount cities to underlie gendered interpretations of geography. This marks the shift from the "masculinism of

geography" (Rose 5) in terms of the mechanics of cities to embrace women's perception of topographic violence in Postcolonial Iraq and Palestine. The approach of "mapping as a potent metaphor" (Turchi 7) associates the rhetoric of geography with literary fiction. The two narratives have been selected since they are relevant to explore life-writing postcolonial geographic critiques to offer a montage of the Self within wounded nations and to blur the lines between memoirists' personal stories and postcolonial turbulent histories.

"Life geography" (Daniels and Nash 450), "autography" (Smith and Watson 1998: 12) and "personal histories" (Grise and Mayorga 216) blend the physical spaces with the psychological archaeology:

Memories are known to be piled up and installed in the brain. The power that commands these memories is something else, I have discovered. It is the spiritual power of existence, our soul. I have thought about this many times through the years, and my thoughts reach deep into the mysterious pool and that existence to listen to these memories. They are inside me, irrevocably and yet ever present from my youngest years. They brighten the light by which my tiny footsteps roam the earth (Freud 3).

Memories are analogous to unforgettable or buried ruins needed to be unearthed to explore the borders of place and the internal hidden recesses of the psyche. The act of looking back offers geographical and historical records of two defeated nations; Baghdad, the ethnic city, and Tantoura, the occupied city. Memories act as counter narratives of the official geographical and historical documents to challenge a callous ruling regime in Iraq and to insert Palestine back in history: "the autobiographical act is a

seizing of territory, a taking of textual space" (Reaves 14) to create a fluid zone between the private and the public his(tories). As insiders, Huda and Ruqaya narrate first-hand experiences to recount the dismemberment of two turbulent nations. The testimonial potency recalls Michel de Certeau's notion of the city as a space of "everyday practices" (117) or "a discursive practice" (Felman 5) to initiate action. This explains the tendency to use space as a verb: "To space – that is all. Spacing is an action, an event, and a way of being" (Doel 128).

My rationale for the present study is twofold: shedding light on texts that have not received a serious critical consideration and exploring the great potentiality to engage literary cartography with memoirs and life-writing narratives. The two Arab women writers have attempted to capture the harsh realities that are burdened by political and geographical anxieties. They tackle national struggles, civil wars, socio-political oppression in Arab cities; Beirut, Amman, Baghdad and Palestine. They dismantle the colonial assumptions of hegemony to interrogate the fragmentation of time and the state of dislocation in a novelistic form that merges the present with the past in non-linear structures to address their own traumatic realities.

## 2. *Beyond Love* (2003): A Spatial Exilic Consciousness

"Exile is life led outside habitual order. It is nomadic, decentered, contrapuntal; but no sooner does one get accustomed to it than its unsettling force erupts anew". (Said, 1984: 149).

In *The Iraqi Novel: Key Writers, Key Texts* (2013), Fabio Caiani and Catherine Cobham assert the fact the Iraqi writers are either in exile or write from their homeland:

The imaginative powers of these writers allowed them to give compelling expression to, and at the same time transcend, the material and spiritual hardships of exile, war and violence through art. The triumph of their art over those disasters was incomplete as far as the authors themselves were concerned, limited as it was by the circumstances of life, the constraints of time and, ultimately, mortality (44).

"Who is to hold the concept or the idea of Iraq but its artists and writers?", Ferial Ghazoul rhetorically asks to condemn "political regimes [that] come and go but literature remains and is read and reread" (234). She believes that "literature and the arts continue to be of relevance in Iraqi culture despite the series of catastrophes that have beset Iraq in the last half-century (233). Hadiya Hussein (1956- ) herself left for Jordan in the 1990s and like many Iraqi writers, she lives and writes outside her homeland. As an exilic writer, Hussein is an intellectual who has undergone a state of homelessness and emotional sufferings. Though exile is regarded as a "condition of terminal loss" (Said 1984: 137), it is advantageous in the sense of providing two positive aspects; "distance" and "universality". The "unsettling force" of exile energizes the intellectual to go "beyond the easy certainties provided us by our background, language, nationality, which so often shield us from the reality of others" (Said 1994: xiv). Hussein's exilic consciousness makes her outside the mainstream and her creative performance cannot be compelled into any orthodox thinking.

In *Beyond Love*, memory is described by Nadia as something that "reshapes the past like an enemy laying in ambush" (Hussein 18). Iraq has been redrawn through acts of remembering as dramatized in Nadia's letter

to her lover, Emir, a soldier who has disappeared during the revolt in the south. He meets Huda - Nadia's closest friend - in Amman as a refugee under a false name, Musa. Nadia seeks an asylum request when she is killed in a traffic accident. The narrative's central action is set in Jordan after the First Gulf War in 1991. The defeat ignited an anti-regime revolt in the south, accordingly, thousands of Iraqis were forced to flee the country. Characters are mainly women since men died during the war or vanished to escape the brutal atrocities of the ruling regime. Huda strongly adheres to stories of sufferings and survivals retold by other refugees in Amman. She herself is torn between two difficult choices: she cannot accept the horrendous realities of Iraq, on the other hand, she cannot imagine her future life in exile. She spends the weekends at the Bureaucratic Refugee Office with utter uncertainties of whether to migrate or not, besides that, she is always haunted by dead persons and painful memories.

## 2.1. War Stories of Troubled Iraqi Cities

Stylistically, the novel opens by vibrant poetic lines by the famous poet and statesman Lisan al-Din Ibn Al-Khatib (1313-74) to subtly lament the horrible condition of Post-War Iraq: "Great and Powerful we were/ Wretched we have become/ Yesterday we used to feast/ Today we are feasted upon" (Hussein 1). These lines capture the fall of a great civilization into senseless wars and severe economic sanctions. The Iraqis have survived "millennial violence" (Cooke ix) after harsh series of two wars; the Iran-Iraq war and the Gulf war culminated in the American invasion. Iraq's infrastructure was destroyed and a blockade was imposed on the Iraqis.

Musa/Emir's lengthy letter to Huda recounts factual descriptions about the

withdrawal from Kuwait in February 1991; "the soldiers were barefoot and the retreating vehicles were targeted by the US airplanes" (Hussein 135). Musa describes how "the roof of the Basra Television and media headquarters had been blown up by a large missile", the damage of al-Zubayr Bridge "by the air raids and it is the only way to cross Shatt al-Basra" and how "the corniche was choked with soldiers who were trying to cross Shatt al-Arab on their way to Tannum" (Hussein 132). Basra suffered from the most hideous destruction as "it was the only city along the route for both the lines of invasion into Kuwait and the lines of defeat coming back from there" (Hussein 40). In "Necropolitics" (2003), Achille Mbembe postulates that "colonial occupation is a concatenation of multiple powers: disciplinary, biopolitical, and necropolitical" (29). Iraq, within geo-spatial relationships, is seen vulnerable to technologies of surveillance and domination under the global regime of necropolitics. Manipulation and exploitation have led to a social formation in which "vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*" (Mbembe 40; emphasis in the original). Musa/Emir's act of recalling is a performative survival of neocolonial necropolitics to bear witness to the psychological trauma of the Iraqi soldiers and to express a deep distress about the destruction of Iraqi cultural treasures and archives.

The fragile nature of the Iraqi patriotism is the outcome of the monolithic nature of the leading nationalism of a totalitarian regime: "Nationalism is not simply an intellectual construction, an ideology, or mere social movement, but a cultural space in which history, religion, culture, and socioeconomic aspects play crucial parts" (Jabar 129). Southern Iraqi religious ties and geographic closeness to

both Iran and Kuwait have been critical aspects of stigmatization:



Figure 1: The Southern Provinces  
[https://en.citizendium.org/wiki/Provinces\\_of\\_Iraq](https://en.citizendium.org/wiki/Provinces_of_Iraq)

*Beyond Love* documents the feelings of humiliation and defeat that have led to a resilient revolt in the south: "the regime's helicopters circled the houses, the factories and the whole southern cities", as described by Musa, the wounded soldier. He bitterly says that "with horror falling upon houses, Karbala became a ghost city filled with the smell of decay. Its streets were empty except for tanks, the regime's armed men, and the bodies that no one dared to bury" (Hussein 76).

In *The Modern History of Iraq* (2017), Phebe Marr and Ibrahim Al-Marashi analyze the geo-historical contexts of Iraqi ethnic religious and sectarian identities; The Sunni Muslims, the Shia Muslims and the Kurds (10):



Figure 2: Iraqi Ethnic Territories

<https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2006/10/12/divisa-in-partes-tres>

Demographically, the Shias have exceeded the Sunnis in population in the southern cities. However, the ruling regime brutally curbed their political revolt. *Beyond Love* illustrates how houses have been destroyed with their inhabitants inside, the survivors have fled to Baghdad, Karbala and Najaf "thinking that the capital and the holy places could be safer" (Hussein 40). Nadia's house in Basra has become "a dumping ground for garbage and waste" (Hussein 41) and Baghdad has fallen "in deep silence" (Hussein 49).

Aesthetically, the Frankenstein-esque mood underlies the gothic tropes to depict the southern provinces as troubled cities. The atmosphere is violent, macabre and desolate to mirror the horror of the war concretized in bombings, dead bodies, gunfire and mothers grieving their lost beloved ones; a state described as "wanton slaughter" (Allawi 48). The thought-provoking questions arise: Is militia fighting justifiable? Do civil wars make any actual logic? Contemporary Iraq suffers from a perilous vacuum of state power which appears to correspond little to the exemplary of bourgeois democracy. The horrendous reality is that all the Iraqis are involved in the conflict as mother Khadija bluntly puts it: "Oh, my daughter, our people are scattered like the beads of a broken

necklace. No one can reunite us. It is God's will, perhaps it's a punishment because we have lost the purity of our souls" (Hussein 146). Thereby, no faction is innocent; they all are responsible of gratuitous violence and death.

Mother Khadija's tragic exile embodies Iraq's geo-political dilemma: "I'm a mother of four. Two of them died in the war with Iran. The third was lost in the war with Kuwait and the fourth is here with me" (Hussein 130) in Amman as a refugee. In her old age, she merchandises in Hashemite Square Iraqi incense on a black rug: "We have become a spectacle, selling our sorrows in the streets, but no one buys sorrows" (Hussein 130). At the finale, she returns to her homeland to preserve her dignity believing that "countries are bigger and live longer than their leaders" (Hussein 156), in contrast, Huda is seen leaving for America as a permanent refugee.

## 2.2. A 'Topopoetic Presence' of Iraqi Holy Cities

The notion of "presence effects" (Steiner 9) brings to the fore the corporal experience of the places as "sensuous geographies" (Rodaway 5) to examine the locality and the physicality of the Iraqi southern cities through the senses of smell, sound, touch and sight. The Front Cover Page illustrates a mosque to signify an ethno-religious identity:

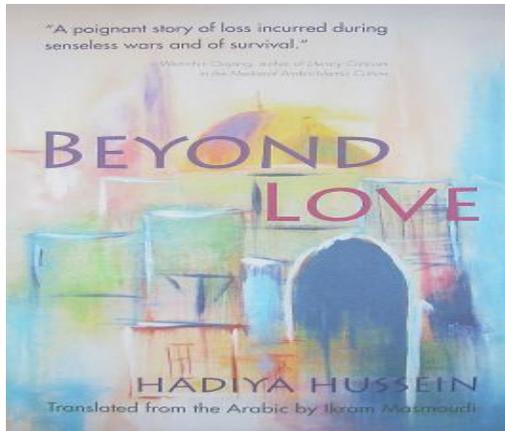


Figure 3: Front Cover Design (2012)

The illustration of the mosque embodies the dome of Imam Ali, the holy shrines, the burial processions and the invocation of al-Zahraa, the mother of the Hassanayn to relieve the Iraqi mothers' agonies – all represent the personality of the southern cities especially the holy ones such as Karbala and Najaf. Women visit the Imam Musa al-Kadhim's shrine to get the blessings and buy "a miracle product for their problems: a mixture of dried grapes, chickpeas and sweet citrus. I would wander about with the people, filling myself with the good smells, passing my hand along the fence. Different-colored tissues and strings would be knotted around the window in the hope that the Imam would untie the knots and remove the sorrow" (Hussein 61), Huda narrates in flashbacks. The shrine of prophet Elias - is said to be on the Tigris river in Baghdad – is "full of visitors and guests carrying platters filled with gifts" (Hussein 63). Huda's cartographic eye is endowed with freedom to record sensations and to engage affectively with holy places. It is a subject-centered landscape of the mind to assert identity and rootedness.

Huda's visual and aural engagement with the local markets provides an aesthetic of presence and "sense-effect" (138), to use Gilles Deleuze's term, to reveal her physical closeness to tangible charming places with

distinctive local flavors. As a memoirist, Huda recalls the scene of the Sarbadi Market "where the shops were filled with merchandise: rosaries, woolen wraps and Koufiya, prayer rugs and handmade quilts, coffee sold in small cups. Bracelets and earrings, necklaces and silver rings, rubies, wedding clothes decorated with ribbon, large candles hanging in front of the shops like chandeliers. I lit those candles in memory so that the alleys would shine from their glow" (Hussein 62). Not only does Huda recall times, places and objects, but also all the ambiance surrounding her like the smells and the local impressions. This geopoetics mediates between the world out there and the subjective sensuous experience. Odorous, haptic, auditory and the visual evocations of the local markets usher the presence of the physical dimensions as a synesthesia of colors, sounds and shapes.

The physicality of the Iraqi streets, the vast cemeteries, the holy shrines and the local markets represent "echoes of sensibility" (Steiner 9) to interrogate how language speaks of landscaping; "the corporal strand of topo-poetics of a language" (Rodaway 30). The fusion of language with a landscape is a geographical identity that must be searched for and restored, thereby, the personality of places is not simply a location, but "an organized world of meaning" (Tuan 179). Tigris has witnessed the birth of Huda whose umbilical cord has been thrown into it. As years pass, the memory of the river is always fleshed out as "ebb and flow" (Hussein 61): "Large banks, sweet clover, Indian figs and spinach, polished rocks, myrtle trees flanking the fences of the houses – all exhaled their fragrance in the corners of my memory and colored it with the henna of love" (61). The ancient river is a signifier of the flow of time and it functions as a witness to the fall of great Iraqi cities.

The question that poses itself: What would happen if cities ceased to produce fictional texts? Westphal's conviction of fiction not only represents the world around us but it also contributes vigorously to the production of that world: "I will never get tired of repeating that fiction does not reproduce the real, but actualizes new virtualities that had remained unformulated, and that then go on to *interact* with the real according to the hypertextual logic of interfaces ... fiction detects possibilities buried in the folds of the real, knowing that these folds have not been temporalized" (171; emphasis in the original). The vividness and suggestiveness of literary representations of the Iraqi cities can be interpreted within what Westphal calls "polysensoriality" (xi) to provide better perception of the places where we inhabit. On focusing on senses, Huda renders the 'polysensorial' places by registering the sensuous plenum of the indigenous markets and streets where the fragrance of incense dominates.

Autoethnographic descriptions highlight the vibrant perception of cultural objects and subjective places to empower the Iraqi female identity. Huda's grandma's "distinctive room" is recalled as "a special world" with its "a mixture of scents – henna, incense and mastic" (Hussein 32). Grandma is described as being "uncommon" (32) among her generation for being educated and literate. She has completed reading the holy Qur'an at the age of nine. The holy Qur'an is placed on the top of the wooden table near her bed. In her closet, she still keeps her wedding dress; "a faded pistachio color embroidered with glittering beads" (32). Besides, there is "grandfather's rosary from al-Hussein, a silver cigarette box and an oak cane with a serpent head" (32). Grandma's "bright memories of the past" are verbalized in the way she calls "the pillow *lulah*, the chair *Sakmali*, and the medicine cabinet *Sandagja*" (Hussein 33). More significantly, grandma's

stories of past memories end "with the expression: 'It was back then, in the days of plenty'" (33). The ethnographic style addresses the spirit of the room that exceeds the physical sensation for it belongs to the realm of the mystic to be sensed as an equivocal feeling and to convey visibility to intimate experiences. Within this rationale, autoethnography is more than telling a personal experience; it is a cultural critique in tension with neo-colonial practices to reclaim identity as a nation and as a willful embodiment of female agency.

### 2.3. On Geo-Traumatic Memories

*Beyond Love* dramatizes the emotional dysfunction of lonely women who have lost male family members, husbands and fiancés in devastating bombings through the employment of sub-narratives of the female Iraqi refugees. These sub-narratives function as miniature stories to construct alternative his(tories) to expose the chaotic consequences of wars and exile. As such, the narrative fulfils what Judith Herman terms as "prolonged trauma" to describe "political captivity" (74). Wars are experienced twice; on the frontline and in the memories by war survivors. Heaps of oppression are voiced in long introspections in the main characters' minds; the events are narrated alternatively by Huda, Nadia and Musa/Emir.

Nadia's "bleeding memory" of the brutal murder of her twin, Nader, is buried "in deep dooms" (Hussein 18) and "despair transforms [her] into pieces of ember and ashes" (Hussein 102). Her voice is "calm" and full of "Iraqi grief" (Hussein 2). Musa/Emir, as a defeated and mortified soldier, tells Huda that the Iraqi refugees are "uninvited guests" (Hussein 126) in Iran: "we carry names for identification, and when the name becomes a death threat, we have to write it off" (Hussein 127). Nadia's memoir and Musa/Emir's war letter can be refigured

as long soliloquies to record how they have experienced traumatic events. These characters' points of view concretize the subjectivities of the fluid temporality since narration switches among them to establish polyvocalism of geo-political experiences. Huda sets an example of the first-person "wounded story-teller" (Frank 95) to reveal her inner deadness in a series of incidents and disconnected thoughts. She has fled to Amman as a political refugee after voting 'No' to the ruling regime in a presidential election. As a refugee in diaspora, she switches between two cities; Iraq and Amman: "A vehement longing would sweep me away as though I were floating into the air, passing over the checkpoints and then falling from the sky into Baghdad, crying with a full voice, 'I'm back! Open the doors!'" (Hussein 104). It is a physical state of geopolitical discontinuities mirrored in the narrative's inner-build seen as "a pastiche of memories strung together between Nadia's notebook and the narrator's deadly day in Amman" (Cooke x) to depict gendered relational ties to ethnic and diasporic cities.

Postmodernist life-writing narrative gives rise to the voice of memory. Hussein's life-writing practice is a claim of authority to centralize the refugees' dilemma in Amman. Huda's memories are in a constant movement between the public and the private to acknowledge her sense of dislocation. As Huda puts it forth: "our memories were supposedly buried in Baghdad. What made them come back to the surface again, weaving once more their web of sorrow and exile in Amman?" (Hussein 2). Huda's traumatic shock is materialized through the act of remembering and the desire to forget. Remembering and forgetting are intertwined; the past and the present do co-exist with a blurred borderline. Huda's presence in Amman recedes as the presence of the past invades her space against her will. Memories, thereby, take over. Huda always complains

that her "head was stuffed with memories" (Hussein 61). Within the stream of consciousness technique, Huda writes the following lines: "I sank into a terrible void, and I found myself wandering the streets of Kadhimiya, strolling through narrow, twisted alleys" (Hussein 45). The presence of the past never causes a nostalgia and Huda feels no peace with it. As such, her flow of memories is not smooth: "exile plagues me, and the past has me almost in a stranglehold" (Hussein 156). Being a defeated refugee, Huda cannot afford to forget the past. She is unable to accept what has happened in her homeland and she is condemned to relive it.

Amman serves as a threshold to articulate Huda's shock of arrival and her narrative "bridges Basra/Baghdad and Amman, war and exile" (Cooke x). In exile, Huda is "swallowed by the streets" and she "silently and painfully" (Hussein 2) mourns the death of Nadia in a "tiny refuge, a room high in the slopes of Mount al-Hussein" (2). The first day in exile testifies to her "ruined soul, broken hopes" (Hussein 37). Though memory is ostensibly "immaterial, personal and elusive" (Smith and Watson 2001: 21), it is "always implicated in materiality, whether it be the materiality of sound, stone, text, garment (21). Huda suffers from insomnia in her small rented room in Amman. She remembers her habit to perfume her bed in Baghdad with incense from Najaf every night before sleeping, "so that I could sleep with a serene soul and body. Now, however, I need time to get used to the new smells, the moist walls, the low ceiling, the small window overlooking the street" (Hussein 38). Memory is, therefore, aroused by the senses of smell, taste, touch, sound that are encoded in objects or events that evoke a sensuous vibration and a specific connotation for the narrator.

As a life narrator, Huda confronts two lives; one is the self and the other is the

socio-historical being. She has anchored her narrative in her own geographical, temporal and cultural milieu. At the Refugee Office, affinities have been drawn between Huda and the other Iraqi refugees in Amman:

There was only one story circulating among the people, though with different details – the flight from Hell and the lack of work opportunities in Amman. As soon as I sat next to someone, I would find myself listening to that person's story, which was also my own (Hussein 43).

As Ikram Masmoudi remarks, "they are the survivors, the ones testifying to their experiences; and from their testimonies, we can just catch a glimpse of the hidden aspect of their lives as wives who lost their husbands under torture, or lovers who were separated by wars, or single women standing on their own, refusing to commit in circumstances dictated by exile and transiency" (2010: 71). An Iraqi mother narrates how she has lost contact with her husband and daughter who have been accepted as refugees in Germany: "Here I am, waiting. I have lost it all: daughter, husband and homeland" (Hussein 43). Another Iraqi mother – in her black woolen cloak - expresses her worries over her son who has migrated to Michigan for two years, but his phone has been out of service recently: "Could the phone possibly be out of service this whole time? Her tears are visible" (Hussein 44). Huda herself suffers from the same loss: "I carried myself to the phone booth and dialed. No one answered" (Hussein 47) from Baghdad. Anxiously, Ruqaya inquires: "What happened to Youssef? What happened to my aunt? Why was no one responding?" (47):

Every time I dialed the number for home, I was disappointed. Baghdad preferred to keep silent, as if punishing me for having abandoned it. Every time I asked myself

questions, I developed a headache. Days and months passed slowly. I felt like a sojourner lost in a mirage that was failing to quench my thirst I was unable to change the map of my exile, and I couldn't return to Baghdad (79).

Remembering is not a personal issue since "acts of personal remembering are fundamentally social and collective" (Smith and Watson 2001: 21). On narrating testimonies, Huda's "I" is blurred with the refugees' "we". Memory is "contextual" and it "never stands alone" (Engel 52) to indicate the move toward the inner life within the potent dynamism "we" in the making of memories. Huda's city narrative amalgamates "the politicization of the private and the personalization of the public" (Smith and Watson 1998: 436). As Huda claims, "these stories are all that we have. We ought to repeat them again and again in order to bear witness to the age of butcheries" (Hussein 18). As such, acts of remembering function as "therapeutic intervention" to give "voice to what was previously unspeakable" (Smith and Watson 2001: 21) on both the private and the communal levels.

Finally, Basra/Baghdad and Amman fragmented narratives can be interpreted as geographical imaginaries of cities within the paradigm of the conceptual self/space convergence. The city narratives can be interrogated historically within their material locations and with a recognition of how diverse spaces can reflect or represent "textualization of landscape" (Gregory 140). Basra/Baghdad and Amman chronicles are explored as "textual spaces" to aesthetically investigate the sense of space, the space of the psyche, the streets, the markets and the private domestic rooms. City narratives are substantial anchors for linguistic forms of communication that span time and space in order to mediate between objects of sensation on the one hand, and intangible conceptions

on the other hand, thereby, these textual spaces construct pictorial maps and cartographic prompts to employ the metaphor of the city fiction as a world with borders and to assert the materiality of the texts.

### 3. *Al-Tantouria* (2010): Memories of Geographical Uprising

"Along with language, it is geography - especially in the displaced form of departures, arrivals, farewells, exile, nostalgia, homesickness, belonging, and travel itself - that is at the core of my memories". (Said 1999: xvi).

How has Palestine disappeared geographically from the maps? Forced exile from homeland and the mapping away of the Palestinian lands have been culminated in the American President Trump's 'Plan of the Century' in 2020:



Figure 4

<https://www.passblue.com/2020/02/03/will-trumps-vision-shake-up-the-middle-east/>

The thought-provoking inquiry is how to represent a country that no longer exists in the physical sense of place on a map in the recent time? This question of representation is not an epistemological issue, but a political one to allow the speaking subaltern to possess the freedom to narrate. The significant interrogation arises: How does Radwa Ashur (1946 - 2014) present Tantoura factually and fictitiously? Geographically speaking,

Tantoura is located, old Ruqaya says, within "the coastline from South of Arce to South of Jaffa" and it is "included in the Jewish State after the partition" (Ashur 2014: 73):

there is an unmistakable coincidence between the experiences of Arab Palestinians at the hands of Zionism and the experiences of those black, yellow, and brown people who were described as inferior and subhuman by nineteenth-century imperialists. For although it coincided with an era of the most virulent Western anti-Semitism, Zionism also coincided with the period of unparalleled European territorial acquisition in Africa and Asia, and it was as part of this general movement of acquisition and occupation that Zionism was launched initially by Theodor Herzl (Said 1992: 68-9).

Tantoura's massacre took place when it was attacked and occupied by the Israeli army's Alexandroni Brigade. Palestinian peasants suffered from severe ethnic cleansing which has marked the cycle of destruction, acts of terror and the establishment of refugees' camps: "the Palestinian landscape has been transformed by processes of geopolitical powers from an imagined place of 'land without people' into a 'redeemed territory' materialized in the creation of Israel" (Philo 121).

Stricken by the incalculable losses in Tantoura, the Palestinian peasants fled to the nearby town of Fureidus. They were stunned by the military failure of the Arab armies. "Imperialism after all", Edward Said writes, "is an act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted, and finally brought under control" and "the land is recoverable at first only through imagination" (1990: 77). Zionism has approached Palestine

advocating the Western "imperialist cognitive agenda" (El-Messiri 564), thereby, the Palestinians have become an obstacle to the Israeli existence. The act of 'Othering' the Palestinians has been manipulated by Zionism to obtain the "international legitimation for its accomplishments" (Said 1992: 71).

### 3.1. Tantoura as a Geo-Cultural 'Polysensuous' City

Ruqaya belongs to the generation of Catastrophe; a period of intense physical and

psychological torture. She constantly recalls specific Palestinian heritage to emphasize her geocentric identity. To defy the Zionist narratives that deny the geographical presence of Palestine, *Al-Tantouria* celebrates the beauty of the coastal city, folk traditions and chivalrous Palestinian men. Old Ruqaya's memories of Tantoura's coast are very poetic and lyrical: "The sea resides in the village lending it its voices and colors, suffusing it with its scents, which we would smell even in the aroma of large, flat stone-baked bread loaves (Ashur 2014: 16):



Figure 5: Front Cover Design (2010) - Tantoura in 1935 during the British Mandate  
<https://ar.wikipedia.org/wiki>

Ruqaya's sensory memories of the city sea's color, smell and warmth represent the "sensation of *presencing*" (Moslund 29; emphasis in the original). The textual signifiers usher a topo poetic appreciation of Tantoura's coastal shore, hence, the "sense energies" (Deleuze and Guattari 166) of the physical experience of the city sea provoke "intensive states" (Deleuze 141) within the memoirist's geomental sensuous past experiences. Ruqaya nostalgically speculates, "The sea in Beirut or Alexandria is the same sea. City sea is different: you look at it from a higher balcony or you walk along an asphalt path and the sea is there, separated from you by a ditch and fence" (Ashur 2014: 16). Ruqaya's "Langscaping" (Tally, *Geocritical Exploration* 4) beautifully

reveals how places and landscapes are closely interacted and *presenced* in a city life-writing narrative.

Tantoura's sea is singular for hosting weddings on the shore, "the dance Dabka circles, the aroma of grilled lamb, the Ataba and Ooof songs and mothers' folk songs with trills of joy" (Ashur 2014: 24). Tantoura has become a site of memory in its literal and metaphorical sense: "landscape is the work of mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock" (Schama 6). The figurative value of the coastal shore represents not only the poetics of the place, but also it generates a strong sense of self-identity. Both landscape and memory are always in a state of creation and recreation and the act of keeping the memory

alive is an ethical act to enhance the "shared sense of Palestinian-ness" (Sayigh 2012:13) in a ruptured community; those living in East Jerusalem, Gaza, the West Bank and those living in diaspora.

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict is symbolically illustrated in "the Night-Haunting Ghoul" with its unpleasant engine's "roar" (Ashur 2014: 38). The train is ridden by English soldiers and Jewish settlers to go to Haifa. Haifa – as a city of struggle – crystallizes the Palestinian villagers' resistance against the Zionist military attacks. The morale is low: "Haifa fell in two days!" and the Israeli attack "was like a bolt of lightning" (Ashur 2014: 120). Tantoura illustrates the Nakba "from the ground up" (Masalha 2012: 219) to underscore the authentic Palestinian Fedayeen's heroic fighting. Thereby, the Palestinian peasant represents the archetypal image of a genuine struggle and an authentic voice of the Nakba oral testimonies. Armed struggle is the key aspect of the Fedayeen's 'imagined community' that embodies an awakening of the Palestinian identity since suffering has fostered a powerful sense of solidarity. The 1948 Catastrophe has become a catalyst to authenticate patriotism and heroism. Postcolonial testimonial narrative is molded by the ebb and flow of resistance to reclaim geo-political identity.

The madafa – a folk guest room – is a signifier of cultural and social gatherings occupying a central patriarchal position as narrated by Ruqaya in flashback: "there men sat in a circle around the radio to listen to the news" and "Women were not allowed to enter" (Ashur 2014: 85). The madafa symbolizes a geographic shared sense of belonging. In this sense, Said asserts the cultural significance of "the material space of a house":

The objective space of a house—its corners, corridors, cellar, rooms—is

far less important than what poetically it is endowed with, which is usually a quality with *an imaginative or figurative value* we can name and feel; thus a house may be haunted or homelike, or prisonlike or magical. *So space acquires emotional and even rational sense by a kind of poetic process*, whereby the vacant or anonymous reaches of distance are converted into meaning for us here (1978: 55; emphasis added).

Men meet to solve disputes and to discuss critical decisions. This affirms both the tenacity of the Palestinian peasant's family and the public cohesion. It is also symbolic of respect, chivalry, social decorum and authentic Palestinian past (Slyomovics 140) maintained by the elder and regarded as a village institution of power to authorize the Palestinian uprising. More significantly, the seating system and the ethics evoked in these gatherings deconstruct the Zionists' stereotypical image of the Palestinians as barbarians, inferiors and savages.

"The Battle Dress" chapter is devoted to Ruqaya's closest friend Wisal's folk Palestinian dress to denounce the Israeli acts of cultural appropriation of the Palestinian national heritage. A foreign stranger stares at Wisal's 'peasant embroidery' or 'thobe' thinking she is from Israel: "This no Izrael. This is Palestinian thobe that I embroidered with my own hand. Izrael is a thief (Ashur 2014: 1071). Even "Tel Aviv itself is stolen", Wisal enthusiastically continues in her local vernacular, "They stole Jaffa and named it Tel Aviv" (Ashur 2014: 1075). Wisal - symbolically named – is a signifier of the Palestinian heritage as she is full of pride of the dexterous stitchery on the traditional dress which is a geographic symbol of the national culture:

Each dress has a unique shape which tells *a story of Palestinian cities*. A rock for Jerusalem, a red flower for Ramallah city, orange and apple trees for Jaffa, branches and papers of the trees for Hebron, large-sized engineering units for Gaza, watches shape for Bethlehem, pictures and flowers shapes for Beersheba and a camel for Jenin (Abu Jarad 2020; emphasis added).

Wisal's thobe is a national tale of struggle against the Israeli theft of land and heritage: "it is alleged that the traditional Palestinian dress designs were stolen by Israeli community, deliberately registering the Palestinian dress in its name in the fourth volume of the World Encyclopedia in 1993" (Abu Jarad 2020). By large, Wisal's courage is associated with "the events of the Intifada on television in Abu Dhabi" (Ashur 2014: 1082). Old Ruqaya astutely remarks, "I would think a lot about Wisal and her children, and look closely at the pictures whenever a woman appeared in an embroidered peasant dress, raising her hand with determination to throw a stone at one of the army cars ... She looks like her, but she it's not Wisal" (Ashur 2014: 1083).

Wisal is vehemently loyal to her identity in terms of accent and dress. What is more, her cuisine - Maqlouba, Musakhan and Mujaddara - occupies a passionate space in Ruqaya's memories. Wisal brings "bread from the old oven and three plastic bottles, tightly sealed, containing olive oil, and olive from the Palestinian trees in Jenin" (Ashur 2014: 674). Throughout the novel, Ruqaya cherishes the memory of Labneh, Kunafa dessert, Naboulsi cheese and domestic thyme – foods with local flavors maintained by Wisal who is described poetically in association with the "scent of the sea" which Ruqaya gets from "Wisal's body, long dress and hair" (Ashur 2014: 662). The recurrent

descriptions of orange blossoms, olive oil and olive trees become leitmotifs to symbolize the Palestinian tree bond. They are indigenous practices to survive the geographical trauma of the Nakba. Memories are localized in Ruqaya's vivid descriptions of the 'Indian figs', 'the sugar spring' and the 'newly weed's beach' – all are voiced through memory. "Acts of memory" (Nora 19) represent the 'return' to the old homeland and to the glorious days. The sea, the coastal town, the wedding songs, the fig-trees, the peasant embroidery and the olive trees are objects of active "commemorative vigilance" (Nora 12). They are also metonymic ties to the people-land bond. As such, Tantoura - in terms of coastal geography, trees, folk songs, marriage rites and national dress - is figured to reenact geomental memories of the Palestinian calamity of uprooting.

The seventy-year-old Ruqaya's mental trauma is illustrated through the apparition of Naji Al-Ali: "In bed, between sleep and waking, I became confused. I thought, was Naji sitting beside me, or was it a vision in the dream? Would I find him the next morning in Ain Al-Helweh? Would Naji meet little Ruqaya one day across the wire, or without it? I will sleep so that I can get up early in the morning and go to the camp, to look for Naji and make sure he is there" (Ashur 2014: 1438). She sets an analogy between the national Palestinian cartoonist Naji Al-Ali and a small boy whom she encounters on the bus while they ride back from South Lebanon. More Significantly, the boy's name is Naji, a painter from Ain Al-Helweh Camp too, originally from Galilee. He draws her twice in a peasant dress with two braids in association with a large key, oranges and olives trees. Ruqaya's trauma is historically and geographically specific within a particular time and space. Remembering and memories are Ruqaya's strategies of adaptation to survive wars, deaths of her relatives and the disappearance

of her husband: "making memory public affirms identity, tames trauma, and asserts Palestinian, moral and political claims to justice, redress and the right to return" (Sa'di and Abu-Lughod 3). Diaspora is subtly illustrated in Ruqaya's memory of her mother's fears that her daughter might leave her and get married in Haifa while Ruqaya's children have scattered everywhere; Alexandria, Emirates, Amman, Paris, Canada, Beirut and the refugees' camps. Ruqaya's epic story is spatial in which memories of place and dislocations are woven together. Her memoir is a deeply personal geography depicting the interplay of a sense of Self and a sense of place.

The key of a deserted house concretizes the concept of "the right of return" and it remains vivid to symbolize the history of trauma and forced exile. The key is an object of a heavy memory; what does this personal belonging tell about the domestic homeland? The Palestinian house's key crystalizes a sense of self-identification. The key is an eternal material icon of dignity to overcome the aggravated sense of homelessness:

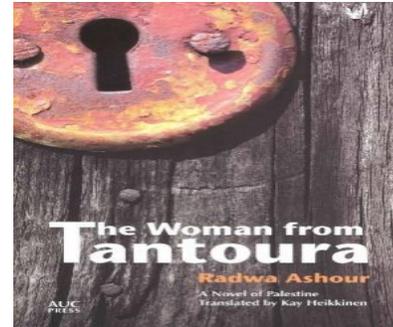


Figure 6: Front Cover Design (2014)

The contrast between before and after the 1948 Catastrophe is depicted through the 2014 Front Cover Page which is a close-up shot of a rusty keyhole in monochrome. The large old key is Ruqaya's last legacy to bequeath to her granddaughter in a very touching and captivating scene across barbed wire; "The key to our house, Hasan. It's my gift to little Ruqaya" (Ashur 2014: 1425).

Affinities are set between Ruqaya's family members and Hanzala – Naji Al-Ali's famous satirist figure – in the sense that they all are "defeated" (Ashur 2014: 1116). Hanzala's mother - like Ruqaya - is depicted with the key hanged on a cord around her neck. Hanzala's shabby appearance - illustrated barefoot in patched clothes - is symbolic of his name which means bitterness:



Figure 7: Naji Al-Ali's Drawings

<https://al-ain.com/article/naji-al-ali-bullet-handala> / <https://www.pinterest.com/pin>

He is a ten-year-old boy depicted from the back with clasped hands and his eyes are only on the Palestinian predicament. It is a physical pose of opposition and rejection of

the whole world that is full of terrorism and oppression as narrated in detail by Ruqaya as she follows Naji's drawings during the massacres of Sabra and Shatila. This brings

to the fore other significant symbols of the Palestinian identity; *Fedayeen's Kufiyyah*, folk embroidery, *Dabka*, land registration documents and pictures of the Dome of the Rock intermingled with the map of Palestine— all are icons of a distinctive identity in a constant state of resistance and remembering.

### 3.2. Oral Testimonies as Geospatial Story-Telling

Al-Nakba is a historical disaster the marks a tragic "rupture in the continuity of historical space and time in Palestinian history" (Masalha 2009: 39). Demographically, the geopolitical realities of Palestine have been erased. The Hebraized invasion of the Palestinian geography has been carried out through the practice of re-naming sites: "David Ben-Gurion explained that this was done as part of an attempt to prevent future claim to the villages. It was also supported by the Israeli archaeologists, who had authorized the names as returning the map to something resembling 'ancient Israel'" (Pappé 138). Thereby, the Palestinians have become 'refugees' and many picturesque Palestinian villages have disappeared from maps, ruined and re-invented by the Zionists to create new Jewish settlements.

Why did the Palestinians flee? is a question stated to provide the reasons of the flight during the 1948 War: "The primary causes were: direct military attack on the villages; terrorism; lack of leadership; lack of arms; in short, chaos and fear" (Sayigh 1979: 62). The Palestinian exile is concretized in the refugees' camps of Lebanon, Jordan and Syria: "Palestinians in Jordan, like those in the West Bank, became officially Jordanian; in Syria and Lebanon they were issued with special refugee ID cards, with rights and restrictions that were gradually defined in the years that followed" (Sayigh 1979: 100).

Refugees in Palestine sought coastal cities especially those of Tyre and Sidon in order to be as close as possible to their original villages and to easily meet their fellowmen. Ruqaya has always been caressed by the sea in Tantoura, Sidon and Alexandria; the sea is always clear and sharp to remind her of the happiest serene childhood mixed with the scent of the orange blossoms.

Ruqaya, after the Tantoura's massacre and the fall of Haifa, seeks refuge in Lebanon where her uncle Amin has fled earlier to escape the horror of the Israeli acts. Uncle Amin rejects the idea of being a refugee. What is more, uncle Amin's outstanding story-telling of the same stories of the homeland to his grandsons and his unrelenting determination to recognize the map of Palestine by heart fulfil Michael Milshtein's "memory from below" (71) as spontaneous acts of self-affirmation to defy the intimidation of being nullified as a nation. His stories can "fill volumes" (Ashur 2014: 275) telling about Haifa's garrison, Zionist gangs and the Hijaz line station. As part of his weekly schedule, he takes a taxi and participates in demonstrations in Tyre, Al-Khiyam, Nabatiyeh, Bint Jbeil and Al-Rashidiya (Ashur 2014: 545) calling for political reform and civil rights. He has survived several Israeli bullets despite his old age. Uncle Amin's oral narratives represent a memory in exile. The use of the preposition 'in' is a signifier of both being temporally and spatially within: "He specified the place and time, moving from one time to another and from one place, from a well-known date to personal events he had witnessed and in which he played a part" (Ashur 2014: 572). This is well-illustrated in the martyrdom of the populist political leader Maarouf Saad whom Uncle Amin genuinely laments his death. Uncle Amin has passed away before the terror siege of Tall Al-Zaatar, before the alliance of Syria and the Phalange, before the fight between Amal and Arafat's group,

before the Black Saturday at the end of the 1975 and before the most aggressive Israeli invasion in 1982; chaos was in the heart of Beirut, Acre Hospital was shelled and houses were struck by missiles.

Ruqaya's son, Hassan, pushes her to write her memoirs of the 1948 Disaster: "Why have you entangled me in this writing? What sense does it make for me to live through the details of the disaster twice?" (Ashur 2014: 637). Ruqaya despondently speculates: "Leave the page blank, Ruqaya" (637). The question arises: Do memories have authoritative narrative voices? Hasan urges his mother to record her testimony; "Mother, What I'm asking for isn't a composition but testimony" (Ashur 2014: 678) to interpret the Palestinian collective memory as a national enterprise. Ruqaya's national memories are "a will to remember" (Nora 19) to halt time and block forgetfulness. More significantly, Ruqaya's

autography is the embodiment of what Sidonie Smith terms as "Autobiographical Manifesto" (1998: 26) to offer "an arena in which the subject can insist on identity in service to an emancipatory politics" (Smith and Watson 1998: 435). Thus, the Palestinian memory symbolizes an "eternal present" (Nora 18) since it functions as a cathartic experience and it is open to the dialectics of recalling and disremembering to reclaim the lost paradise.

The refugees' camps have been intended to provide shelter. However, they are means of dispersion and dismemberment. The camps resonate deeply in the Palestinian geo-lexicon: "borders became a defining feature of daily life - borders that both locked Palestinians in and kept them out. Space was splintered as was time. This rupture has been a watershed event in the formation of Palestinian identity and relations to place and time" (Petee 3):



Figure 8: Refugees' camp in northern Lebanon & Shatila camp early 1950s - Archives of American Near East Refugee Aid (ANERA), Washington, D.C.

Despite the Israelis' tight control over the camps, they fail to erode "the practice of family solidarity or family reproduction. All accounts of the early period show the refugees groping to re-establish family contacts" (Sayigh 1979: 136). Camps, checkpoints and walled-in areas are seen as "open-air prisons" (Petee xiii). The refugees suffer from the pressures and restraints

imposed by the Second Bureau and the Lebanese authorities: "They shout in a loud voice. "Good God, they need permission from the authorities to leave the camp? Is it a prison?" (Ashur 2014: 296). On the one hand, the refugees' camps are investigated as sites of marginalization, terror and poverty and as sites of creativity and resistance on the other hand. The contradictory perception of the

refugees' camps questions the relation between place and identity to underscore what Barbara Parmenter terms as "landscape of despair" and "landscape of anticipation" (64). Ruqaya's regular visits to the refugees' camps underlie a new insight of borderland as socio-cultural practices within a geopolitical designation. This new insight is dramatized in the stories of the theft of land and the damage of the crops told by the elderly women: "It's not enough to steal the land and the crops, they even want the clothes we're wearing and the blankets we wrap up in! Believe me, Sitt Ruqaya, they didn't even leave a sieve" (Ashur 2014: 523). Moreover, Ruqaya is impressed by Umm Sabah's talk of figs, awe-struck by Umm Nabil's bright face when she describes the shape and leaves of the pomegranate tree: "When Umm Nabil comes to the fruit, she doesn't talk about it, she simply stretches out her hand and picks it and opens it, spreading the seeds before your eyes so that you see their crimson red" (Ashur 2014: 513).

The elderly women's stories "reassure me, in some strange and wondrous way I can't understand. (Ashur 2014: 506) and all the stories begin with "'there', with what happened when they took over the village and threw us out and we fled to Lebanon" (Ashur 2014: 512), Ruqaya passionately recalls. The past is "thrust into the present" (Auster 139) by a story or a place that is attached to a memory which is not simply a "resurrection of one's private past, but an immersion in the past of others, which is to say: history - which one both participates in and is a witness to, is a part of and apart from" (139). The refugees are not voiceless since their audibility and visibility are tactical and strategic. Within the strategies of the autobiographical manifesto, these Palestinian stories contest the colonizers' assumptions of subjugation: "The autobiographical manifesto is a revolutionary gesture poised against amnesia and its compulsory repetitions. It is not quite

anamnesis (or reminiscence) so much as a purposeful constitution of a future history, the projection of anamnesis into the future" (Smith and Watson 1998: 438). Thus, the autobiographical manifesto enriches the experiences of the margins to affirm the confluences of socio-political and psychological forces of oppression.

In the refugees' camps, Ruqaya participates in literacy campaigns intended for the women in Shatila and she delivers tutoring sessions for children too: "I came to know the lanes and neighborhoods of the camp by the houses piled one on top of the other" (Ashur 2014: 501). The volunteering work empowers her in the sense that "when the resistance took over the camps and their borders, it remapped the scales of power in space; the microgeography of the camps exploded" (Peteet 133). Françoise Lionnet, in *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture* (1989), argues that "historically silenced subjects, women and colonized peoples create "braided" texts of many voices that speak their cultural locations dialogically" (Smith and Watson 1998: 12). It is a way of acting multiplicity to underlie the experience of physical, emotional and political predicament of exiled populations. Ruqaya's and the colonized Palestinian women's oral testimonies are a weave of a multi-voiced act that marks the emerging of new speaking beings through self-presentation to counter the centrifugal power of the colonizer.

Finally, the women's oral testimonies serve as a "scriptotherapy" (Smith and Watson 2001: 172) to foster one shared political identity. In this sense, the Palestinian refugees' identities are "a production" (Hall 392) that is "in process" (392) to represent the politics of agency. This pinpoints the multifaceted interconnections between lives lived and the narratives of life. Performativity of life narratives marks "the

shift from the documentary view of autobiography as a record of referential fact to a performative view of autobiography centered on the act of composition" (Eakin 1992: 143) to contest the notion of self-narration as a monologic utterance of a solitary and introspective subject. Ruqaya's life has been prolonged to grasp who she is at a given moment within the politics of agency. She chronicles testimonies to perform rhetorical acts; mitigating insights, defying colonial practices and commenting on the refugees' physical and emotional plight.

#### 4. Aesthetics of Historiographical Metafiction: A Textual Critique

*Beyond Love* and *Al-Tantouria* investigate the history-story relationship through dual temporalities of the past and the present within self-referential and self-conscious reconceptualization of national his(tories). The life-writing practice, in the two narratives, does not unfold chronologically; it halts at key events in flashbacks to defy a single unitary and linear history to reinforce "the subjective and fragmentary nature of historical knowledge through disruptions of linear chronology" (Wallace 204). Huda and Ruqaya function as surrogate authors in the sense that they grapple with their ability to serve as story-tellers. They can also be regarded as surrogate readers in their genuine attempts to make sense of their spatial experiences. In so doing, the two Arab women writers approach historiographic metafiction with a double awareness of its fictionality and historicity. Baghdad and Tantoura exhibit their idiosyncratic sensibilities through the merge of the factual and the imaginative accounts. They are cities with unstable and polymorphous insights constructed in episodic forms to deliberately shift from the present to the past; to move smoothly back and forth within the dual personal story/history paradigm.

Huda and Ruqaya are examples of archetypal exile. Their memoirs are personal renderings of Iraqis and Palestinians as dispersed national communities. As a form of self-reflective writing, memoir opens realms for the speaking subaltern to contemplate the place of the self in a traumatic history. Memoir is deployed to historicize the self and place through the focus on times in which life is closely related to testimony. As such, memoir is a structural scheme for fragmented accounts, loose plots, episodic structures, lack of fixity and the narrative reflexivity is a poetic device to document wars and trauma. Remembering is part and parcel of life-writing narrative to testify to traumatic experiences and to advocate the story-teller approach. Thus, memory is situated in narratives to acknowledge the notion of revisiting the past and to re-evaluate the present subjectivity in the light of what has gone before. Hussein and Ashur speak in terms of percepts, affects and sensations to evoke tenor, mood and intensity of places. Both Arab women writers embark on emotional and physical journeys backward and forward within the spatial/temporal coordinate mingled with a journey inward. They seek to transform repressive geographical cities into spaces for agency and resistance.

The poetics of historiographical metafiction contests the absolute assumption of the realist novels and espouses the postmodern aesthetics of plurality through the extensive use of the topologies of transtextuality. Gérard Genette contends that texts are

rarely presented in an unadorned state, unreinforced and unaccompanied by a certain number of verbal or other productions, such as an author's name, a title, a preface, illustrations. And although we do not always know whether these

productions are to be regarded as belonging to the text, in any case they surround it and extend it, precisely in order to *present* it, in the usual sense of this verb but also in the strongest sense: to *make present*, to ensure the text's presence in the world, its "reception" and consumption in the form of a book (1; emphasis in the original).

Paratextual clues create a set of readerly expectations about a text. The concept of the peritext triggers the reader's curiosity towards the materiality of the narratives in order to provide fresh textual meanings. Miriam Cooke's "Foreword" to *Beyond Love* associates the Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani's 1963 "classic story of the Palestine escape, *Men in the Sun*" with Huda's "twenty-hour car ride to Jordan across the Iraqi desert" (x). The premise is grounded on the fact that Kanafani's fiction is an iconic dramatization of post-colonial trauma. Ikram Masmoudi's "Introduction" is very functional since it provides the historical context of Post-War Iraq. Hadiya Hussein makes the best use of the "Footnotes" to provide extra descriptions and explanatory information about the Ba'ath Party, the holy shrines, revered religious Imams, the real literary and historical figures mentioned in the main narrative itself. In Amman, Huda's exilic experience is concretized within "A Stranger by the Gulf": "al-Sayyab's pain in exile. My tears flowed silently, hot and burning" (Hussein 83). A reference to Dunya Mikhail's war poem "The War Works Hard" is made to express the horrors of atrocities and war calamities (Hussein 96). Farouk Jouweida's love poem is recalled: "But your love is a long journey/And the days of my life are short nights" (Hussein 65), to comment on Nadia's impossible love affair and to subtly foreshadow her forthcoming death. Finally, Nadia's diary is a guide or a text that stands alone. The diary act is an intimate epitext in

a loose and disruptive form that constitutes the *raison d'être* of the whole narrative to convey psychic fragmentations.

In a similar vein, Radwa Ashur endows Palestine its voice through the recurrent presence of renowned patriotic figures such as the cartoonist Naji A-Ali and the prominent Palestinian historian and activist Dr. Anis Sayegh. Kanafani's *The Land of Sad Oranges* is weaved within the threads of the events to dramatize the intimate bond between women and orange trees signifying the calamity of the Palestinian exodus and the tragedies of deportation. There is also a reference to the fight between Fatah Activists and Israeli leaders to authenticate the Palestinian national armed struggle. Allusion is made to the failure of the Arab Nationalism, Jamal Abdul-Nasser's massive funeral and Oslo Accords. *Al-Tantouria* is Ashur's last novel and it is a tribute to the poet and memoirist Mourid Al-Barghouti as materialized in both the Arabic and the English "Dedication Pages". Al-Barghouti has become an icon of the Palestinian displacement. He actually suffered from many exiles and a sense of statelessness. More significantly, the English version's "Subtitle" on the Front Cover Page, "a Novel of Palestine", is essential for the western reader to grasp the relation between the translated title, *The Woman From Tantoura*, and Tantoura itself as a coastal city occupied by the Zionist gangs. Tantoura is no longer acknowledged in geography books since the Palestinian Acre, Haifa and Jaffa have been officially recognized as Israeli cities. Finally, both the Arabic and the English versions provide a "Glossary" of the Palestinian distinctive lexical items; vernacular language, local food, folk songs, tragic massacres, political leaders and activist movements. The "Glossary" functions as a stage curtain to mark the move from the private textual world to the public space

where the reader is neither outside nor inside the narrative itself.

## 5. Conclusion

On reading cities, a myriad of questions arises about how cities have come into being, how they have taken shape and what tenacities they have played in the socio-political and cultural transformation. The teleological modernist aesthetics of the early twentieth century cherished the temporal aspect especially with respect to the individual psychology while issues of spatiality have occupied a subordinate role in academic critiques. However, "geographical perception", Paul Rodaway believes, is "the perception of a world around us, of spatial relationships and the identification of distinctive places – to recognize our situation in a world and to have a sense of a world" (13). *Beyond Love* and *Al-Tantouria* draw upon such geographical perceptions to create senses of cities. The spirit of a city is grasped not only as a physical setting, but also as a potent feeling (Crang 108). Huda's and Ruqaya's personal experiences are paramount, and their "concrete realities" (Tuan 18) of places arise through a total experience which mingles sensory perceptions with mental reflections.

Life-writing fiction addresses the story/history accounts foregrounding "historical shifts and intersecting cultural transformation" (Smith and Watson 2001: 4) in relation to geographic ruptures. *Beyond Love* and *Al-Tantouria* tackle life-writing genre to underscore the Arab women writers' construction of a reality within auto-narratives to emphasize identity and agency. This marks the powerful presence of "turning points" (Bruner 31) to underlie "the power of the agent's intentional states" (31). The turning points in *Beyond Love* are the defeat of the 1991 Gulf War, the decline of the Iraqi national unity and the uprising of the south while in *Al-Tantouria* are the 1948 Nakba

and the Palestinians' exodus. These climactic moments represent the "poetics of transformation" (Ashcroft 19) to "redirect discursive power" (19) through a new self-representation.

Huda's migration to America underlines the "dissonances" that can be advantageous in the sense of preferring not being "out of place" (Said, 1999: 295). Huda flees Iraq to overcome any nationalist nostalgia opting for exilic consciousness and a state of foreignness. She interrogates the "borderline negotiations" (Bhabha 319) as a "translational" migrant to pursue "a postcolonial metropolitan assimilation" (Bhabha 320) within the zone of hybridity or 'Thirdspace' and to spot a new construction of self-representation, a point stated at the finale of the novel: "either you reconcile with your memory, or you have to create a memory for the future" (Hussein 156). She leaves for America as a permanent refugee in order to create a temporal distance to escape from her alienated state of being. Ruqaya's physical mobility symbolizes the dislocations of her family; she is the archetypal image of Palestine whose nation has scattered everywhere. As such, she is emblematic of both the generation of Al-Nakba and that of Resistance. More importantly, she represents a truthful eye-witness to the horrors of atrocities experienced in Deir Yassin massacre and the ferocious shelling of Sabra and Shatila camps culminated in writing her memoir that signifies her mature political consciousness. At the age of seventy, she returns to her homeland to reclaim her agency handing the historical key to her granddaughter.

Finally, Huda's painful memories and the desire of forgetfulness are in contrast to Ruqaya's intense memories of the Palestinian resistance seen as a tactic adaptation of survival to locate Palestine back in history and to maintain a geomental mapping of the

usurped cities. Both Huda's and Ruqaya's testimonies of ethnic cleansing are not fixed, but they are "evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation" (Eakin 1985: 3) to meet the essentials of the defiant consciousness. It is the 'contrapuntal awareness' of the two female protagonists' sufferings and agonies in the two narratives that evolve a spur to repossess geographical

places through the acts of remembering and story-telling. Huda and Ruqaya create their counter-histories as "signifying systems" (Hutcheon 93) to reinvent forms of narrating the Self. Layers of temporality signify a ruptured geo-political totality in which the past clashes with the present; spatial ruptures problematize the Now by viewing in it several temporalities.

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