

Original Article

CHILDHOOD SUBJECTIVITY AS A SITE OF CULTURAL RESILIENCE: DISPLACEMENT AND IDENTITY IN IBTISAM BARAKAT'S TASTING THE SKY

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes childhood subjectivity and the formation of resilient Palestinian identity in Ibtisam Barakat (2007). The lens of Diaspora Theory and Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome are used for the analysis of the work. This nonfiction, a memoir, recounts her own childhood experiences. The narrator of the novel is Ibtisam Barakat who memorizes her childhood in Palestine during the Six-Day War in 1967. Diverse recollections about childhood are revealed as this little girl attempts to confront the complexities of life, especially when the homeland is disrupted. The child is represented both as the observer and historical participant, who responds to displacement, which reveal about the mechanisms of identity construction in contexts of exile. These memories offer the narrator the opportunity to reclaim a part of her identity that was left behind in Palestine due to her migration to America. The analysis examines how the identity of the child narrator is rooted both in specific domestic and cultural practices, which included the sensory details of Palestinian life. By inscribing experience onto the child's internal world, the memoir functions as both a personal and collective literary-political project. *Tasting the Sky* addresses history from a marginalized perspective, affirming cultural continuity, psychological healing, and a persistent claim to a lost home. The child's identity, torn between a nostalgic past in Palestine and the reality of diaspora in America, becomes an act of resistance. Barakat's memoir is transformed into a generative force for self-definition.

Keywords: Palestinian Identity, Diaspora Narrative, Childhood Subjectivity, Cultural Memory, Literary Trauma, Counter-Hegemony, Rhizome, Home

INTRODUCTION

The figure of the child in Palestinian diaspora literature is more than a passive subject or chronicler of loss. It becomes site for the articulation of identity, memory, displacement and resistance.

The state of displacement experienced by the Palestinian citizens following the Nakba in 1948 and the 1967 war has become the theme of many literary works. Many Palestinians left Israel and crossed the borders to Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and other places. Naturally, children were part of this departure. Therefore, the stories depict the image of the child who was stripped of his childhood and rights; the child who was denied an environment that provided freedom and security. Jabir-Kassoum (2021)

Ibtisam Barakat's memoir, *Tasting the Sky: A Palestinian Childhood*, represents this potential, of the figure of the child as it takes the reader through the tumultuous world of post-1967 Palestine, through the eyes of the young Ibtisam. The child's perspective

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offers a unique encounter with trauma and displacement but reveals redemptive powers of memory and experience. [Barakat \(2007\)](#), analyses resilient Palestinian identity within the diaspora. This narrative choice is an act of preserving the cultural identity, by shifting the focus of discourse from grand political narratives toward the intimate, sensory realities of the young narrator's life.

Ibtisam Barakat, a Palestinian American author, poet, and artist, is recognized for her memoirs and children's literature that articulate the complexities of displacement and identity. Born in the West Bank, she directly experienced the tumultuous period surrounding the 1967 Six-Day War, a foundational event that shapes her acclaimed work, *Tasting the Sky: A Palestinian Childhood*. Her educational journey reflects the formation of her bicultural identity. She studied English literature at Birzeit University in the West Bank, moved to the University of Missouri-Columbia. Her memoir, *Tasting the Sky: A Palestinian Childhood*, by Ibtisam Barakat, is a non-linear account of the author's childhood experience during and after the 1967 Six-Day War in the West Bank. Narrated from the developing perspective of young Ibtisam's personal memories of family life with the collective chaos of displacement, the memoir details the shift in Ibtisam's world when the war begins, forcing her family to move from Ramallah, their hometown as refugees. The memoir revolves around cultural endurance of the family and their journey as refugees. They eventually return to an occupied homeland.

The narrative begins and ends with the teenage Ibtisam. While she is detained at an Israeli checkpoint, she uses her secret post office box correspondence with global pen pals as a way to find internal freedom, contrasting her outside world. The core of the memoir is the shattering of Ibtisam's happy three-year-old world in Ramallah during 1967 Six-Day War. She was separated from her family during their flight toward Jordan. After their reunion the family lived in temporary homes as refugees. Upon returning to their house under occupation, their new normal is defined by fear and her mother prioritize safety over everything else. The mother takes the children to an orphanage in Jerusalem for safety. Ibtisam is deeply unsettled by this shift and the tears are compared to 'liquid stories' [Barakat \(2007\)](#). The family's return to home is conditional on the father's promises of security and a new goat, Zuraiq. This fragile promise of peace is broken when the father, despite a promise to the children, allows Zuraiq to be slaughtered for the brothers' circumcision feast, a 'happy' occasion (Bharakath 108). Ibtisam realises cultural practice is prioritised safety and personal attachments. As Ibtisam grows, her remarkable intelligence is reflected in school, where her success is equated with her mother's acknowledgement. But she is traumatised when she is sexually assaulted by an older boy on her walk home. She keeps the incident a secret. The memoir concludes with the family forced to move again after an Israeli soldier sexually threatens the mother. For little Ibtisam, even when the war ends, 'it hides' inside her as memory [Barakat \(2007\)](#)

The earlier scholarly works on *Tasting the Sky* address how the sudden historical and political shifts affect literary expressions. For example, [Yusuf et al. \(2012\)](#) article shows how home "is not only recollected in the memories of the child that she was, but it is also regenerated in the imaginary landscape of her narrative" (102). [Al-Rikabi \(2016\)](#) states how Palestinian-American fiction writers, like Barakat, face multiple issues as they struggle with the loss of their physical homeland on one hand, and the challenges of belonging and identity. According to [Savsar \(2018\)](#) Barakat's narrative emphasises the struggles of marginalisation and representation toward self-discovery and agency. [Alnwairan and Al-Jarrah \(2022\)](#) explore the concept of female memory and its role in reshaping Palestinian history in Barakat's memoir. The authors apply a postcolonial perspective to show how Barakat's narrative goes beyond merely reflecting history, which builds on [Kassem \(2011\)](#) research on Palestinian women's oral narratives.

Autobiography, as a chronicle of one's own life, positions childhood as the foundation of one's identity formation. In diasporic autobiographies, the construct of childhood represents lost origins, and the beginning of a linear quest of the lost self. Memoir, by contrast, depicts the construct of diasporic childhood as a mosaic of displaced fragments, where nostalgia coexists with enduring adaptation. The construct of diasporic childhood embodies perpetual becoming, a negotiation between belonging to the past and adapting to the present. The construction of childhood, children and cultural identity within diasporic literature is linked to memory and identity. Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome is particularly productive in understanding *Tasting the Sky*, as it foregrounds a non-hierarchical, acentric, and ever-proliferating model of thought and narrative. Barakat's memoir is not linear and shifts between places and times. According to Deleuze and Guattari, the rhizome or fungus, which is an organism of interconnected living fibers has no central point and origin. It has no unity of structure. It has no beginning and end. [Deleuze and Guattari \(1987\)](#). Rhizome brings in the possibility of multiple and perennial reappearance. Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome stands in sharp contrast to structures of linear development. When this concept is applied to the construct of diasporic childhood, the child is reimagined as an open-ended assemblage that resists fixed roots. In *Tasting the sky*, the diasporic childhood is a rhizome in itself. Like a rhizome, it has no central points. and linear pattern, but is an assemblage of overlapping place, memory and space. The memory of the diasporic child represents a rhizomatic practice that stitches heterogeneous spaces together. The child's identity is continually circling back through personal, familial, and collective histories.

Barakat's memoir opens "midway from Birzeit to Ramallah, at the Israeli army checkpoint at Surda" [Barakat \(2007\)](#) and merges the boundaries between present and past, adulthood and childhood. The ensuing narrative collapses linear development and operates as a rhizome, with no centre to scattered and traumatic moments about the life of refugees and shifting homes. The trauma of displacement and the fear and confusion of separation is represented through the fragmented narrative of the child who reconstructs her experience as individual and communal history. The rhizomatic form contributes to the non-conclusive nature of traumatic ruptures of the Six-Day War and the ongoing occupation. In *Tasting the Sky*, memories of war are intricately intertwined with intimate domestic details:

Mother had just announced that our lentil-and-rice dinner would be ready as soon as Father arrived. She picked up Maha, my infant sister, held out a plump breast, and began to rock and feed her. I was three and a half years old but still wanted to be the one rocking in my mother's arms. [Barakat \(2007\)](#).

Barakat's childhood recollections move between shelters and refugee camps, school and home, is forced into a state of continual adaptation. She is, "midway from forgetting to remember. I do not know how long it will take before I return to all of myself" [Barakat \(2007\)](#).

In this state of the constant evolving, the child discovers the mutable nature of identity. The constant negotiation between loss and hope, trauma and joy, produces a resilient and reimagined form of selfhood. The child's perspective resists a closure, making space for the endless multiplication of identity. *Tasting the Sky* invites us to consider the child not as a passive recipient of trauma, but as an active agency of cultural production and consumption. The narrative ends with an affirmation of agency to the child "Dear everyone / Written on my heart, all that I lost my shoes, a donkey friend, a city, the skin of my feet, a goat, my home, my childhood shattered at the hands of history. But my eternal friend Alef helps me find the splinters of my life and piece them back together" [Barakat \(2007\)](#). By centering the child's perspective, Barakat's memoir transcends the closure and alienation of adult-centered histories. The domestic sphere and non-linear recollection all serve as a site for the ever evolving cultural identity that is open-ended.

The ongoing internal conflict and political and social unrest reshape the child narrator's identity. Her mother's reflection, "When a war ends, it does not go away... it hides inside us" [Barakat \(2007\)](#), depicts the ways in which trauma affects a child growing up in occupation. Yet, Barakat finds refuge: "it is hidden in Post Office Box 34. This is what takes me from Ramallah to Birzeit" [Barakat \(2007\)](#). This metaphorical space becomes an agency to her identity, a hidden domain where the child's voice seeks safety and resilience. Post Office Box 34 is transformed into a symbolic space in which identity can breathe, evolve, and transform away from the restrictions imposed by immediate external surroundings. Her construct of childhood have an agency even in moments of loss or fear. Young Barakat fosters a parallel identity to empower and heal her diasporic childhood in displacement. She voices, "paper and ink, poems and my postbox are medicines that heal the wounds of a life without freedom" (9). Her writing allows her to find peace in pain. Different from Ibtisam, her father has "no language for the pain and loneliness he feels" (744). For Ibtisam transforms her tears drip onto her shoes and tears are her secret ink, in the absence of real ink. *Liquid stories* (749). Barakat's memoir reveals how even amid instability and uncertainty of war the routines and freedoms of childhood emerge as sources of affirmation. While the family did their laundry by the stream, domestic labor turns into communal celebration and release: "Mother washed our clothes mainly on Fridays, when Father had no work and could drive us to a stream where many people gathered. My brothers and I rode in the back of the truck screaming into the wind and laughing wildly" [Barakat \(2007\)](#). Barakat describes how these journeys suspended grief and led to self-expression: "At the top of our lungs we would yell all the expressions Mother had told us we should never say because they were impolite. Then we made up songs in which the forbidden words were repeated over and over until we arrived at the stream" [Barakat \(2007\)](#).

The home, in Barakat's memoir, is not just shelter but a space for the construct of identity and the transaction of culture. According to Long, Home is an interplay of the house and the world, the intimate and the global, the material and the symbolic. It is the meaningful integration of larger, distant and former homes in a situated present. The intimate spaces of human life are simultaneously the spaces that open us up to the world: domestic space is a dialectic of inside and outside, of house and the universe, of intimacy and the world in the fundamental interconnectedness of people and places through imagination.

In the memoir chores, foods, rituals, and motherhood are recounted in detail. "Early mornings, Mother prepared the dough for our bread. She sifted flour, mixed it with water, salt, and yeast, and pounded it together. When she let it rest, we would poke our fingers into the dough to draw faces. Father then took the flat loaves to be baked in the community oven" [Barakat \(2007\)](#).

Here, the boundaries between individual, community and collective are blurred, and the transmission reflects in cultural identity formation. The extended hand for nursing becomes a mode of extending kinship. "The women who could do so nursed the infants of women whose milk had dried up...It was said, and repeated, that children nursed by the same woman would instantly become siblings and must never marry. Mother nursed only my sister, so we acquired no new siblings" [Barakat \(2007\)](#). The domestic space becomes a space for personal recollection and a space for sociality, solidarity, and collective memory.

CONCLUSION

Ibtisam Barakat's *Tasting the Sky* exemplifies the profound theoretical and thematic possibilities that result from centering the construct of childhood within diaspora narratives. By adopting a rhizomatic narrative mode, Barakat positions the child as historian, witness, and agent of cultural memory. Through a focus on the domestic sphere, the embodied subject, and the generative power of language, the text contests both patriarchal and colonial silencing, constructing a healing narrative of loss, resilience, and continual becoming.

The paper underscores that childhood, far from being an apolitical space, is where the work of cultural identity is most powerfully negotiated and renewed. In doing so, Barakat's memoir inspires not only an empathetic understanding of Palestinian experience but also a reimagining of the child's role in histories of trauma and survival. The narrative concludes with the voice of the

child intact not as pure innocence but as living memory and potential, forever "midway from forgetting to remembering" Barakat (2007).

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