3L: Language, Linguistics, Literature® The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies
Vol 31(1), March 2025 http://doi.org/10.17576/3L-2025-3101-08

Palestinian Speculative Fiction: Reimagining Home in Virtual Palestine

ANIS AFIFI NORBASUDI
Department of English Language and Literature
AbdulHamid AbuSulayman Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences
International Islamic University Malaysia, Malaysia

RAIHAN ROSMAN *
Department of English Language and Literature
AbdulHamid AbuSulayman Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences
International Islamic University Malaysia, Malaysia
raihanrosman@iium.edu.my

ABSTRACT

Palestinian speculative fiction emerges as a powerful and dynamic literary genre, providing a distinctive lens on Palestine's complex historical, political and cultural landscape. Drawing on Ian Campbell's assertion that speculative genres inherently reflect postcolonial literature, this paper examines how Palestinian speculative writers utilise this genre to illuminate the complex nostalgia and profound trauma of displaced Palestinians following the pivotal event of the 1945 Nakba. Through the analysis of Saleem Haddad's "Song of the Birds" (2019), Majd Kayyal's "N" (2019) and Emad El-Din Aysha's "Digital Nation" (2019), the paper demonstrates how these authors employ 'alternate realities' to depict both the complex longing of the pre-Nakba generation and the resilient resistance adopted by the younger generation in response to the enduring trauma of Israeli occupation. It acknowledges that while there may be no immediate remedy for Palestinian's longing to return, their narratives persist as powerful expressions of hope and resilience.

Keywords: Saleem Haddad; Majd Kayyal; Emad El-Din Aysha; Palestinian speculative fiction; the Nakba; reimagining home; nostalgia and trauma

INTRODUCTION

In the rich tapestry of global literature, the speculative genre has consistently functioned as a potent means to delve into possibilities, envision the improbable and challenge societal norms. Although it has gained popularity in Western fiction, this genre has found its way to accommodate many stories in Palestinian literature. Against the backdrop of complex history and continuous geopolitical conflicts, Palestinian speculative fiction ventures into the *terra incognita*, fusing creative imaginations and the realities of the Palestinian experience to call attention to the manifold anxieties triggered by the brutality of their long-standing enemy, Israel. Significant topics of displacement, dispossession, expulsion and extermination are interwoven into their narratives, making resistance an inherent essence of their literature. Three Palestinian writers, Saleem Haddad, Majd Kayyal and Emad El-Din Aysha in their short stories, "Song of the Birds" (2019, henceforth "SOTB"), "N" (2019, henceforth "N") and "Digital Nation" (2019, henceforth "DN") utilise this 'impossible narration' to examine the complex nostalgia and convoluted trauma sparked by different arrays of colonial anxieties endured by Palestinians for over seven decades through the presence of virtual or simulated Palestine.

Speculative fiction has gone through multiple and rigorous revisions on its definition and the reconciliation point of those polarising debates hitherto grounded on the basis that it is a non-mimetic genre that espouses a limitless vision of the real. In the 1940s, the term 'speculative fiction' was first deployed by a notable American science fiction writer, Robert A. Heinlein in his seminal essay, *On the Writing of Speculative Fiction* (1947) who used the term 'speculative fiction' and 'science fiction' interchangeably to denote those stories that "la[y] in the future, on another planet or in another dimension" and also those that speculate "what would happen if…" (Heinlein, 1947, p. 128). In the early 20th century, both terms were used to promote fictional works that inculcate space exploration, technological advancement, and scientific discovery, which unquestionably contain speculative elements. Heinlein's earliest attempt to curate the direction of the speculative genre does not appear to be problematic to his contemporary writers as he retains a huge influence on a few succeeding authors like Ursula K. Le Guin, David Gerrold, Gregory Benford and Doris Lessing.

The successive attempt to redefine speculative fiction was advanced by Margaret Atwood, a prominent speculative writer in the late 20th century and early 21st century who wrote several speculative novels such as *The Handmaid's Tales* (1986), *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009), and *The Testaments* (2019). These novels, dystopian in nature, according to Atwood (2014), occupy the speculative realm but detract its association from science fiction and all at once, contesting Heinlein's definition. She affirms that 'speculative fiction' and 'science fiction' are not synonymous as the former does not necessarily incorporate planetary exploration and scientific endeavour, but it comes off as a 'possible' future that has not yet been discovered (p. 4). The latter, on the other hand, frequently fosters far-fetched scientific imagination. Realising the complexity of Atwood's definition, many contemporary scholars have turned to a more accepting and straightforward conceptualisation of the speculative genre, to which this author concurs. It is, for a matter of fact, an umbrella term for super genres stretching from fantasy, science fiction, and other non-mimetic genres (Bacon, 2019; Bourdieu, 1993; Oziewicz, 2017). It also includes but is not limited to utopian or dystopian worlds, horror, gothic, steampunk, cyberpunk, magic realism, fairy tale, horror and many others.

Basma Ghalayini, the editor of *Palestine +100* (2019), a book in which the selected short stories: "Song of the Birds" (2019), "N" (2019) and "Digital Nation" (2019) were published criticises the short of or the absence of contemporary speculative fiction in Palestinian literature. The lack of appreciation towards this genre is, according to Ghalayini, a result of cruel reality and past trauma that has "too firm grip[ped]" on Palestinians' creative visions that it hinders them from exploring those "fanciful ventures" offered by the speculative world (Ghalayini, 2019, pp. iv-v). However, in this book, she, together with twelve other writers, including Saleem Haddad, Majd Kayyal, Emad El-Din Aysha and Mazen Maarof, attempted to break the convention and utilised speculative fiction to reimagine home. This attempt is a continuation of the humble efforts carried out by the pioneer writers of Palestinian speculative fiction, to name a few: Emile Habiby, Jamil Nasir, Ibtisem Azem, Ahlam Bsharat and many others who gallantly retell their colonial experiences through the mould of science fiction.

Saleem Haddad wrote "Song of the Birds" (2019) in honour of a talented young Palestinian writer, Mohanned Younis, who killed himself in 2017 out of depression living under the Israeli occupation (Helm, "A Suicide in Gaza") (Helm, 2018). The spike in suicide rates became the central motif of the story. It chronicles the relationship between two siblings, Aya and her brother, Ziad, who inhabit two different worlds, one in liberated Palestine and another in occupied Palestine. After the death of Ziad, Aya is constantly bothered by countless uncanny dreams of him

persuading her to commit suicide and join the other thousands of young fighters in 'real' Palestine. "N", written by Majd Kayyal, on the other hand, recounts a half conversation and a half monologue of N's father navigating his isolated life in post-war Palestine while he pursues his study in a parallel world called Israel. Troubled with loneliness and sorrow, the father switches to the recorded reality of pre-war Palestine as a distraction. Emad El-Din Aysha's story, in contrast, bends toward an optimistic view of technology in which simulation is used to reclaim Palestine. Asa Shomer, the director of Shabak, an Israeli security force, tracks down a group of ingenious Palestinian hackers who valiantly committed cybercrime. The story recalls the young hackers' success after success in debilitating Israelis' cyber security and eventually claiming their seized territory.

The three short stories also interrogate the complex history of colonialism in Palestine. As this paper is written, more than 47,035 Palestinians have been brutally killed, tortured, bombed and shot since the 7th of October 2023 ("The Human Toll of Israel's War on Gaza - by the Numbers") and the number does not stop growing as lust and greed continuously feed Netanyahu and his complicit. The ongoing ethnic cleansing often widely reduced as the 'Israel-Palestine War' or 'Middle East Conflict' by the West is not new, in fact, it stretched to seven decades ago when the consequential Catastrophe or the *Nakba* came to pass in 1948. This apocalyptic event recorded the horror of violent displacement and dispossession of over 750,000 Palestinians from their only home, catalysing Zionist's colonial project to build a "predominantly Jewish state" in occupied Palestine (Khalidi, 2022, p. 8). The reinforcement of such colonial projects was materialised and supported by the British mandate authorities, with a sweeping number of European Jewish settlers invading the land after World War 1.

Mimicking the other European imperialists, the Zionists began conquering the land by dominating the local economy despite their minority status. This came in hand with the exclusion of Arab labourers from their private sectors, the pulverisation of the native vendors, as well as a major injection of capital from the Western countries, turning them into the dominant controller of the economy and later politics of Palestine. Their justification of such colonial propaganda was none other than a copy of the Western imperial manifestation that the land was once "barren, empty and backward", and that their responsibility was to keep the locality and people forward (Khalidi, 2022, p. 10). The narrative echoes the prevailing dichotomies of West/East, civilised/barbaric, backward/progressive that the East "has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality [and] experience" (Said, 2019, p. 2). The later event of the Great Arab Revolt in 1936-1939 marked the first imposition of violence towards the Palestinian resistance group, with thousands of troops of British-employed armies supporting the Zionist militias in their campaign to exterminate the entire native population. This campaign led to the momentous event of the *Nakba* that cornered and displaced over seven thousand Palestinians from their homes.

Climaxed by the withdrawal of the British from Palestine, the *Nakba* itself not only resulted in the displacement of people but it was also the pinnacle of Zionist colonialism. Urban centres like Jaffa, Haifa, West Jerusalem, Saifad and Beisam were ferociously seized to eventuate the creation of, so to speak, the 'promised land' of Israel. Consequently, Palestinians were forced to reside in the two remaining regions, the Gaza Strip and West Bank, under heavy surveillance by the Israel Defence Force (IDF). Israel's apartheid further tensed up with the constant denied basic needs, heavy shelling and unsparing treatments received by the Palestinians for more than seven decades. Ironically, the West always has its way of turning the table, blaming Palestinian resistance group Hamas for the atrocities they never put their hands on. In the wake of 7th October 2023, multifarious shocking cruelties were uncovered, including the shelling of hospitals and refugee

camps, organ harvestings, stripping hostages and many other crimes one could ever imagine. Hence, it is indubitable to contend that the history of colonialism in Palestine is concomitant to blood, pain, trauma and agony.

Another aspect imperative to this study is the presence of virtual reality or simulation that not only displays the writers' creative imagination but inadvertently becomes the central element that highlights the Palestinians' anxieties living amid colonialism and neo-colonialism. Adam Robert, in his seminal book *Science Fiction* (2000), views the speculative genre as a means for writers like Saleem Haddad, Majd Kayyal and Emad El-Din Aysha to destabilise and deconstruct the vilified images and stigmas surrounding the native Palestinians found abundant in the Western mainstream literature and media (pp. 29-30). Although this genre is claimed to be rightfully originated from the West, it set out to be one of the magical weapons that allow the Palestinian authors to subvert the power play between the West and the rest by authorising them to weave their own realities. Realities that support their desire to return, to claim and perhaps, to repopulate their seized homes. Coupled with their spirits of resistance, in many ways, this genre accommodates their unmarred hope of becoming freemen in their own terrain.

Making sense of Robert's conviction, this paper intends to further examine the texts through Ian Campbell's assertion in *Arabic Science Fiction* (2018, p. 6 & p. 21) that Arabic Speculative Fiction or precisely Arabic Science Fiction is "manifestly a postcolonial literature" that it appropriates a genre borrowed from the West, all "the tropes and discourse of science and of Science Fiction – to examine, critique and even resist that coloniser's power". Even though Palestinians are still subdued under the Israelis' power, it does not completely divert from the conventional notion of postcolonialism. In one way or another, Palestinians experience similar damage of colonialism and speak of the trauma, pain and nostalgia collectively shared by the postcolonial communities to a greater extent. However, as the colonialism in Palestine has advanced to a more horrific event of ethnic cleansing, many scholars simultaneously found it difficult to navigate the position of Palestinian literature and resort to postcolonialism as the best fitting realm to critic the power imbalance in the world system as well as addressing the unspoken horrors of displacement and extermination.

Additionally, Campbell's statement also intersects with Eric D. Smith's (2012, p. 2) proposed conditions of canonical science fiction that observe the imperialist desire for dominance is fulfilled through technological advancement and that the very similar technology is re-weaponised to expose the trauma of the imperial subject. Technological advancement, in this sense, is not only confined to the usual physical weaponry utilised in wars but may take up shapes such as social media, modern machinery and artificial intelligence software that work wonders in this modern world. Quevillion (2021, p. 16), on the contrary, saw science fiction as a "route for escapism" for both Palestinians and Israelis to escape their heinous reality while concurrently offering "a way [for them] to process and grapple with complex national issues through the medium of imagined realities, alternate histories [and] possible futures". Even though the statement has neutralised the power play between both parties, Quevillion is far from wrong in asserting that this genre allows them, particularly the Palestinians, to inhabit their national imaginations of pre-*Nakba* Palestine.

Since this paper seeks to explore the efficacy of the speculative genre in tackling colonial discourse in Palestine, a few past studies will be assessed. For instance, Maurice Ebileeni sees the infusion of pseudo-scientific tools, 'false utopias' in Saleem Haddad's short story as one mechanism for the writer to criticise the aftermath of the "temporal suspension" the Palestinians experienced. The simulated Palestine, or what Ebileeni termed as 'false utopias', evokes the "incapability [of the

people] to rewrite history and ignore the irreversible consequences of the occupation" (Ebileeni, 2023, pp. 11-12). This is in many senses true as the nation's history is heavily muddied by many unforgettable colonial traumas that flawed their imagining of a liberated Palestine. In contrast, AlAmmar (2019, p. 4) takes a distinct path in interrogating the Palestinians' generational collective memory. She asserts that the generational conflict between the pre-*Nakba* generation and post-*Nakba* generation in Haddad's story is due to the burden of post-memory that the former always resorts to "recreate their past existence" while the latter's memory of violence is neglected. In this regard, the differing generational memories of colonialism further complicate the relationship between the older generation and the younger generation.

The two academic discussions above contribute to the limited number of past studies made on "Song of the Birds" (2019), as there are no further references worth turning to. Similarly, Majd Kayyal's "N" (2019) and Emad El-Din Aysha's "Digital Nation" (2019) also suffer the same fate, with only one study citing their work. Sellman, in his article, "The Que of Dystopia" (2023), only makes sense of Aysha's short story to exemplify the conditions of science fiction as a greater part of the discussion is designated for Basma Abdel Aziz's *The Queue* (2013). Despite this scarcity, numerous studies centred their analyses on many other Palestinian speculative fictions, such as Larissa Sansour's speculative short film trilogy, *A Space Exodus* (2008), *Nation Estate* (2013) and *In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain* (2015), Adania Shibli's *Masas* or *Touch* (2002) and many others. Their conversations blend diverse subjects related to the Palestinian experience of displacement and speculative frameworks from different scholars. On that account, this paper then aims to fill in the gap by examining the complex nostalgia and trauma magnified in Saleem Haddad's "Song of the Birds" (2019), Majd Kayyal's "N" (2019) and Emad El-Din Aysha's "Digital Nation" (2019) through the presence of virtual Palestine.

REIMAGINING HOME IN VIRTUAL PALESTINE

The three short stories foster two specific science fictional nova known as simulations and virtual reality. In Palestinian speculative fiction, these novae serve as a powerful tool to explore the complexity of the Palestinian experience, allowing the authors to address pressing issues by immersing characters and readers alike into alternate realities. Although science and technology conjure up disturbing images of Israeli military tanks, armed drones, and aerial and artillery bombs, the authors bring up further advanced computer-generated simulation and virtual reality to tackle multiple concerns relating to Palestinians' nostalgic memory of home and collective resistance against their enemies. One compelling function of virtual reality includes its capability to carve a way for the displaced generations to revisit their homeland, offering readers a visceral understanding of the emotional and psychological impact of the *Nakba.* Furthermore, simulation also offers a space for speculative exploration of alternate realities, where they can envision different paths for their future. In many speculative realms, both virtual reality and simulation are employed to rewrite history, control narratives, or even reveal the vulnerability of truth in the face of powerful forces.

The whole idea of weaponising this science fictional nova to either imagine the future of Palestine or reclaim the virtues of the past encapsulates Siddiqi (2002) conviction that modernity, or in this sense, the pseudo-science, is a double-edged sword.

> To be [a] postcolonial subject is to be an unbidden guest at the table of modernity. Its fruits are spread delectably before one: technological prowess, economic development, [and] political freedom. *Yet, as one reaches for these, one feels a hint of queasiness, for they evoke the postcolonial double-bind: a desire to embrace the modern, but the knowledge that the dialectic of modernity has entailed the subjection of the colonised*.
>
> (175, *italics* our own)

Here, simulation and virtual reality can be deployed as a means of control or manipulation by or against oppressive regimes. Blending technology with storytelling, authors like Haddad, Kayyal and Aysha are capable of generating immersive, unique narratives that go beyond traditional boundaries, inviting readers to engage with the complex realities and potential futures of the Palestinian people.

In "Song of the Birds" (2019), simulation works as a thin wall that divides the utopian-like Palestine from the dystopian one. Ziad and Aya live in two different realities; one is real, while the other is forged by Israel through a simulation. The simulated reality which Aya dubbed as 'liberated Palestine' constructs a quixotic realm where the citizens, including their parents, carry on with their lives in a supposedly free country harmoniously inhabited by both Palestinians and Israelis. "…[T]he business of the beach: the loud, cheesy music blasting from the drone speakers in the sky, the smell of shisha and grilled meat, the screaming children and half-naked bodies running up and down the sand" (SOTB 1) indicates the congruous state of the nation, fabricating the reality only known to Ziad. As the story unfolds, Ziad reveals to Aya that he lives in "the real Palestine" where war is inescapable while the one Aya's in is only "a digital image" of the country (SOTB 14). Ziad's revelation to Aya suggests his resistance towards modern-day colonialism, and with that, he persuades Aya to escape the simulation by committing suicide.

Kayyal's simulation in "N" (2019), in contrast, functions as a 'solution' to forge peace between Palestinians and Israelis over decades of their territorial disputes. The simulation is manifested in the creation of two parallel worlds occupying a similar geographical area. Hence, there are "Palestinian Haifa to Israeli Haifa, Jaffa to Tel Aviv, Palestinian Hebron to Israeli Hebron and Nablus to Shakhim", and it is no different from travelling from one place to another (N 59). However, "the Agreement" that leads to this, so to speak 'peace' only enables those who were born after the accord to travel between the two worlds, leaving the older generations trapped in their own memories of pre-*Nakba*, where the present Palestine could not afford to cure. To compensate, N's father turns on a trendy device, namely Virtual Reality (VR), to escape the gloomy and bleak Palestine. The same goes for the youths who return to Palestine; they "play five or six hours of realities a day", while in Israel, they carry on with their life "without being disconnected from the machine for a minute" (N 61).

On the other hand, "Digital Nation" (2019) by Emad El-Din Aysha utilises virtual reality as a tool for counter-colonialism. It aims to subvert the narratives of master/slave, coloniser/colonised, the West/the rest that prevailed in many Western discourses. Asa Shomer, the director of Shabak, an allegedly Israeli cyber-security force, has grown worried about the alarming cybercrimes committed by a group of Palestinian hackers who are rumoured to be led by an unknown man called Hannibal. The hackers, on a mission to wreak vengeance on Israel, turn the state into a digital nation, a virtual space called Palestine. The creation of a digital nation developed in stages, from "destabilising the stock market, hijacking media outlets, hacking servers" (DN 78) to "devising marketing strategies to flood the world with chickpeas and Palestinian falafel and demolishing intricate Hebrew letters in the thin air while replacing them with Arabic letters (DN 82). Shomer admits the hackers' adroitness, "who needed to 'liberate' Palestine if you could

convert Israel into Palestine? You wouldn't even need to build a new world, just repaint the existing one" (DN 84).

The employment of virtual reality and simulation in the three short stories does not merely reflect the author's creative pursuit but is a conscious choice to advertently explore the psyches of the displaced Palestinians. There are ambivalent responses to these technologies, of course, as the older generations desperately wish to return to their pre-*Nakba* era, clinging to the memories of a 'peaceful' Palestine through simulation, while the younger generations, born after the *Nakba*, never get to imagine what it is like to lead a peaceful and pleasant life in their own country. This, in turn, forces the youths to either deploy or retract the technologies to retaliate against Israeli colonialism. Here, the creation of these utopian realities in one way or another, characterises the fulfilment of the Palestinians' desire to return to a peaceful homeland while at the same time communicating a sense of negation, a critic of the longingness of what is robbed from them, a physical space itself (Spiers, 2016, p. 54) (Langer, 2010, p.171). To further elucidate the Palestinian's push and pull reactions toward the technology, it is crucial to dive deeper into the generations' psyches.

NOSTALGIA AND HOPE TO RETURN

The deployment of the speculative nova of virtual reality and simulation in the fictional works insinuates the multiplex anxieties of displacement and expulsion experienced by the Palestinians as a colonial subject. As evident in Haddad and Kayyal's short stories, the older generations born before the momentous event of the *Nakba* in 1948 demonstrate an attachment towards technology particularly the alternate realities empowered by Israel. This attachment is reasonably a result of the profound nostalgic memories they had of their past or homeland. Ideally, important concepts of nostalgia, memories and hope have always been the quintessence of Palestinian literature, interwoven with their spirits of resistance. Saloul (2012, pp. 15-16) postulates that nostalgia brings forth "the Palestinians' cultural memory of [the] loss of place in exile, through which their sense of themselves as Palestinian subjects and identification with Palestine as their homeland are shaped and crucially, reshaped". The event of Catastrophe or *Nakba*, then, has become a significant moment that 'reshapes' Palestine into a place of no return.

Palestinians who had personally encountered the *Nakba* have vivid memories and testimonies of their tragic experiences that deeply connect them to the past, specifically the period before colonialism eventuated (Aboubakr, 2019, p. 16). Like Aya and Ziad's parents, together with the older generation in "Song of the Birds" (2019), experience nostalgia to a greater extent than Ziad can ever understand. They enjoy their sweet time in the simulation dozing off, like everyone, "[Aya's] father sle[ep] a lot, although no one sle[ep] as much as her mother, who [is] barely awake these days" and it seemingly that every "grown-up [can] do [is] just drop off to sleep" when life becomes a little bit complicated (SOTB 1). However, what is unknown to Aya is those grown-ups who were born before the simulation are actually wired by the Israelis to doze off whenever their memories of their homeland return. Ziad reveals, "[t]hey need to be reset" so that their memories of pre-*Nakba* or, in this sense, pre-simulation fade away (SOTB 14).

Ziad's frustration over the grown-ups' refusal to retaliate over the advanced colonialism ensues, as he wrote in the last entry of his diary before his death.

> There is an oral tradition of grandparents passing on their stories of Palestine, which helps keep Palestine alive. But is it not too much of a stretch for them to have figured out how to use these stories to imprison us? The truth of collective memories is that you can't just choose to harness the good ones. Sooner or later, the ugly ones begin to seep in, too.
>
> (SOTB 9)

This nostalgia or collective memory, according to Ziad, impedes their manoeuvre towards liberation, but to the older generations or grown-ups like his parents, it becomes the only source for them to hold onto their identity and their sense of belonging. For instance, Aya and Ziad's mother is torn between resisting and clinging to the simulation as she "drift[s] in and out of consciousness" (SOTB 14), wanting to fight for real Palestine but ultimately wishing to stay in the liberated one too.

Majd Kayyal in "N" also speaks of nostalgia, which is almost similar to Haddad. In the short story, N's father, whose name is not revealed, takes up a device called Virtual Reality or VR to escape the gloomy Palestine. 'The Agreement' signed by both Israel and Palestine has resulted in the creation of a virtual Israel and a virtual Palestine inhabiting a similar territory. However, Article 7 of the Agreement mentions that only those who were born after the consensus are allowed to travel between these two worlds, leaving the older generation to build up a new Palestine from ruins, rubble, remnants and the memories of their home. As the younger generation mostly travels to Israel for better opportunities, the older generation, including N's father, succumbed to unbearable loneliness. He strolls around the empty streets, recalling the memories of all the buildings and places he and his late wife have ever been. "[T]he church is empty as it's always been…no one mentions the archbishop anymore [a]nd no one knows who Leon Morin is either. No one watches films these days", he recounts (N 46).

The loneliness turns out to be overwhelming as N's father goes through an exhaustive journey of swallowing and suppressing his memories of living together with his wife before the genocide and war happened. He frequently escapes the loneliness by diverting his attention to Virtual Reality that brought him to places before the war, a virtual space where an incomprehensible "warmth passed through the wires and headset", sending him into a state of tranquillity (N 47). For instance, he turns on a reality created by a French-Egyptian director that transports him to pre-1947 Egypt, which reminds him of his meeting with Salem and the spectacular Egyptian artist Ramses Younan in 2016. In another instance, N's father turns on reality with Angie Aflaton, an Egyptian painter, to distract himself from his devastating life. However, the memory he shared with his wife in pre-war Palestine always creeps in and finds its way to suffocate him: "I'm not interested in Cairo or Paris as much as I would like to walk with you in the streets of Hadar" (N 49).

In spite of N's return, his father relentlessly suffered from loneliness as if it had engulfed his whole being. The only one whom he is able to relate to is Nada, his son's girlfriend, who lives with him. She is an aspiring director who aims to direct a virtual reality of the past Palestine in memory of her late father. He looks up to her for her ability to maintain her Palestinian identity even though she has lived in Israel her whole life. She is also described as "authentic", "speak[s] in verses" in her charming Arabic and "uses striking, elegant phrases" (N 61). Despite her favourable impressions, N's father notices a "profound sadness in her that hasn't healed" (N 61). Perhaps it is the memories of her late father, who was found killed in Israel, that triggered the sadness, and to compensate, like N's father, she prefers to stay at home and "plays five to six hours of realities a day" (N 61). The dissimilar attitude between these two characters in the short story reveals their longing for the memories of pre-war Palestine and whoever inhabited it.

Avtar Brah (1996, p. 193), in her ground-breaking study of diaspora, informs readers that the diasporic communities are often burdened with one intrinsic 'homing desire' that invokes their hope to return. It is then sensible to posit that this 'homing desire' has infected almost all first generation of Palestinians who were expelled from their beloved hometowns and cities. It is the same desire as well that has affected Aya's parents and N's father, who struggle to navigate their lives in the new 'liberated' Palestine. Aya's parents' constant need to doze off and N's father's loneliness further exemplify what Brah has to say about the vision of 'home' inbred in diaspora people: "[h]ome is a *mythic place of desire* in the diasporic imagination. In this sense [,] *it is a place of no return*, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of 'origin'" (192, italics our own).

Yusof et al. (2012) similarly discuss this 'homing desire' in their analysis of Ibtisam Barakat's *Tasting the Sky* (2007), framing it as a tension between 'forgetting and remembering'. They emphasise how the older generation, particularly mothers, often seek to forget and move past the painful memories of Palestine as a form of "non-violent resistance" (2012, p. 102). Like Mirriam in the memoir, Ziad's mother also "politicised her domestic sphere" (Yusof et al., 2012, p. 102) by striving to ensure her family's survival and comfort in the simulated Palestine. Even though these characters do not necessarily feel at home in the newly liberated Palestine, the 'homing desire' has compelled them to accept whatever comes close to their place of origin. Here, the simulation and virtual reality of late Palestine is the closest to their imagination of 'home'.

Nonetheless, the 'place of no return' brought up by Brah also resonates with Salman Rushdie's concept of 'imaginary homelands', which is well discussed in his book *Imaginary Homelands* (1991). He delineates that 'home' in many diaspora studies can be bordered into present and past, that "the present is foreign, and the past is home" (Rushdie, 1991, p. 2). This is, in many senses, reasonable to the condition of postcolonial Palestinians, in which their memories of the past, both the good and the bad of pre-Nakba Palestine, will continuously preoccupy and plague their present. Rushdie argues that this is possible as the only route available for them to return 'home' is through revisiting their fragmented memories, nostalgia and vivid memories of the past (Rushdie, 1991, p. 4). Hence, returning to the simulated Palestine and virtual reality of pre-war Palestine, as suggested in both Haddad and Kayyal's stories, in one way or another, enables them to anchor their sense of belonging and the memories of seized land.

In addition, nostalgia also plays a vital role in inspiring optimism in the hearts of displaced populations, especially in those exilic communities like Palestinians. In the old days, nostalgia was treated as a curable disease, and varying traditional treatments were introduced to re-orientate those displaced people who had become disconnected from reality. Svetlana Boym, in *The Future of Nostalgia* (2008), however, suggests that nostalgia, in actuality, traverses beyond one's psyche. Nostalgia, borrowing Brah's term, is a 'homing desire' for both the locality and the past that impels one to rebel against the modern perception of time (Boym, 2008, pp. 3-4). One who is plagued by nostalgia has the desire or hope to reiterate history, "revisit time like space", and most often "refuse to surrender to the irreversibility of time" (Boym, 2008, p. 14). Nevertheless, Brah and Rushdie have attested that nostalgia or this 'homing desire' remains unabated with one's constant visit to the place, while it is also quite impossible to revisit the past. However, pestered by the nostalgic memories of Palestine, Ziad and Aya's parents and N's father submit to the possibility of revisiting the past offered by the simulation and virtual reality, even though they were formulated by their enemy, Israel.

The similar 'homing desire' and nostalgia unquestionably afflict the younger generation too. As Mahmoud Darwish, a renowned Palestinian poet, postulates in his poem "A State of Siege" (2002), the Palestinians have one incurable disease and "that ancient disease/is still alive and well in you (the Palestinians)/a disease called hope" (13-14). Even though the younger generation, mostly born after the *Nakba*, experience nostalgia to a lesser extent than the older generation, they share the same hope, which is a hope to return. This hope is one of the driving factors that urge them to take up resistance as their maxim. Resistance has been one of the major themes in the broad postcolonial discourse, and it serves as an effective mechanism for many native authors to write back against the colonial empire. Here, Emad El-Din Aysha takes a different course than Saleem Haddad and Majd Kayyal in utilising this speculative genre to resist colonialism and reconstruct the manipulative as well as inaccurate colonial discourse prevalent across the world.

Edward Said, in his controversial study of Orientalism, criticises Western dominance over the Others. He postulates:

> The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest, richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilisation and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other…the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience.
>
> (Said, 2019, pp. 1-3)

Heavily influenced by Gramsci, Said claims Orientalism is one form of consent domination, a situation of the core power dominating the subaltern "just as certain ideas are more influential than others" (Said, 2019, p. 7). This insinuates the fact the West is responsible for the binary formulation of 'the West' versus 'the rest', which mimics the narrative of 'superior' versus 'inferior'. It supports the notion that the latter is "gullible", "devoid of energy and initiative", "intrigue, cunning…unkind to animals", and "inveterate liars" as opposed to the former's "clarity, directness and nobility" (Said, 2019, pp. 38-39).

The ongoing Israel colonialism and brutal ethnic cleansing in Palestine exemplified Said's dictum of Western dominance over the 'Others'. Seven decades of continuous expulsion and extermination have subdued these displaced communities under the labels of 'inferior' and 'powerless'. However, Aysha, in his short story "Digital Nation" (2019), employs speculative elements to subvert such narrative and proceeds to portray the new wave of aggressive young Palestinians who are well-equipped to resist colonialism. The insurgence of young Palestinians to revolt against Israel is likened to the biblical image of David versus Goliath, wherein a weak and powerless opponent faces a powerful and gigantic enemy. The reason behind this insurgence, despite the discrepancy in power, is that many of them live under the dire condition of a crippling economy, scattered blockades, scanty resources and endless military attacks that sparks trauma and naturally, being young, retaliation is one way to resist (Saloul, 2012, p. 2).

The instance of retaliation and decolonisation in "Digital Nation" (2019) is evident through the ingenious act of Palestinian hackers exploiting Israel through cybercrime. The hackers create a 'digital Palestine' by deciphering everything digital in the state. Asa Shomer, the director of Shabak, an Israel security force, is blown away by the capability of the hackers to materialise their vision of a liberated virtual state of Palestine by "virus-leaked into every VR console on the Israeli market" (DN 79), erased intricate Hebrew from all devices and replaced them with Arabic (DN 83) and rewrote history in all GPS devices, virtual tour guides, eBooks and online atlases (DN 86). These circumstances have restricted Israel's command over its security, leading to a decline in

stock markets and a plummet in various essential services such as telecom networks and banks. The end result of this counter-colonialism is the declaration of the establishment of "the world's first virtual government" (DN 88) where "[t]he Palestinian flag flutter[ed] – the right way up – over the Dome of the Rock" and "Jerusalem [has] finally become Al-Quds again" (DN 92). Even though these astounding actions were believed to have been perpetrated by one old man whom Shomer referred to as Dr. Hannibal, his patients, both Palestinians and Israelis who are adept with advanced computer skills, were the real impetus for the creation of digital Palestine. This approach to creating a digital Palestine mirrors the efforts of Nathalie Handal, a Palestinian poet who uses geomantic imagery (Aman, 2021, p. 6 & 73) of Palestine to reimagine the liberated past and preserve their identities for future generations.

Emulating these hackers' spirits to reclaim their space and 'home', Ziad in "Song of the Birds" (2019) also takes up arms to resist colonialism. He, however, did not resist alone, as the news report revealed that there is a "spike in teen suicides across Palestine" (SOTB 5). Death, in the story, becomes a portal that transports the young teenagers who took their own lives to another reality where Palestine is still at war with Israel. Upon realising that the reality that he lives in is a simulation created by Israel to advance their colonialism, Ziad chooses to voluntarily kill himself. Unsatisfied with the reality, he persuades his little sister to do the same. On one occasion, Ziad visits her dream in an awful condition, "[b]oth his legs were cut off at the knee" and "he look[s] thinner, his fingernails dirty [and] his jeans stained" (SOTB 17). Despite his condition, his words are inspiring; "[m]y body is crippled, but my mind is free. And I'm going to keep fighting until I'm completely free: body, mind and soul" (SOTB 18).

The Hannibal clan and Ziad resonate with the spreading images of young stone throwers who courageously confronted Israeli tanks in the streets of West Bank and Gaza during the First Intifada, mostly known as 'Stone Intifada'. Many of them were between the ages of five and 15 years old, fitly categorised as '*awlad*' or young boys. Baker (1990, p. 504) examines that the eventful Intifadas, first in 1987 and later in 2000 onwards, had given the Palestinian youth esteem to retaliate. Grew up witnessing the atrocities of Israelis and their complicity has ignited the youngsters' spirits to participate in the protests, and those who are actively involved in the movement often consider themselves to be powerful and heroic. Coupled with this heroic spirit and the desire to reclaim their home, these youngsters utilised whatever resources they had, including small stones, to fight back against the coloniser. In this case, the simulation and virtual reality are weaponised by Aysha and Haddad to demonstrate their years of desire to return 'home'. Ultimately, Williams and Ball (2014, p. 129) proffer that "there is no hope is more Palestinian than this (to return home) formed by years of suffering, adapting to altered historical circumstances, but still working determinedly towards the utopian horizon of the postcolonial future" (Williams & Ball, 2014).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Palestinian speculative fiction emerges as a powerful and dynamic literary genre that offers a unique lens through which to explore the complex historical, political, and cultural landscape of Palestine. As writers delve into the realms of the speculative genre, they not only provide readers with captivating narratives but also engage in a profound exploration of various topics of displacement, resistance, trauma, nostalgia and identity. Saleem Haddad's "Song of the Birds" (2019), Majd Kayyal's "N" (2019) and Emad El-Din Aysha's "Digital Nation" (2019) in

Palestine +100 (2019) utilise the speculative genre to demonstrate the complex nostalgia and convoluted trauma sparked by different arrays of colonial anxieties endured by Palestinians for over seven decades. These three writers use the speculative elements of virtual reality and simulation to exhibit the Palestinians' push-and-pull response towards technology and modernity.

"Song of the Birds" (2019) and "N" (2019) are unified in showcasing the older generation's acceptance and attachment towards virtual Palestine. Their continual devotion to simulated Palestine stems from their connection to nostalgic memories of pre-war or pre-*Nakba* Palestine. Meanwhile, Aysha employs virtual reality and simulation in "Digital Nation" (2019) to showcase the resistance of young Palestinians against colonialism, illustrating their efforts to counter-colonise. Haddad also incorporates a character that embodies Aysha's young hackers' spirit, showcasing their determination to retaliate against Israel. As this genre continues to evolve, it serves as a poignant testament to the enduring spirit of a community that refuses to be defined solely by its struggles, demonstrating the transformative power of storytelling in envisioning alternative narratives and shaping the discourse surrounding the Palestinian narrative.

REFERENCES

Aboubakr, F. (2019). *The Folktales of Palestine: Cultural Identity, Memory and the Politics of Storytelling*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

AlAmmar, L. (2019). Palestinian Postmemory: Melancholia and the absent subject in Larissa Sansour's in vitro, Saleem Haddad's 'song of the birds,' and Adania Shibli's touch. *Journal of Literature and Trauma Studies*, *8*(1), 2019, 1–23, https://doi.org/10.1353/jlt.2019.0000.

Aman, Y. K. A. (2021). Re-imaging Palestine in selected poems from Handal's the lives of rain. *3L The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*, *27*(1), 2019, 62–75, https://doi.org/10.17576/3l-2021-2701-05.

Atwood, M. (2014). *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*. Virago.

Aysha, E. (2019). Digital Nation. In Ghalayini, B. (Ed.), *Palestine +100: Stories from a Century after the Nakba* (pp. 77-94). Comma Press.

Bacon, E. M. (2019). The Speculative: A Problem with Definitions. *Writing Speculative Fiction: Creative and Critical Approaches*. Macmillan Education, London.

Baker, A. M. (1990). The Psychological Impact of the Intifada on Palestinian Children in the Occupied West Bank and Gaza: An Exploratory Study. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 60*(4), 496–505.

Bourdieu, P. (1993). *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. Columbia University Press.

Boym, S. (2008). *The Future of Nostalgia*. Basic Books.

Brah, A. (1996). *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. Routledge.

Campbell, I. (2018). *Arabic Science Fiction: Studies in Global Science Fiction*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Darwish, M. (2002). *A State of Siege by Mahmoud Darwish*. Retrieved January 11, 2024, from www.marxists.org/subject/art/literature/darwish/2002/siege.htm

Ebileeni, M. (2023). Palestine 2048 in inertia: False utopias, a dwindling nation, and the last Palestinian. *Interventions*, 1–24. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801x.2023.2252813

Ghalayini, B. (Ed.). (2019). *Palestine +100: Stories from a Century after the Nakba*. Comma Press.

Haddad, S. (2019). Song of the Birds. In Ghalayini, B. (Ed.). (2019). *Palestine +100: Stories from a Century after the Nakba* (pp. 1-19). Comma Press.

Heinlein, R. A. (1947). On the Writing of Speculative Fiction. *Nota Do Tradutor*, 24(1), Desterro, pp. 126–131.

Helm, S. (2018). A Suicide in Gaza. *The Guardian*. Retrieved May 26, 2024, from www.theguardian.com/news/2018/may/18/a-suicide-in-Gaza

Kayyal, M. (2019). N. In Ghalayini, B. (Ed.). (2019). *Palestine +100: Stories from a Century after the Nakba* (pp. 43-63). Comma Press.

Khalidi, R. (2022). *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917-2017*. Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company.

Langer, J. (2010). The Shapes of Dystopia: Boundaries, Hybridity and the Politics of Power. *Science Fiction, Imperialism and the Third World: Essays on Postcolonial Literature and Film*, McFarland & Company, pp. 171-187.

Oziewicz, M. (2017). Speculative fiction. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.78.

Quevillion, T. (2021). Herzl, Nakba and the Nationalist Escapism in Israeli and Palestinian Science Fiction. *Journal of Science Fiction*, *4*(2), 16-35.

Robert, A. (2000). *Science Fiction*. Routledge, pp. 29-30.

Rushdie, S. (1991). *Imaginary Homelands*. Viking.

Said, E. W. (2019). *Orientalism*. Penguin Random House.

Saloul, I. (2012). Nostalgic Memory and Palestinian Identification. *Catastrophe and Exile in the Modern Palestinian Imagination*, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 15-57.

Sellman, J. (2023). The Queue as Dystopia. *Time*, pp. 103–114, https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110690774-007

Siddiqi, Y. (2002). Police and Postcolonial Rationality in Amitav Gosh's The Circle of Reason. *Cultural Critique, 50*, pp. 175-211.

Smith, E. D. (2012). *Globalisation, Utopia and Postcolonial Science Fiction: New Maps of Hope*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Spiers, M. C. B. (2016). Reimagining Resistance: Achieving Sovereignty in Indigenous Science Fiction. *Transmotion*, *2*(1&2), 52-75.

"The Human Toll of Israel's War on Gaza - by the Numbers." *AlJazeera*. Retrieved on 21st January 2024 from https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/1/15/the-human-toll-of-israels-war-on-gaza-by-the-numbers

Williams, P., & Ball, A. (2014). Where is Palestine? *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, *50*(2), 127–133.

Yusof, N. M., Hashim, R. S., & Raihanah, M. M. (2012). Remembering home: Palestine from a distance. *3L: The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies, 18*(2), 95-103.