

Re-Imaging Palestine in Selected Poems from Handal's *The Lives of Rain*

YASSER KHAMIS RAGAB AMAN
Department of English, College of Arts,
Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University, Dammam, Saudi Arabia
ykAman@iau.edu.sa

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates Nathalie Handal's re-imaging of Palestine as the Promised Land. Such a re-imaging is crystallized through two perspectives: identity politics, which spotlights two distinctively separated groups, viz., the Palestinians and the Israelis, and shared/global identity which depends on transcendence to common humanity. Handal is a French-American poet, born in Haiti to a Palestinian family from Bethlehem. She has lived in different places in Europe, the US and Arab World. She reconstructs an image of Palestine from family memories and from her strong sense of belonging enhanced by frequent journeys to Palestine in the hope that she might have a home in poetry. In many poems such as "Ephratha", "Bethlehem", "Regrets in Galilee", "Jenin", "Gaza City", "Haifa", "Baladna" and "Amrika", Handal recalls a geomental image of home. However, a geopolitical image of home is put in juxtaposition in order to highlight Handal's journey for obtaining global identity. I argue that the two perspectives, which are intricately intertwined in Handal's poems due to her life and travels, provide a version of complete portrait of Palestine.

Keywords: Palestine; Memories; Identity politics; Handal

INTRODUCTION: NATHALIE HANDAL AND THE PALESTINIAN-ISRAELI CONFLICT

I am Palestinian and permanent transience has been my reality. I cannot escape the trauma of losing my 'homeland' and all that it represents for me, for the history of my people, so of course that will always transpire in my work. I live in the United States and cannot escape the experience of being held between the crack of a half opened door – on one side the view of high-rises, on the other side the view of disappearing olive trees. (Handal, "Interview with Nathalie Handal", 2006, p. 613)

Nathalie Handal is a French-American poet, playwright, producer and director born in Haiti to a Palestinian family from Bethlehem. She has lived in different places in Europe, the US and Arab World. She reconstructs an image of Palestine from family memories and from her strong sense of belonging enhanced by frequent journeys to Palestine in the hope that she might have a home in poetry. In *Lives of the Rain* she highlights the lives of Palestinians in exile as well as indigenous people. Handal enjoys a range of identities thanks to her travels; she is a border-crosser. Handal aspires for a global identity; therefore, in her poem "Amrika" the geopolitical dimensions of this identity have gradually been revealed with her movements from place to place. However, the geomental image of her roots has always been in the heart of her wished-for global identity:

In Haiti and in all the numerous cities we lived in, the moment I entered my family house, I entered Palestine, and more specifically Bethlehem-Jerusalem. We were surrounded by Palestinian artifacts and images, listened to Arab music, ate Arab food, spoke about the conflict, and were consumed by the scars and the elation it left inside of us—our sense of self deeply rooted in the Holy Land, the dream of return sacred.
(Handal, "Building an Architecture for the Wanderer": A Conversation with Nathalie Handal", p. 14).

Although different writers have discussed Palestinian poetry and its relation to identity, politics, and home/place¹, no research has clearly shown the intertwining of identity politics and geomental image on the one hand and that of global/shared identity and geopolitical image

on the other hand. This paper is meant to fill this gap. In order to explore the geomental and geopolitical images of Palestine in Handal's poems, the history of Palestine and Palestinian-Israeli Conflict is briefly discussed.

The history of Palestine has been recorded in different means of publications². This paper focuses on the recent history of Palestine before the declaration and the recognition of Israel in 1948 and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. "Until 1948, Palestine typically referred to the geographic region located between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. Arab people who call this territory home are known as Palestinians. Much of this land is now considered present-day Israel" (History.com Editors). After WWI, Britain controlled Palestine and in 1947 Palestine was divided into a Jewish nation and an Arab one, with the approval of the Jews and rejection of the Arabs. In 1948 war broke out between Israel and five Arab nations: Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon. This was the beginning of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

In 1964, the PLO was established with Yasser Arafat as Chairman till his death in 2004. In 1967, the Six-Day War broke out resulting in Israel occupying "the Gaza Strip, West Bank, Sinai Peninsula...and Golan Heights" (History.com Editors). In 1987, the first Palestinian uprising (known as Intifada) broke out resulting in Oslo Peace Accords in 1993 and 1995 according to which a Palestinian government was established and a proposal for complete withdrawal of Israeli troops from some areas was set. Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon's visit to al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem triggered the second Intifada in 2000 culminating in the Israeli army's withdrawal from Gaza. Hamas and Fatah, two Palestinian political groups, fought each other and Fatah was defeated in 2007. However, in 2014, they stroke a deal for one national Palestinian government. There have been many bloody confrontations between Hamas and Israel such as "Operation Cast Lead in December 2008, Operation Pillar of Defense in November 2012 and Operation Protective Edge in July 2014" (History.com Editors). That is why Hamas was claimed to be a terrorist group.

Israeli settlements have been spreading illegally in Palestinian lands which has worsened matters. The Deal of the Century³ has come to abolish the Palestinians' rights in their homeland which has gradually been usurped by Israelis. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict will not stop unless the world recognizes the pre-1947 Palestine as an Arab state, which seems to be a chimeric dream in light of the world's silent approval of all Israeli crimes committed against the Palestinians.

IDENTITY POLITICS

In her article, "Identity Politics", Mary Bernstein (2005, p. 48) traced the development of the definition of identity politics till 1990s when it came to refer to "violent ethnic conflict" and "nationalism". Historical/political memory plays an important role in forming identity. Zheng Wang (2018, p.5) maintains that "historical memory can serve as a constitutive, relational, and purposive content for group identity".

Joshua Paul (2019, p.5) developed the concept of anti-identity identity politics as implied in "All Lives Matter" hashtag launched in opposition to that of "Black Lives Matter". He argues that: "ALM exemplifies an anti-identity identity politics (AIIP) invoking rhetoric in opposition to racial identities while smuggling in an elastic 'postracial' neoliberal subject as the foundational identity". ALM hashtag subscribes to the idea of global/shared identity underpinned by a propagation for the idea of "foundational identity" which should assume a multicultural profile in order to contain diverse identities within one unified whole. In this case, all attempts at effacing group identities such as Palestine or Arab identities will fail.

P. G. Klandermans (2014, p.1) makes it clear that there is a strong relation between the social psychological dynamics of protest and the concept of politicized "identity". His argument focusses on how "Identity politics had bred politicized identities", especially when

inequalities are deliberately maintained by governments. “Arabic citizens in Israel” (Klandermans, 2014, p. 1) is one of the examples he gave in order to illustrate his point. In fact, in the case of Arab-Israeli conflict, “Identity politics makes collective identities salient, contributes to their politicization and radicalization, and triggers political protest” (Klandermans, 2014, p. 1). That is why world power tries to weaken social identity so that Palestinians/Arabs won’t have “a shared collective identity and an increase in the strength of group identification” (Klandermans, 2014, pp. 3-4). The collective identity the Palestinians take is the focus of the struggle for power; that is why it is politicized.

In her article “Politics of Identity-III” Karma Nabulsi (2003, p. 479) argued that her identity is not based on national characteristics that give rise to Palestinians but on “the general will” of people. Nabulsi discussed the nature of the Palestinian refugees’ lives pointing out that their only dream is to return home since they feel ill at ease. She maintains that: “since the original dispossession and continued displacement from their homes in 1948, the unhappy fate of the majority of Palestinians remains the core of the conflict, and is still almost entirely neglected” (Nabulsi, 2003, p. 481). The refugees’ right to return has become a chimera. United Nations as well as Arab states failed to fulfill this dream.

The 1970s and 1980s regional conflicts resulted from both Israeli and Arab states’ attempts to preclude Palestinian’s political independence (Nabulsi, 2003, p.483). However, and as a result of the general will of the people, in 15 November 1988, The Palestinian National Council issued the Palestinian Declaration of Independence which reached out every place and everyone in the diaspora. It is the “close link between Palestinians inside and outside the homeland” which “created a homeland in itself” (Nabulsi, 2003, p.489).

In constructing Israeli national identity, it is observed that religion and politics are “deeply intertwined and constitutive of each other”; moreover, they have been “complicit in the legitimization of exclusionary politics towards the Arab population of Israel/Palestine” (Baumgart-Ochse, 2014, p. 402).

SHARED/GLOBAL IDENTITY

Palestinians/Arabs share an identity, viz., collective identity. I see Klingerman’s (2014, p.2) definition of collective identity suitable for this study. He maintains: “I use the term “collective identity” to refer to an identity shared by members of a group or category. Collective identity becomes politically relevant when people who share a specific identity take part in political action on behalf of that collective”. However, shared identity sometimes results in multiple identities. For example, there was a call for Palestinians and Israelis to share one identity as inhabitants of the same land. Multiple identities of Palestinians who come under such category may cause inner struggle between being a Palestinian and an inhabitant of what is claimed to be Israel.

In a review of Phillip L. Hammack’s *Narrative and the Politics of Identity: The Cultural Psychology of Israeli and Palestinian Youth* published in New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, Larry W. Chappell (2012, p. 227), commenting on Hammack’s narrative theory that was applied to the US peace education program in which three groups of youth, viz., Palestinians, Israelis and Israeli-Palestinians or Palestinian-Israelis, participated, pointed out that attempts at “replacing hostile group identities with transcendent identities” not only failed but resulted in “identity accentuation, suggesting increased likelihood and intensity of conflict” (Chappell, 2012, p. 227) as well.

In 2006 four documents known as the Vision Documents were published by Palestinians civil society organizations in the hope of attaining “more power sharing, recognition and equality to the Palestinian minority in Israel” (Agbaria & Mustafa, 2012, p. 718). This of course shows how national and civic frameworks intersect and redefine each

other. These documents aimed at restoring “trust in the viability and feasibility of coexistence and reconciliation between Israeli citizenship and Palestinian nationality” (Agbaria & Mustafa, 2012, p. 719). Coexistence and reconciliation is made possible through a politics of contention and “opposing narratives to the hegemonic Zionist narrative” (Agbaria & Mustafa, 2012, p. 726). It should be noted that “while the documents emphasize the separate rights and identity of the Palestinians in Israel, they do not call for separatism” (Agbaria & Mustafa, 2012, p. 729). However, the introduction of “indigenouslyness of minorities” (Agbaria & Mustafa, 2012, p. 730) not only differentiates between Israeli Jews and Jews coming from the diaspora but it leads to the “the emergence of the Palestinians in Israel as ‘a third people’” (Agbaria & Mustafa, 2012, p. 730).

On the other hand, multiple identities may not result in an inward struggle so much as in a tendency for accepting the co-existence with the other. Handal’s multiple identities is an example; however, “shared grievances” (Klandermans, 2014, p. 11) make collective identity control over other types of identity. When it comes to Palestine’s history that has deliberately been eradicated, Handal protests as a Palestinian who is keen on preserving his/her history and the image of his/her motherland. However, she aspires for a global identity and *modus vivendi*.

METHOD

The historical/biographical approach is used in this paper in order to prove that Handal’s poems reflect a true chapter of life.

DISCUSSION

HANDAL’S POEMS: IDENTITY POLITICS AND GLOBAL IDENTITY

Because she lives in the diaspora, Handal’s physical interaction with the Palestinian cause is limited *per se*. Elizabeth Mavroudi (2008, p. 59) maintains “Palestinians are a diasporic group with a fixation on and transnational/cross-border connections to a homeland that may be more symbolic than material and whose physical involvement in homeland politics may be limited because there is no formal Palestinian state”. Therefore, such poems written by Handal are considered a historical record that can illustrate and re-image Palestine which the occupier has exerted vain efforts to efface.

Palestinian sacred places such as Hassan Bek mosque have always had a formative impact on the formation of national identity and politics of identity. Discussing the importance of Hassan Bek mosque, Nimrod Luz (2008, p.1044) maintains that the “struggle for a particular space and the spatial changes in the socio spatial boundaries of a place are inexorably linked to politics of identity. The struggle of a subordinate group over a particular place (resistance) is by and large a spatialization of identity conflicts and, at the same time, identity constructions around a particular object”. Luz (2008, p.1049) aims at highlighting “the political nature of the sacred and its use as a nexus of identity formation and as a site of resistance to state agencies and planning policy”. This in turn redefines the politics of Palestinian identity which Luz (2008, p.1050) deliberately describes it as “minor”.

IDENTITY POLITICS AND THE GEOMENTAL IMAGE

All selected poems are titled after cities’ names, something that supports the geomental image Handal brings home through these poems. At the opening of the chapter entitled “Epistemological assessments about the Term Geomental” (*Apreciaciones Epistemológicas*

sobre el término geomental), José Pascual Mora García (2004, p.39) gives a definition of the geomental: “The geomental term is historiographically correlated to the Annales School (1929), and is specifically correlated to the historical evolution of the concept of collective mentality, collective memory or mental tooling” (el termino geomental ... como correlato historiografico la Escuela de Annales (1929), y especificamente la evolucion historica del concepto mentalidad colectiva, memoria colectiva o utillaje mental). In “Ephratha” Handal questions the poem and constructs an image of the city by recollecting past memories:

Poem

dressed in olive branches and cracked happiness,
surrounded by seasons of sleepless nights staring
at the dusty walls of cities we have lost. (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p. 5)

The “olive branches” and “the dusty walls of cities” create a fading image summoned through memories of “sleepless nights” and “cracked happiness.” Handal brings life to her memories and revives the geomental image of Ephrata by using poetic devices; the poem is personified into a young girl dressed in “olive branches”, a very important element reminiscent of “Ephratha”. In the abstract of “On Geomentality”, Hong-Key Yoon (1991, p. 387) maintains that :

Geomentality is an established and lasting frame (state) of mind regarding the environment. It is necessarily translated into a geographical behavioral pattern and is reflected in a pattern of cultural landscape. An individual or a group of people can hold a geomentality about a particular environment.

“Ephrathah, or Ephrath, is the ancient name for the town of Bethlehem” (“Ephrathah”). The very title crystallizes Handal’s intention to keep connected to old names of towns, which in turn deepens the roots of Palestinians’ identity.

Handal highlights loss of “address” which refers to attempts at detaching the memories from the land they memorize. Then, the idea of detachment is crystallized in an inability of remembrance of bad memories by the poem, now referring to all Palestinians, to remember: “the day the soldiers marched in their villages, towns, /houses, dreams and future, remember the crumbling of prayers/remember the gap between hands which held all” (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p. 5). The poem ends with a question that highlights the sense of estrangement: “why/ does the street have a name I can't pronounce?” (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p. 5). The question stresses rejection of geomental effacement and highlights Palestinians’ identity politics. Street renaming cannot erase the history of Palestinians; rather, it makes it difficult to co-exist and urges Palestinians to resist in order to preserve their identity.

From collective memory, Handal constructs a geomental image of Palestine which reflects a pattern of cultural landscape portrayed in different poems in the volume under study. The Israeli attempts at reorganization of the nature of the Occupied Territories, the demolishing of Palestinians’ homes and the establishment of the Settlements is an expression of the imposition of the Israeli will on the nature of the Palestinian land. Such an expression is fought back by asserting the past geomentality of Palestine by Palestinians.

Bethlehem’s secrets are indecipherable and cannot be detached from the Palestinian identity as “they live in the space between our footsteps” (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, p. 9). Memories of the past are recollecting as if they were a shattered sheet of glass whose arpeggio suggests an aural image crystallized in the resounding words of the grandfather and click of his beads. The vision of the past memory of Bethlehem is blurred: “I see Bethlehem, all in dust, empty/ a torn piece of newspaper lost in its narrow streets” ((Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, p. 9). The present city of Bethlehem has nothing to do with the past one; so, the speakers ask “Where is the real Bethlehem...?” S/he gets no answer. The speaker meets people who do not remember the past and leave the speaker at a loss. “Bethlehem” starts with “secrets” and ends in “secrets”,

which suggests efforts exerted in order to reach a redefinition of the geopolitical identity of the place.

The meaning of international relations and geopolitics, a term coined by Rudolf Kjellén at the beginning of the twentieth century, has witnessed different changes and has been influenced by the technological advances even after the cold war so much that geopolitics has come “to include economic as well as military factors” (Deudney). The geomental reimagining of Palestine stands against a geopolitical image realized in “Bethlehem”, forced by Israel and supported by international power, that aims at the effacement of Palestinian identity turning Palestine into a phantom sovereignty.

The title “Regrets in Galilee” illustrates a gloomy ambience of memories that hurts. The antithetical relation that exists between the two parts of the first line, “A night by a fire” and “a day in Galilee”, reflects the crescendo of the tension that creeps furtively from memories recollected at that moments. Night and day represent the cycle of time, whereas fire is put in juxtaposition to the cold memories clustered around Galilee. The speaker addresses an auditor whose voice reflects a series of memories: “...all I found was a haunting/ in the middle of your speech/a bridge of echoes...” (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p. 13). This aural image asserts that memories are closing in on the mind of the speaker so much that she stumbles over her dream, “like a woman wearing another woman’s heels” (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p.13). The simile that likens stumbling over one’s dreams to wearing wrong heels/bad memories highlights the importance of detachment from a traumatized past such as “the seasons that offended me/ and the lovers I have never unmasked...” (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p.13). The speaker focuses on the present as bad memories washed off of her mind leaving an unanswered question: “What were you going to say/that night when I started travelling? /When I stopped your mid-sentence?” (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p.13). The closing lines raise a lot of suggestions and call for many interpretations. The question is an attempt to relate the past to the present and the unknown answer shows the influence memories can have on present and future actions. The now border-crosser might have changed her mind and stopped travelling if the other half of the unfinished sentence had convinced her.

“Gaza City” illustrates an image of mortification because the city/speaker had been usurped by the occupier. This parallel image is supported with the speaker pressing her “hands and “check” [sic] “against the wall”, a synecdochical reference to the city, hiding “like a slut, ashamed” (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p.19). The speaker identifies with the city so much that her body reflects the resistance against changing the geomental image of the city:

I pull the collar of my light blue robe so hard
it tears, one side hanging as everyone’s lives hang here.
My fingers sink deep into my flesh,
I scratch myself, three lines scar my breasts,
Three faiths bound in my head and I wonder
If God is buried in the rubble. (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p. 19)

Gaza is torn between the Jewish occupier and Christian and Muslim Palestinians. This trilogy of religion is symbolized in the three scars of the speaker’s/the city’s breasts. The three religions cannot provide a solution; so, the speaker doubts the existence of Justice, of God. Therefore, houses are considered prisons and rooms dog cages.

The speaker portrays an image of present Gaza that is opposite to the past one. There is no “*Debke*”⁴, a symbol of happiness and weddings, but there are funerals instead. The metaphor of Gaza likened to a woman laboring to give birth without receiving any help is an indirect indictment of Arab nations who have given a blind eye to what has been happening in Palestine. The image is of the past Gaza with its streets, hospitals, schools, airport had vanished long ago. Even the atmosphere is deadening so much so the speaker is “choking on my spit” (Handal,

The Lives of Rain, 2005, p. 19). Although people have resisted attempts of destroying the geomental image of Palestine, the face of the city has gradually changed.

“Haifa, Haifa” records a bitter experience of leaving Palestine and moving into diaspora. Memories complete the gloomy atmosphere in the above poems: broken walls/dusty roads/nightmares” (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p. 23). The image of a destroyed city illustrates attempts at obliterating the geomental image of Palestine and Palestinian identity. It results into psychological disturbances crystallized in “nightmares”. This trauma has accompanied Palestinians in the diaspora where they have been waiting to “live the way we should live...” (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p. 23). Enjoying life is a perpetual retrieval. It depends on going back home. Handal (“Interview with Nathalie Handal”, 2006, p. 615) once stated:

I feel free only in Palestine because it is only there that I am whole, that I see Nathalie and understand who she is. It is only in Palestine that I can hear my heart beating as I look at a butterfly on the windowsill and understand what flight means ...understand that love can only exist if we allow hearts true freedom.

However, attempts at effacement of Palestinian identity have not stopped: “The lemon trees keep disappearing/ and the weather keeps changing/we keep aging” (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p. 23). Each time a Palestinian visits Palestine, they find more Palestinians leaving. The poem highlights the impossibility of regaining the past image of Palestine, an unoccupied independent country.

GLOBAL/SHARED IDENTITY AND GEOPOLITICAL IMAGE

“Jenin”, as well as “Regret in Galilee”, starts with the same time reference “night”; however, this time, “night” reflects the same gloomy and cold ambience of the “day in Galilee”. Therefore, the cycle of time in the Occupied Territories is associated with negative feelings. In “Jenin”, it is a “night without a blanket” (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p. 16) without a sense of warmth and belonging because the occupier stole the blanket, a symbol of safety and security. The speaker calls for coexistence, for a shared identity. The struggle for reconstructing and asserting the true Palestinian image leads to another concept, viz., the geopolitical. Under the reconstruction of geomental image of Palestine by Handal, geopiety, which refers to “a broad range of emotional bonds between people and their homeland” and topophilia which refers to “people's emotional ties with (affection for) particular places” (Yoon,1991, p.390) underpin the poem(s) under discussion.

She sees that blame and sadness will do no good for anyone. She believes that a new order should replace standing political struggle:

all I want is a row of olive trees,
a field of tulips, to forget
the maze of intestines, the dried corners
of a soldier's mouth, all I want is for
the small black eyed child to stop
wondering when the fever will stop
the noise will stop, all I want is
a loaf of bread, water
help for the stranger's torn arm,
all I want is what we have inherited
from the doves, a perfect line of white:
where are the bodies? (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p. 16)

“Olive trees”, “tulips”, “bread”, “water”, “help” and “doves” build an image of a peaceful country. She wonders if people can respond to her call or not. Identity struggle has complicated any attempt for having a shared identity because people have not had the same

stance and differences among groups could not easily have been solved. However, the speaker focuses on a common element that can unify all groups, viz; humanity.

The title “Baladna”, an Arabic word, can mean “our country” or “our ballad”. The first meaning is suggested by the opening lines and the second one closes the poem. The pun brings into mind an image of a myriad of memories of homeland. These memories can be commemorated in a ballad.

Between reality illustrated in “we are who we are” and past memories remembered in “the common things” stands the speaker whose identity is torn between the past and the present:

We are who we are,
and home is home
to keep the season dreaming
to remind us of
ahweh, zaatar, khoubiz, kaak—
the common things
I am no longer sure what I see. (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p.33)

Through her geomentality speaker recalls past daily activities in the hope that she might regain her lost identity. “*ahweh, zaatar, khoubiz, kaak*” are culturally specific activities that distinguish Arab identity.

Geomentality is the mentality of an individual or a group of people (whether cultural, professional, or racial) regarding the geographical environment. Geomentality can therefore include any pattern (established set) of mind about places and environmental conditions including people's place preferences and prejudices. ... it is an integral part of individual or group mentality as a whole. (Yoon, 1991, p. 388)

The speaker's attempt fails at keep a geomental image and she is “no longer sure what [she] see[s]”. Visions are so blurred that she cannot distinguish “a herd of sheep” from “a burning mountain” (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p.33). Moreover, the speaker starts self-effacing her past identity by feeling indifferent to her stance “between [her] grandfather/and what seems to be [her] present” (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p.33). Many factors have made the speaker lose interest in her past, the important of which is moving into the diaspora. Another concept of identity, viz., transnational identity, has gradually been formed. Her doubt of being different from her ancestors culminates into “we are who we are; are we who we are?” (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p. 33).

Being influenced by diasporic ambience and the newly attained identity, the speaker's memories of her past have dwindled into a doubtful ballad: “We write a ballad to celebrate ourselves, *baladna*/and wonder, is that what it's like/to dance in Arabic...” (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p.33). All past memories and activities which have long constructed her identity have been reduced into a ballad fit for performing an Arab dance. However, the closing lines bear a sense of mortification that should be felt by all Palestinians living in the diaspora. They should all past memories of old Palestine in order to cling to their Palestinian identity.

“Amrika”, the longest poem in *Lives of Rain*, crystallizes the transnational identity the speaker has acquired while moving from place to another in the diaspora. The poem provides intersecting cultural webs, a tapestry, a patchwork, delicate in its composition as well as in its expression. “Amerika” turns all concepts of the only and one identity topsy-turvy. Through this multilingual poem Handal realizes her global identity. It is language that can gather, accommodate and recreate. Handal maintains that: “no language is untouched; they all carry the remains of other civilizations and conquests. And it's in these connections that I am reminded of our global gathering. Exile is an unsolvable grief. But with language my hyphenated mother tongues have found a way to create an original language” (Handal, “Diasporic Cartographies”, 2017, p.143). For Handal the many hyphenated languages she speaks have almost become synonym to identity: “I've often said I don't have a mother tongue.

In fact, they are all hyphenated mother tongues. Together they create a symphony, a new language, and the multiplicity of that new language reflects my identity and life” (Handal, “Building an Architecture for the Wanderer”, 2016, p. 13).

This eight-part poem takes one in a multi-leg odyssey, breathless yet enlightening. From “*The Curfews of History*”, to “*The Tyranny of Distance*”, “*The Cry of Flesh*”, “*Opening*”, “*El Color del Inmigrante*”, “*Another Sun*”, “*Incantations*”, till one reaches the last part “*Debke in New York*”, one acquires a kaleidoscopic and psychedelic vision of the speaker’s identity, one that combines memories of home— “*Debke*”—and the present status— “*New York*”—so much that the speaker, while moving on and gaining experience, sticks to their roots. Handal makes it clear that her identity is like a multi-facet gem created by her constant travels: “My life is a series of residencies in the skies. I don’t know how to live differently, and don’t think I want to, either. My home is in flight” (“Building an Architecture for the Wanderer”: A Conversation with Nathalie Handal”, 2016, p. 17).

In the first part, the speaker spends “nights all night digging” (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p. 57) for parts/memories of her “Sittis and Jiddos” (grandmothers and grandfathers). The physical act of digging for an “arm, leg, finger, a silver of hair” (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p.57) suggests another spiritual counterpart making the synecdochical reference cover not only “Sittis and Jiddos” but all past memories as well. Memories haunt the speaker and her kinsmen while “walking to all borders” (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p. 57), memories such as “the bruised child, the throat of our national song” (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p. 57). Sticking to memories were a strong support against the image of the now “divided country” (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p. 57).

Memories, customs and traditions have been transmitted from generation to another by telling tales about the past:

women weave, weave
thread after thread,
lost songs of Palestine, Oum Kulthoum
buildings built and torn down,
the way home changing as the city does—
with every bomb, a new wall. (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, pp. 57-58)

The above lines reflect the long-standing struggle between the geopolitical image crystallized in daily bombings and new walls being built and the geomental one created by serious attempts and reviving the past image of Palestine. The speaker sees that revival of past traditions is the best way to stand against daily attempts at eradicating the image of old Palestine: “we continue to dance, hands swaying/the air *Ya Allah, Ya Allah*, /we will never leave” (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p.58). It is important to note that the poem starts with the word “distance” and ends with “never leave”, an indication that a second coming is always at hand.

In the second part a comparison is held between two cities: Marseilles and Jaffa, “between the city of lights and black-outs” (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p. 58). Moving to France does not efface their identity since “our eyes remain, our memory” (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p. 58). The speaker’s actions are imbued with a strong sense of her Palestinian identity in the new residence Memories of home haunt the present so much that she sings Arab songs in French, and revives an old love story that entails questions about the possibility of returning to the promised land: “Will we ever smell the sweet scent of morning/in Haifa again” (2005, p.59). The closing lines of her letter to her lover answers this question: “*Je n’ai jamais oublié/ce que tu n’as pas cesse de me dire, /la terre ne ment jamais*” (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p. 59). Part three reflects the vicissitudes of life in the Diaspora. References to “Antilles”, “the island of Boukman”, “Tabou Combo and Sweet Mickey” (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p. 59) shift the scene from France to “*Ayiti cherei, plus bel*

pays—” (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p. 60). Spatial and cultural references help crystallize the speaker’s transnational identity. She has mingled with different people and things: “I leave with the Kreyol—/tioul, zonbi, refijye, testaman” (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p. 60). The speaker has acquired experience and can live in the Diaspora convinced that “we did what we had to,/but it was not enough” (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p. 60). There are more places in order for her new identity to be fully constructed.

Part four opens with a new spatial reference, “New England”. This marks the crescendo of the transnational identity. There is a marked difference “between where we are from and/where we now live in” (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p. 60). Hopes and dreams can be fulfilled in the new residence, something difficult to realize in the homeland that is now a pack of memories trapped “behind a broken door” (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p. 60). Memories of the old identity flash over the scene since “only later do I hear the Arabic/ in his [her father’s] footsteps...” (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p. 60). Although “New England” is in the foreground of the scene with a clear reference to the American dream since time “wears a hat and own a car/and we are comfortable in foreign tongues” (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p.61), the only music that can stir emotions “is a melody from the east—” (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p.61). The implication is that though a stranger can achieve acculturation, atavistic feelings will always lurk in the deep reaches of their soul.

Part five shifts the scene to Cuba where the speaker and her company “reach the Miami beat” and an aural image is crystallized by a cultural reference to the well-known Cuban singer Celia Cruz’s “la tierra de Dios” (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p. 61) (the land of God). The speaker is convinced that she should be on the move in order to realize her full transnational identity: “leaving, we survive” (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p.61).

The title of part six is a temporal and spatial reference to the speaker’s constant movement. The speaker and her company reach the sweet island, “Santo Domingo” and “listen to Bachata, Juan Luís Guerra, /speak about Sosa, El Camino Real/ las calles en la Zona Colonial” (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p.62). Handal highlights ties between Palestine and Latin America to which many Palestinians immigrated. “the imaginative intertwinings of Bethlehem, Haiti and the Dominican Republic are explored in the poetry of Palestinian US-based poet Nathalie Handal” (Abdel Nasser, 2018, p. 240). References to cultural practices, famous figures and historic places highlight the intensity of the experience the speaker has gained. Cultural references color the rest of the poem. References to priests, witches, buildings, towers, slums, ghettos, suburbs create an image of another place different from her own home land. Another psychedelic image is illustrated by drinking mamajuana. The trilogy of time intersects so much so the speaker is confused:

Why do we insist
on disappointing ourselves—
past or future
suspense or dream
instead of hoping the present. (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, pp. 62-63)

The above lines show that memories filter through the interstices of her new transnational identity. Attempts at acculturation in different places the speaker has visited cannot prevent memories from haunting her present and future.

In part seven the scene is London where nature and literature create an enigmatic ambience. She had memories of “Shakespeare”, “Yeats” and “Beckett” while “smoking *sheesha* on Edgware Road” (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p. 63). Sheesha-created mist and Portobello Market’s odd colors intensify this sense of enigma. The psychedelic vision the speaker has had before, runs in this part since she sees mist as a room where she can disappear

in. Although the new and old identities show their appearance simultaneously, the speaker tries to incarnate the new one:

where I came to know
the silent rain inside of me
as the Thames has come
to the rhythm of my breathing. (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p. 63)

The aural image created by murmuring of the Thames and the speaker's breathing highlights the extent of the speaker's inculturation.

Handal's reading of "Shakespeare", "Yeats" and "Beckett" highlights the importance of geopolitics. As mapping's underpinning relation to geopolitics has often affected people's life, the latter opens a new door for reading literature which has been depoliticized for a long time. An example is Fionnuala O'Neill's and Stuart Elden's reading of *King Lear* which reads *King Lear* as a historical and political record rather than a tragedy. O'Neill (2013, p.168) maintains that:

One of the most productive aspects of Professor Elden's reading, then, lies in its capacity for putting Lear into dialogue with the histories and some of their most pressing concerns regarding absolute sovereignty and the commonwealth, including the relationship between the monarch, the territories, and the commons. ... Reading these plays both within and against generic frameworks thus draws attention to the shatteringly tragic potential of territorial dispute on a national scale, as well as to the political nature of tragedy.

Selden (2013, p. 148) focuses on the term "territory" in its relation to geopolitics. For Selden "territories" has to do with "political control of and stake in those place" (Selden, 2013, p. 148), viz., France as reported by Lord Somerset in *Henry VI, Part II*. The same reference to "territories" is found in *King Lear*. The word "implies a range of political issues: it is controlled, fought over, distributed, divided, gifted, and bought and sold" (Selden, 2013, p. 160).

Mireya Folch-Serra (2009, p. 177) pointed out that the concept of "the nation-state" was based on the ideas of "national identity" and "manufactured unity" within national borders. Through her analysis of the Spanish translation of Tom Clancy's *Op-Center: Balance of Power*, she discovered that the translation is different from the original because the "Spanish version sought to sanitize so-called inexact geographical and historical facts, and supposedly bring the text closer to "reality"" (Folch-Serra, 2009, p. 178), thus emphasizing how media and censorship can affect the geopolitics of identity.

The title of part eight, "*Debke* in New York"—the last part in this poem—has cultural and spatial references to the old and new identities respectively. The hustle and bustle of New York is put in juxtaposition to her homeland since the speaker says: "the past a bedroom I once slept in" (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p. 64). References to places she goes to—"Broadway", "Columba", "Hudson River", "subway rides", "that place I now call home", and "the corner of Bleeker and Mercer" (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p. 64)—illustrate social mobility. However, references to cultural figures, writers and singers from both sides—"Said and Twain", "Ibn Arabi" and "Abdel Halim and Nina Simone"—show that the two identities are intermingled and transformed into one, viz., global identity.

Handal's cultural references is an attempt at mapping the new identity so much that Palestinians/people in the diaspora can embrace it. In his article "Editing worlds: participatory mapping and a minor geopolitics", Joe Gerlach points out the role mapping plays in considering geopolitics from a new angle by maintaining that mapping is geopolitical not only for "its implication in the practices of statecraft and of delineating sovereignty in a 'major' representational sense" but also for reshaping "attitudes", "dispositions" and "sensibilities" in a particular way (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2015, p. 274).

Handal's references suggest remapping and revisioning old masters such as Ibn Arabi, Said and Mahmoud Darwish. Alan Ingram (2016, p.2) argues that research in the "(geo)political implications of art" can be developed through an "appreciation of the aesthetics". The same can be said about Handal's poetry in which geopolitics plays a formative role.

The lesson the speaker tries to teach the world is clear. She "wonder[s] why we are obsessed/ with difference, /our need to change the other?" (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p. 64). These lines reflect the speaker's belief in the image of the melting pot, a belief that there is diversity within unity and this diversity should be respected. Issues of Displacement and identity are not easy to deal with. Handal sees that "if we think we can achieve resolve with the question of displacement and identity, we will feel defeated. The aim is to maintain equipoise as if we were playing a dangerous sport" (Handal, "Diasporic Cartographies", 2017, p. 144).

The odyssey is complete and "faded Arabic letters" and "a New York *debke*" (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p. 64) close this multicultural scene. What Handal has done is that she has "synthesize[d] the culture and memory repertoires which she has interiorized" (El Hajj and Harb, 2016, p. 82). The last lines stress the fact that identity search is a never-ending process: "my voice still breaking into tiny pieces/ when I introduce myself to someone new/and imagine I have found my way home" (Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p.64). The aural image points to the difficulty in breaking ice with strangers. The speaker tries to socialize, acculturate and build an identity and find "home". Discussing Nathalie Handal and Naomi Shihab Nye, Hind El Hajj and Sirene Harb (2016, pp.62-63) maintain that: "through travel and political comparativity, the articulation of personal and collective identities becomes a never-ending journey and an act of resistance against racism, colonial regimes, and imperial and interstate violence".

CONCLUSION

Re-imagining Palestine in selected poems of *The Lives of Rain* has been realized through two perspectives, viz., identity politics and shared/global identity which are related to the geomental and geopolitical images of Palestine respectively. Discussion of the above-mentioned poems have proved that Handal has succeeded in having a home in poetry. Handal realizes that she has to live with the idea of loss of home and permanent transience. Her poems prove that memories of home are deeply rooted in her despite the fact that she has lived in different places. A brief discussion of Palestinian-Israeli Conflict shows how identity politics has been a result of this struggle and justifies Handal's aspiration for global identity and *modus vivendi*.

Handal's cultural references have opened new venues to remapping literature and revisioning old masters' works from a politicized perspective in order for the geomental image of Palestine to be kept for future generations. The above discussions have proved that writing poetry creates, recalls and preserves memories so that one's ethnic identity may be kept under a wider global one.

ENDNOTE

¹ Books such as Barbara M. Parmenter's *Giving Voice to Stones: Place and Identity in Palestinian Literature*, published by University of Texas Press, 1994; Susan Slyomovics' *The Object of Memory: Arab and Jew Narrate the Palestinian Village*, published by University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998; Meir Litvak's *Palestinian Collective Memory and National Identity*, published by Palgrave Macmillan, 2009; and Muna Abu Eid's *Mahmoud Darwish: Literature and the Politics of Palestinian Identity*, published by I. B. Tauris, 2016, do not delve deep into the concept of geomenal and geopolitical images that are basic to the discussion of Palestinian identity.

² A lot of books, articles, videos and films have recorded the history of Palestine, an Arab land. Gudrun Krämer's book *A History of Palestine: From the Ottoman Conquest to the Founding of the State of Israel*, published in German and translated in English by Princeton University Press in 2008, covers the period from 1750 till WWII and the establishment of Israel. Ilan Pappé's book *A History of Modern Palestine: One Land, Two Peoples*, published by Cambridge University Press in 2004, focuses on modern Palestine till after the period of the second Intifada. Other books, such as *Preventing Palestine: A Political History from Camp David to Oslo* by Seth Anziska, focus on recent periods in Arab-Israel conflict. The book, published by Princeton University Press in 2008, covers the period from Oslo to Camp David accords. *A New Critical Approach to the History of Palestine: Palestine History and Heritage Project 1*, edited by Ingrid Hjelm, Hamdan Taha, Ilan Pappé, Thomas L. Thompson, first published by Routledge in 2019, is the first of a series of several volumes focusing on writing "a comprehensive, evidence-based history of Palestine with a critical use of recent historical, archaeological and anthropological methods" ("Preface"). However, the editors claimed that there was no dominant ethnic group to which people living in Palestine have belonged and the account of history the book contains, twenty articles divided into four parts, might be part of the heritage of all people who live in Palestine. Many videos by Dr. Tamim Al Barghothi, a Palestinian-Egyptian political activist and poet, discussed the history of Palestine. He proved that Israel does not have any right to claim that the Palestinian lands are theirs, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FFsPlmbRTs>. In this video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CabBiViFg2w>, Israel occupation stealing the Palestinian legacy and showing it to the world as theirs is discussed. Moreover, Al Barghothi has written and recited many poems crystallizing the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Of these poems are "As a Palestinian You Mustn't Live" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tz2lqTtLuEM>, "In Quds" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tZTSLDVeH5M>

³ A cursory look at the map shows how Palestine has gradually disappeared in order to establish an illegitimate Israeli state. This link points out the gradual process of effacing Palestine from the World map. <https://images.app.goo.gl/XSX7Qx6RSsPx91AN9>

⁴ Debke was originally used while Palestinians were harvesting their crops. Then it was used in weddings as an expression of joy in pre-1948 Palestine. After 1948, it was used as an expression of Palestinian identity, protest and struggle against the occupier (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=whc5GPEt4Do>).

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