

**Culture, History and Resistance in Ibrahim Nasrallah's *Time of White Horses*****Lina Elayan<sup>1</sup>, PhD Student****Dr. Yousef Awad<sup>2</sup>, Jordan****Abstract:**

There has been a trend in literary studies over the past few decades to examine the relationship between literature and history. In this respect, this paper examines how Ibrahim Nasrallah's *Time of White Horses* (2012) serves to document and historicize Palestinian annals, and cultural aspects with regard to struggle and resistance against different colonial powers. In this sense, Palestinian historical fiction helps subvert Israeli's claims that they settled in a land with no people. Subsequently, this historical novel seeks to resolve the symbolic problem of the invisibility of the Nakba in global culture. By transcribing oral testimonies in its narrative of the destruction of Palestinian society under colonialism, and by studying the historical documents of Palestine, this novel becomes a space to refute and debunk stereotypes and false assumptions of the imperialistic and Western ideological norms and giving them high qualities that prove their capability to rule themselves. On the other, it exposes the falsity of Israel's claim to its right to the land of Palestine.

Keywords: Palestine, Israel, history, culture, resistance.

Silence from and about the subjective was the order of the day. Some of the silences were broken, and some were maintained by authors who lived with and within the policing strategies. (Toni Morrison, 1992, p.51)

Morrison here addresses the colonized and marginalized for re-creating their own voice through their intelligentsia. This voice functions as sacred history that explains the total reality or identity of the respective traditions which express themselves through human existence, society and culture. Such works explain a collective experience directed towards a nation's future, recognition and independence.

In *The Question of Palestine*, Edward Said states that before 1895, Theodor Herzl and the Zionists have been promoting the idea that Palestine is an empty land, so there is no problem to give it to homeless people (9). In 1917, the Balfour Declaration was issued by the British government and it stipulated that Palestine should be re-constituted as the National Home for the

Jewish people (Ibid). Former Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir claimed in 1969 that “Palestinians did not exist.” (Ibid) Contrary to Meir’s unfounded claims, Said assures that Palestine “existed as a huge majority for hundreds of years a largely pastoral, a nevertheless socially, culturally, politically, economically identifiable people whose language and religion were (for a huge majority) Arabic and Islam.” (Ibid)

In this context, this paper will illustrate how Ibrahim Nasrallah’s *Time of White Horses* (2012) asserts the existence of Palestinian people on the Palestinian territories by depicting the daily life experiences of Palestinian people in Palestine from the late nineteenth century until the Nakbeh 1948. The novel vividly portrays Palestinian cultural traditions, exposes Israeli propaganda, cruelty and brutality, and traces the emergence of the Palestinian armed resistance.

There is no clear cut distinction between literature and history. On the contrary, there is an intertwining relationship between the two as history can be documented in literary texts through depicting real historical events and mixing them with imaginary ones. In his article “Imagined Geographies: Mapping the Oriental Habitus in Three Nineteenth-Century Novels,” Savi Munjal argues that “there are no mute spaces” (1). Equally, it means that every literary work does not emerge from a vacuum but from a real context that affects its author. In this respect, this paper examines how *Time of White Horses* serves to document Palestinian history and cultural aspects with regard to struggle and resistance against different colonial powers.

Postcolonial/anti-colonial historical novels help to understand the past in former colonies. These literary productions that have involved a broad historical, political and cultural dimensions, for Barbara Harlow, is no less significant than “resistance and national liberation movements which it reflects and in which it can be said to participate” (Harlow xvi). In this sense, this kind of resistance literature is a motivating power of national liberation movements since it represents the invisible actuality and world injustice. As this chapter illustrates, *Time of White Horses*, springs from a kind of “[t]ruth-telling urge” (Hamdi 24) that provides readers with evidence of the presence of Palestinian people and the falsity of Israeli and Zionist claims. This novel depicts the daily life experiences of Palestinian people in Palestine and records Palestinian history through drawing Palestinian characters, portraying cultural traditions, highlighting the significance of storytelling, exposing Israel’s propaganda, cruelty and brutality. The novel sheds light on the armed resistance of the Palestinian revolutionaries. In other words, the novel gives voice to the colonized, documents their suffering and ignites the flame of resistance through a sub-genre of literature called ‘bearing witness’ (Hamdi 23).

Ibrahim Nasrallah is a Palestinian novelist and poet. He has published many novels and collections of poetry. His literary works trace and document the ideological and imperialistic translocation of Palestinian people. In 2009, his novel *Time of White Horses* was shortlisted for the Arabic Booker Prize. The vital theme of his literary works come from his diasporic

experiences as he was born in the Whidat refugee camp near Amman, Jordan in 1954. He continued publishing his works about his country of origin ([www.cultureandconflict.org.uk](http://www.cultureandconflict.org.uk)).

*Time of White Horses* narrates the struggle of Palestinian villagers with the occupying Zionists that resulted in expelling the villagers and establishing the state of Israel in 1948. The novel delineates three generations of a family living in the village of Hadiya that is headed by Hajj Mahmud. The novel represents and portrays Palestinian life under control of many colonizers. The novel documents the decline of the Ottoman colonization, the British Mandate and the conquering Zionists. The novel describes and represents village life of Palestinians highlighting the cultural costumes. The novel paints a vivid picture of Palestinian villagers' interconnectedness with the land, animals and societal relations from which the cultural and resistant identity is revitalized.

In their analytical study "Reversal of Roles between Animals and Humans in the *Time of White Horses*," Wafaa' Awni Al Khadraa' and Alia Saleh argue that those horses could communicate with others, accede their desires, and make satisfaction and gratification they want. Al Khadraa and Saleh argue that intimate relationships are exchangeable between man and mare which is equated to a woman. (My Translation. *Human and Social Science Study* 574- 586).

Abu Khaled Damrah argues that *Time of White Horses* is an elaboration of the loss and neglect of the nation, life, and the entire people who find themselves a prey to the enemy, tents, homelessness, hunger, deprivation, humiliation, and shame. Damrah maintains that what makes the novel unique is how it portrays the actions of its characters honestly without fabrication or confusion (My translation, [www.raialyoum.com](http://www.raialyoum.com)). In his article, "Out of time: colonial history in Ibrahim Nasrallah's *Time of White Horses*", Karim Mattar shows that Nasrallah's work represents just such a "big", all-encompassing novel that binds scattered Palestinians in a coherent narrative of loss (186). While its form signifies Nakba and exile, Matar believes that Nasrallah's novel foregrounds the impossibility of aesthetic resolution in the Palestinian case without the national resolution of return (176).

In *The Palestine Nakba: Decolonizing History, Narrating the Subaltern, Reclaiming Memory* (2012), Nur Masalha argues that in 1948, the Haganah stole numerous private collections of manuscripts and Palestinian books. This process was replicated when Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982. Israeli army looted the Palestine Research Centre's "Beirut Archive" of 25,000 bound volumes and then bombed the Centre itself. In 2001, the Israeli government closed the Orient House in East Jerusalem and confiscated its Jerusalem Archive of 17,000 books and 200,000 hard copies of original documents (Masalha 135–147). To borrow the words of Patrick Williams, this "historiographical dispossession" (qtd in K. Matar 2) is what makes writers transcribe oral testimonies in their narrative of the dispossession of Palestine. Such writings are set to make a Palestinian archive of the erased ancient Palestinian places and national heritage. At the same time, it records the process of the gradual disappearance of Palestine from the map and the

dismantling of Palestinian society under colonialism. Univocally, these archives evince indigenous Palestinians' claims to land, property and identity. In a way, by writing this historical novel, Ibrahim Nasrallah builds a Palestinian communal narrative and writes back to Israeli leader David Ben-Gurion who ominously predicted that the Palestinians will eventually forget their history: "The old will die and the young will forget" ([www.cultureandconflict.org.uk](http://www.cultureandconflict.org.uk)).

Provocatively, Golda Meir's claimed in 1969 that "Palestinians did not exist historically, had no communal identity, and no national rights." (qtd in Said 1984, 31) Hence, Tahrir Hamdi's 'Bearing Witness' comes to "writ[e] back into history [...] what has been deliberately erased" (24). Consequently, Nasrallah's intellectual activity is the starting point of a national narrative project that revitalizes, authorizes and represents Palestinians' legitimacy and their indigenous presence, and thus proves their national rights. In line with this idea, Said argues in "Permission to Narrate" that "facts do not at all speak for themselves, but require a socially acceptable narrative to absorb, sustain and circulate them" (47).

In talking about lives and experiences before 1948, folk and cultural memories are the most durable foundations. In doing so, collective memories identify Palestinian rootedness and their national discourses. For Dina Matar, collective memories are formed around three motifs "praise and memory of the lost paradise from which Palestinians were expelled, lamentation of the present and depiction of the imagined return" (25). In this paper, I will discuss Palestinian identity as well as some aspects of Palestinian culture: wedding rituals, utilizing Palestinian attire, language, and their relationship with their habitat, especially horses. Exploring all of these cultural aspects shows how society is determined by its culture's psyche.

Nasrallah historicizes a distinct Palestinian societal identity with lifestyle and customs. Wedding rituals are detailed in the novel from the first step of the procession out the groom's house, women's songs, exchange of congratulations, dancing, hosting dinner for the bride and the groom until going back with the bride:

The men representing the groom's family led the procession...They were followed by women...It was the young men who were fighting for the chance to host the dinner. However, they were being urged on by their fathers, who wanted to teach them to be bold and gallant (Ibid)

Furthermore, traditional customs and attires not only preserve cultural memory, but also keep alive national, collective and resistant identity and that enhances understanding of the history of Palestine. Palestinian men used to wear "tunic" and "keffiyeh," (Ibid) that is worn by both the rebels and the villagers (Ibid). Palestinian women used to wear "black silk robe covered with red, blue, yellow, and green flowers" (Ibid). Nasarallah's attention to these minor details is part and parcel of his project of persevering Palestinian cultural memory and showing the diversity of Palestinian people.

Brilliantly, Nasrallah repossesses Palestinian land by mentioning the name of more than forty Palestinian villages and cities in which Palestinian people used to live and which were bases for

the rebels and resistant movements such as “Jaffa ...Majdal” (Ibid). In this way, Nasrallah resists Israeli attempts to erase Palestinian cities from the map.

As for animals, there is a distinct relationship correlating the Arab Palestinian with his horse. It exceeds beyond being a tool to travel on, or a means of fighting. It extends to a relationship mixed with love, friendship and to faithfulness of a great heritage cumulative, extended and continuous on Arab and international levels. In the novel, the Palestinian glorifies a mare more like it was a woman than a horse, protecting her, caring for “they related to her not as a horse, but as one of their daughters” (Ibid).

Not surprisingly, Ezra Danin characterizes the Palestinians as “primitive people who like to drink coffee and eat rice with their hands” (Pappé 12). The text under consideration develops a bond with the reader, a bond that encourages respect for Palestinians. Respectfulness would come from Nasrallah’s utilizing the Palestinian characters as a school for moral instruction and a ground for unlimited superior moral qualities. Through descriptive scenes, Nasrallah asserts that the Palestinian is strong, hospitable, respectable, intelligent and responsible.

Hajj Khaled, the hero, has been idealized as an extraordinary person who represents the true Palestinian. The villages of the region witness that he is an “upright man who had never been known to act unjustly toward anyone or deprive anyone of his right” (Nasrallah 332). Even when he gets older, he is strong enough to fight for his land: “I saw Hajj Khaled leaping from place to place like a tiger. Never in my life have I seen anybody as nimble or strong as he was” (Ibid). As well as, people are committed to ideals of duty, generosity and hospitality since guests are super important in the Palestinian community; they are treated as “royalty” (Ibid).

A little later, Nasrallah expounds a new moral universality through creating a sacred mood of solidarity among the people whether at the battlefield or at homes. The omniscient narrator informs the readers that in combat, “If you ask one of the people who were unarmed, “why are you here? He would say, “To treat the wounded, and to take martyrs back to their families” (Ibid). While at home, they would never tell anything about their hero, Hajj Khaled: “It was a secret that everyone knew, and that no one would reveal to anyone else” (Ibid). As Dina Matar succinctly puts it, solidarity “formed a warm, strong, stable environment for the individual, a sense of rootedness and belonging” (26).

In fact, these stories, as Benjamin Hollander argues in “A Palestinian Odyssey,”[d]efine and honor the discipline of a culture” (Ibid). Nasrallah’s symbolic representation of Palestinian high principles celebrates and gives voice to the subaltern and the marginalized through popular memory scholarship. But Nasrallah’s novel does not only celebrate the individual, it also traces the colonial history of Palestine expressing both deception and political statements and cruelty as the following paragraphs show.

In “The Economy of Manichean Allegory”, AbdulR.Jan Mohamed stipulates that colonialist literature aims in the first level to “de-historicize and de-socialize the conquered world.” (22) As a Post-colonialist, Nasrallah takes upon himself to be, in the words of Tahrir Hamdi, a “guardian of the society’s historical past” (23). Nasrallah looks back at the beginning of the conflict between Zionists and the Palestinians stirred on behalf of human suffering and injustice. In this respect, Chomsky’s *The Fateful Triangle* views historical documentation as a “dogged expose of human corruption, greed” (Said 1984,42).

Therefore, Nasrallah records the history of Palestine and chronicles its colonial history under the Ottoman, British and Zionist occupations, shedding light on the fact that more than half a century ago, the eviction of the Arabs from Palestine began for making way for the creation of the Israeli state under handedly. It is very proper that the real conflict began in 1917 with the Balfour Declaration that “a Jewish national homeland would be established in Palestine.” (Nasrallah 334) At first, Nasrallah lays bare the deception imposed on the Palestinians to steal their land and later he narrates that colonizers’ cruelty that inflicted upon the Palestinians.

In his article “Balfour and Palestine: A legacy of deceit,” Sir Anthony Nutting illustrates that the British government deliberately “set out to deceive the Arab majority in Palestine.” (3) Britain’s deception involves their marginalizing policy that aimed at making the Palestinian uneducated and primitive. Nasrallah’s great exposure is that “[n]either the Ottomans nor the British have wanted us to be educated.” (Nasrallah 272) The characteristically concrete imagination of the uneducated mind of the Palestinians and Palestinian kindheartedness was, in the words of the lawyer addressing the Palestinians, “the greatest threat to this whole country [...] that you all are too kindhearted for your own good. In fact, your kindheartedness is liable to be the death of you” (Ibid). These two facts would allow the Ottomans and the British to play the role freely. Through this strategy of making people ignorant, Palestinians’ lands were stolen, paving the way for the coming of the Zionists.

Because the Palestinians were illiterate, they were convinced by the monastery that the people at the monastery are literate and know that having lands means only “to pay more taxes.” (Ibid) Later, under the occupation of the British, they discovered that the monastery has inconspicuously succeeded in claiming itself as the proprietor of the entire village lands since it paid taxes for years instead of them. In postcolonial discourse, the real façade of colonialism is unmasked. This can be seen in how Nasrallah reveals the ideological attitude of the monastery in Hadiya. He confirms that these monasteries have nothing to do with religion, instead “They’re like ... machine guns, which...have only one aim: to mow down everything around them.” (Ibid) Consequently, the British government started selling the land to the Jews. This fact is not only mentioned in Nsrallah’s novel but also in the article of Joel Beinin and Lisa Hajjar: “Palestine, Israel and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A Primer” where they argue that “the Jewish National Fund purchased large tracts of land from absentee Arab landowners” (Beinin, Hajjar 2).

In fact, the conflict over lands has developed into an uprising. In “August 15, 1929, members of the Betar Jewish youth movement... demonstrated and raised a Zionist flag over the Western Wall” (Ibid). This provocative act is behind the “Western Wall Uprising in Jerusalem “that caused —waves of executions” (Nasrallah 325). The number of Jews immigrating and settling in Palestine after Hitler’s rise to power in Germany in 1933 had continued to increase (Beinin, Hajjar 2), leading to new land purchases and the establishment of Jewish settlements. As a consequence, Palestinian resistance to British control and Zionist settlement climaxed with the Arab revolt of 1936–1939, which Britain suppressed with the help of Zionist militias.

In 1946, an appointed UN committee of representatives from various countries decided that Palestine “should be divided (partitioned) in order to satisfy the needs and demands of both Jews and Palestinian Arabs” (Beinin, Hajjar4). In this context, Edward Said writes in *The Question of Palestine* that “Israel was to be built on the ruins of this Arab Palestine” (13). This fact is the extreme result of the ethnic cleansing that was founded by the Zionist leader David Ben-Gurion. Ilan Pappé defines it in —The 1948 Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine as the “systematic and forced removal of the members of an ethnic group from communities in order to change the ethnic composition of a given region.” (7) According to Pappé, its main element, which in fact Nasrallah vividly describes, is “the forced movement of civilian populations [entailing] the systematic destruction of homes, the looting of personal property, beatings, selective and random killings, and massacres.” (7)

Through descriptive scenes, Nasrallah presents the terrifying process of “psychological campaigns” (Beinin, Hajjar5) aimed at frightening Arabs into leaving:

They had attacked while people were sleeping...a single bullet was fired. It lodged in the head of Ali a-A‘raj as he plowed his land... For seventeen days the sniping continued nonstop...Life’s doors closed completely. The remaining livestock died from lack of food and became impossible to go out for any reason, whether to tend to their fields, bring food, or even pray. (Nasrallah 603-19-20)

The result was that in “1948 at least 75 percent of the refugees fled due to military actions by Zionist militias...and dozens of direct expulsions” (Beinin, Hajjar 5).

Furthermore, Ilan Pappé exposes that the Nakbah of 1948 was the final measure of a predated plan for the eviction of the Palestinians:

On...10 March 1948...veteran Zionist leaders ... put the final touches on a plan for the ethnic cleansing of Palestine. That same evening, military orders were...to prepare for the systematic expulsion of Palestinians... to forcibly evict the people: large-scale intimidation; laying siege to and bombarding villages and population centers; setting fire to homes, properties, and goods; expelling residents; demolishing homes; and, finally, planting mines in the rubble to prevent the expelled inhabitants from returning. (1)

Throughout the novel, the narrator describes the details of the battles and the confrontations with the Zionist enemy since the first discontent among Palestinian peasants opposed to the loss of land and jobs until the moment of expulsion in 1948. Nasrallah establishes a foundation for successful armed resistance that witnessed the birth of Palestinian national organizations whose main goal is the liberation of Palestine through the espousal of violence, Fanonian style. This main goal is, on the one hand, the driving motivation behind all action, and that to which everything returns. On the other hand, liberation may also come from the fact that it could only be achieved through Palestinians' hardihood and strong belief that "the spirit God had given us could be taken by him alone." (Nasrallah 393) Therefore, when Palestinian men had taken part in the Western Wall Uprising in Jerusalem in 1929, British forces arrested twenty-six young men and sentenced them to death (Ibid). Palestinians started a movement of revenge for them: "Shooting of a British policeman in a passenger bus" (Ibid) was one of the operations in which the attacker said "Bear witness, all of you, that what I did today was in vengeance for the deaths of the martyrs who were by the mandate authorities yesterday." (Ibid)

The British government did its best to excruciate and eliminate the Palestinians to facilitate forming the new nation of Israel. One of its strategies to suppress the Palestinians was appointing a number of greedy and non-patriotic collaborationists. Moreover, the Zionists have slaughtered many unarmed Palestinians. Subsequently, the Palestinians reached a high level of outrage, and this sparked the 1936 uprising by the peasants under the command of Hajj Khaled that was extinguished by Britain and Zionists in 1939 by the expulsion of its leaders to the neighboring Arab states (Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Iraq). Fanon writes in this context that this breaking of roles and self-challenge "shakes off the spirit of concealment" which in his viewpoint represents "community triumphs." (Fanon 1963,47) Adel, like many other men who heard of al-Kassam's martyrdom, decided to take his part in the resistance and when a "British jeep came along, he killed the three soldiers that were in it, seized their weapons, and disappeared into the mountains." (Nasrallah 375)

Perhaps, the fact that the Palestinian leadership at the crucial time was unorganized, and even unpatriotic, was the real reason behind the defeat of the Arab revolt and the exile of the Palestinian political leadership. At that time, Palestine's future was decided (Beinin, Hajjar 4). In the absence of honesty, some of the revolution leaders such as Fawzi Al-Qawuqji were conspiring with a Haganah leader, Palmon, who asked him for "one symbolic victory" (Nasrallah 606) and: both he and his army engaged in dubious actions in an attempt to give people the false impression that he was actually fighting. In fact, however, he turned the entire region of Galilee over to the Jews, and in the rescue army's presence, sizable Palestinian cities the likes of Haifa, Jaffa, Acre, Nazareth, and Safad fell under Israeli control. (Ibid)

In conclusion, this study has shown that the postcolonial/anti-colonial theory enables the treatment of these literary texts as the product of their historical context and as the cultural process of Nasrallah's national and artistic endeavor that provides a verifiable documentation of



the colonial history of their people, their cultural identity, and resistance. Consequently, Nasrallah's work conforms a process of re-historicization as a literary resistance that interweaves political events to individual stories and this has been influential in the spread and critiquing of ideologies. Thus, this clarifies how colonized nations have broken the silence of the imperialistic strategies imposed upon them that prevent them from having their own voices, an argument Gayatri Spivak foregrounds in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*. In postcolonial discourse, the real façade of colonialism is unmasked. This can be seen in how Nasrallah reveals the ideological attitudes of the colonial powers. This process of rehistoricization is a resistance strategy that generates counter-discourses to hegemonic structures. Therefore, Nasrallah's efforts debunk the myths of Zionism by delineating the historical national line of Palestine to "reclaim, rename, and reinhabit the land" (Said 1994, 273).

Like all writers of decolonization, Nasrallah endeavors to draw the contour of an imagined identity and land through cultural and national discourses. In this sense, one may argue that culture, history, language, and geography are the components of the resistance discourse and the decolonization battle which mainly aims set the colonized free from the stereotypes and false assumptions of the imperialistic and Western ideological norms and giving them high qualities that prove their capability to rule themselves. On the other, it exposes the falsity of Israel's claim to its right to the land of Palestine, a claim that Edward Said repudiates in *The Question of Palestine*.

In this context, like Said, Cabral postulates that "culture is the vigorous manifestation on the ideological or idealist plane of the physical and historical reality of the society that is dominated or to be dominated" (Williams, Chrisman 54). Indeed, the raw material of history is transformed into narrative through the ritualization of events in Palestinian social life. *Time of White Horses* is elaborations of a certain cultural ethos which offers a convincing explanation for people's attitudes to events of central importance in the development of Palestinian society. Thus, for Nasrallah, the most effective method of decolonization is to revitalize the culture and protect it to from disappearing. Historically speaking, the novel form is an epic venture that documents, remembers, and imagines the legacy of Palestinian culture and history. The period the novel covers is replete with articulated historical events in the emergence and development of the Palestinian issue. Indeed, the colonialist experience depicted in *Time of White Horses* is evidently a paradigm for the whole of collective colonial experiences that repeatedly occur but implicitly directed towards the future. As for resistance, Said defines it as "an alternative way of conceiving human history." (Said 1993, 260) Finally, understanding the social, political, and cultural context of Nasrallah's novel enriches its significance as discourses that challenge the dominant narratives and try to create a Palestinian narrative embedded in history leaving us with the question of the continuing role of resistance literature as a historical force in liberation struggles in the future.

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