

Childhood Misery as a Trope for Redemption

The war of 1948 did not only engender a radical rupture in Palestine’s social fabric, but it also marks a watershed in the way the past is remembered. The reconstruction of childhood, using memory as the primary source is always problematic, but in the case of Palestine it is compounded by the perspective of exile. In childhood autobiographical narratives, moreover, we capture many divisions which one would think children were not closely attuned to—confessional differences, class values, and ethnic separations. Yet the workings of these subliminal forms of awareness present a provocative problem for the historian. Are these forms of consciousness projected backward into childhood narratives, or are the narratives themselves the source of post-1948 visions of innocence? And secondly are the narratives of happy childhoods themselves a mechanism of circumventing the traumas that followed the war, creating a falsely ideal image of an earlier harmonious society?

Many through purgatory are replete with misery and depict oppressive environment. An outstanding example of this genre is Muhammad Shukri’s *al-Khubz al-Hafi* (*Not By Bread Alone*)—an account of his Tangiers boyhood, as well as Taha Hussein’s fictionalized childhood in *al-Ayyam*. These accounts of childhood as an ordeal may seem paradoxical, coming both from writers born into rather comfortable social milieus, as well as those, like Shukri, who grew up in a state

of squalor. In Palestine we recall Fadwa Tuqan's harsh treatment by her family in *The Mountainous Journey*, as well as Jabra Ibrahim Jabra's Bethlehem childhood (excerpt in this issue), not to overlook Edward Said's Cairo upbringing. In Tuqan's case the misery of her childhood is portrayed as the product parental negligence, or by an overbearing father (in Said's case) while for Jabra the source of his desolation was the grinding poverty of his family.

Quite often however childhood misery, as Tetz Rooke has observed, becomes a trope to introduce a process of redemption from a state of ignorance, or aimless playfulness, equivalent to the sinful transition and deliverance experienced by Augustine in his hedonistic youth. In other words, the misery of childhood may not be real but a perceived background to a process of coming of age. In this collection of childhood narratives we see important variations on this theme. Wasif Jawhariyyeh's old city boyhood evokes scenes of a vibrant daily life in a time of war, youthful games, and a street life of an Ottoman Jerusalem which has been basically expunged from later Palestinian histories. Serene al-Husseini, the daughter of a patrician family, does the same with the early Mandate period. What unites these varied childhood experiences by Shuqair, Boullata, Husseini, Jawhariyyeh, and Jabra is a nostalgic return to a bygone Jerusalem era. The childhood is idealized, but the loss is real, since it was also societal. They inhabit different historical epochs—Ottoman, British, and Jordanian. Their nostalgia is framed by reflections on how class and family mediated their experience of growing up in the old city (of Jerusalem, and in the case of Jabra, the old town of Bethlehem). But since they all wrote their reflections as mature writers that experience is visualized through the prism of adulthood.

What is ultimately surprising in these reflections is that the usual distinction between fictional (Jabra, Tuqan, Shuqair) and non-fictional (Boullata, Husseini and Jawhariah) narratives collides. Jerusalem is experienced as a lost space, perhaps not paradise, but certainly as a place and time that has not only gone, but is unlikely to be experienced again by another generation.

But suffering comes in degrees. All this may seem 'normal' suffering compared to the experience of children in Gaza over the last six decades. But the objective of these essays is not to rank the anguish of childhood, but to examine the social history of Jerusalem as seen through the eyes of children, or as captured childhood experience by adult recollections. Bjawi-Levine's article also provides important framing of this experience of identity formation in Jordan. In a forthcoming essay by Rochelle Davis (JQ 40) the author examines biographic and autobiographic literature of Jerusalem childhoods as formulated in education, habitat, migration, and the experience of the city by outsiders.