

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.12426707

# THE DIALECTIC OF “MY PLACE” AND “THE PLACE OF THE OTHER”: OPEN AND CLOSED SPACES IN AL-MUTA’ASHIL

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Received: 25/09/2025  
Accepted: 22/02/2026

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## ABSTRACT

*This study examines the manifestations of place in Emile Habibi's novel Al-Muta'ashil (The Wandering), presenting it as an arena of existential conflict between the Palestinian self (the “ego”) and the Israeli state (the “other”). The study starts from the premise that place in the novel is not merely a geographical backdrop for events, but a living entity that interacts with the characters and shapes their consciousness and identity, encapsulating a history of oppression, resistance, and memory. The research seeks to deconstruct the dialectic of “my place” and “the other's place” by analyzing the duality of closed spaces (prisons, cells, stakes, threatened houses, and transformed schools/mosques) and open spaces (Haifa, Acre, the sea, abandoned villages, and vast landscapes). The study highlights Habibi's genius in transforming physical space into semantic space, exposing the mechanisms by which oppression becomes virtue, closure becomes freedom, and defeat becomes resilience. Finally, the study concludes that Habibi does not offer an alternative homeland in the novel; rather, he makes writing itself a homeland, and the narrative the only space from which its people cannot be displaced.*

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**KEYWORDS:** Space, Place, Palestinian Identity, Israeli Occupation, Open and Closed Spaces, Emile Habibi, Memory, Resistance.

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## INTRODUCTION

Almost every major Palestinian novel is fundamentally concerned with the question of place, not only as a story setting, but as an existential, nationally, and identity-related problem. Place is not a given in the Palestinian experience; but place is an arena of passionate struggle over being and meaning. Since the Nakba of 1948 Palestinians have been changed as people living in their place to people fighting against those who have occupied it. As a result, their relation to the land has been given a dialectical character in the Hegelian sense: a progression of constant negation, awareness of this negation, the symbolic and practical opposition to it to surpass it.

Emile Habibi, in his novel *The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessoptimist* (1974), provides one of the most developed shapes of this dialectic in the shape of art. The novel is written by a Palestinian intellectual who was not leaving the occupied territories and is not a mere narrative of an unusual person, the novel creates a whole fictional world where the duality of self and other can be represented by the spaces that are contrasting and overlapping at the same time. Saeed Abu al-Nahs is not an archetypal hero, but rather, he is a contradictory character with a pessimistic and optimistic character. His consciousness, in its turn, fuses the image of Haifa that he adores with the image of the city of Israeli that he is exposed to.

The concept of the dialectic of my place and the place of the other as a way of entering the discussion of the novel takes the form of the conceptual starting point of the present research. It is answering one of the main questions: How does the Other (the state, its institutions and the army) change Palestinian places into Israeli ones? On the other hand, how does the Self (the Palestinian who does not leave his homeland) defy this change, not necessarily against it directly, but symbolically, in the reproduction of place in memory, language and dreams? In this context, the research also examines how creative imagination of Habibi alters the space equation of the novel in which the cell becomes a palace, the prison a royal court, the stake a national symbol, the diames an identity shelter.

In methodology, the research takes a semiotic-cultural approach to the space analysis. It is based on the theoretical approaches of Gaston Bachelard to the aesthetics of place and the work of Yuri Lotman of the semiotics of fictional space, as well as modern Arab critical approach to the Palestinian fiction. The breakdown of the analysis is divided into two parts. The former considers closed spaces created by the

Other (prisons in their different forms, the threatened home, and transformed institutions). The second revolves around open spaces which the Self either cannot stop dreaming about or tries to re-possess, i.e. Haifa, the twofold city, Acre and the sea.

This work is significant in that it is dealing with a seminal novel in contemporary Palestinian literature that enjoys many readings on the part of the critical domain but still presents new readings, especially given recent changes towards cultural and semiotic criticism. The analysis embracing the novel through the perspective of the dialectic of place brings to focus one of the key aspects of the modern Palestinian experience. It shows the processes of symbolic struggle over land that are prior to the physical struggle at the same time that aesthetic analysis (the representation of narrative space) is connected to the political one (the struggle over identity and memory). Thus, the study goes beyond the classic relegation of form and content and shows that Habibi has the amazing capacity to make the physical space a semantic one and creates another space with writing when the actual place is unavailable.

### *Research Question*

The study addresses the following central question:

How is the dialectic of “my place” and “the other’s place” represented in the novel **The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessoptimist** by **Emile Habibi**? What narrative and semantic mechanisms does the author employ to transform physical space into an existential one?

From this question emerge the following sub-questions:

1. How do closed spaces function as existential metaphors for the Palestinian reality?
2. What are the implications of transforming places from their original functions (school/education, mosque/worship, diames/commerce) into security and military spaces? How does this transformation reflect the conflict between memory and identity?
3. How are cities represented in the novel as spaces belonging simultaneously to memory and belonging on the one hand, and to law and administration on the other?

## SECTION ONE

### *Closed Spaces: The Imprisonment of the Body and the Quest for Salvation*

Closed space constitutes one of the central spatial structures in the novel by Emile Habibi. In the

narrative, space does not merely function as a physical setting; rather, it develops into a symbol of the existential, political, and psychological condition of the Palestinian who remained in his homeland after the Nakba.

The presence of closed spaces in the novel unfolds gradually, beginning with the diames (cellars and underground chambers), first introduced in "Damis Acre," where Saeed encounters the strange creatures of that subterranean world in an isolated and dark underground environment. From there, the spatial experience intensifies as the narrative moves toward the prison cell and the prison itself, most clearly represented in "Shata Prison." Walls, bars, darkness, torture, and Saeed's transformation from a citizen into an inmate—from a labor activist into a mere number—turn the prison cell into the ultimate representation of dehumanization.

Among these enclosed spaces, the image of the stake emerges as the most complex and symbolic configuration. Saeed suddenly finds himself seated upon a headless stake, alone in the open air yet unable to descend from it. This strange place is neither inside nor outside, neither sky nor earth. It represents an abstract spatial condition in which the very idea of place collapses. The stake therefore becomes more than a prison; it signifies the exile of existence itself into a suspended zone of meaninglessness. Saeed does not leave one closed place only to enter another; instead, he gradually discovers that all spaces have become closed. Freedom is therefore no longer associated with movement, but with contemplation—watching the clouds pass above while people beneath them continue their ululations.

### *Prison: The Quintessential Closed Space*

In the novel, prison represents the most extreme manifestation of the space produced by the Other. Saeed Abu al-Nahs enters Shata Prison after the incident of the white flag. Ironically, however, Saeed soon realizes that the difference between life inside and outside prison is merely a difference of degree rather than of kind. He listens to an old prisoner explaining to him "the principles of the new life in prison and the rules of etiquette with the guards above me and the prisoners below me" (Habibi, 1974, p. 61), before concluding with astonishment:

"There is no difference between what is required of us in prison and what is required of us outside" (Habibi, 1974, p. 61).

This realization leads to a bitter insight: the homeland itself has become a prison, and national sovereignty has been transformed into a form of

prison administration.

The village of Shatta emerges as a pivotal rural location in the novel. Originally a Palestinian village, part of its land was later transformed into what became known as Shatta Prison. Saeed describes it as:

"a huge building standing before me like a ghoul in the desert... surrounded by a high yellow fence... a fortress protruding like a cancerous boil on the breast of a land sick with cancer" (Habibi, 1974, p. 162).

In this case the novel tells of one of the most vivid changes of my place to the place of the other. A village land is turned into a prison and is served to the population as a security institution that is needed. That way, the scene captures the excessive politicization of rural space: the land that has been worked and cultivated turns into the location where the bodies are confined.

The prison is even turned into a royal court or a small kingdom in the novel where people lose the right to the privacy and turn into numbers or cases. The spatial system tries to redefine body and consciousness on the basis of a strict disciplinary order. The fact that the prison is described by Habibi as a yellow fortress which looks like a cancerous growth further makes it an artificial space in unison with the natural terrain.

The dialectic of place in the novel thus brings out the fact that the struggle is not only about who has the right to land but it is also about who has the right to space. Place of the Other expresses itself in the prisons in all of their forms, the stake, the order of the military, and the surveillance system; meanwhile, the place of the Self is a symbolic space that can be regained in the form of consciousness, memory, and awareness of history.

Habibi later intensifies this spatial irony by demonstrating how places acquire different meanings over time. The execution chamber of the Acre prison that was used to execute the members of Irgun during the British era was converted into a museum to keep their memory alive and the prison was converted into a mental hospital (Habibi, 1974, p. 82). There is a clash of historical accounts therefore in the same place. But the museum is selective in its memory of one thing and forgetting another:

There is no mention of the Arabs who were hanged in the museum by the British in the execution chamber (Habibi, 1974, p. 84).

Through this, space turns into a means of extinguishing the memory, and re-writing the history as per the logic of the victor.

Habibi uses a number of minor narrative strategies in order to unravel the discourse of colonial

space. By the deconstruction of binary oppositions (inside/outside), the prison turns into the generic representation of the cathectised homeland. Color is also used as a semantic resource: the yellow of the prison walls indicates an insidious invasion of the body of the land, and the white of the interiors indicates the identity loss and the shrinking of the human beings down to unnamed numbers. The ghoul, the boil and the royal court are some other metaphors that make space alive and aggressive. The end result of this process can be seen in the metamorphosis of the execution chamber into a museum, in which whoever controls the ability to turn the gallows into a shrine also controls the ability to write history.

### ***The Cell: The Change of meaning and the force of transformation***

Not only is it in portraying prison as the location of oppression that Habibi is a genius, but he has also gone to a further extent of dismantling the very process of converting oppression in virtue. Saeed encounters a young Palestinian called "Lebanon" in the cell of Shatta prison who addresses him as my father. This narrowed down area that is meant to be the narrowest place of the novel is turned by Saeed to a paradise: the bars of the window were a bridge to the moon and hanging gardens between my bed and his (Habibi, 1974, p. 66). When filled with love and belonging, then it is the miracle of a place. The cell has become a throne and the torturers who beat him turn into the honor guard in the court of this king (Habibi, 1974, p. 66).

Such a semantic transfer is not evading the reality, but a spiritual protest against the place authority. After Saeed yells at the jailers: Dousi, your gigantic shoes on my breast! Suffocate my breath! You, black room, my wretched body kill! Had it not been you, we should not have met again" (Habibi, 1974, p. 66), he makes the instrument of torture a precondition of seeing each other, and restraining into freedom. Place brings submission in others, place brings meaning to me.

### ***Diamees: Space of Memory and Identity***

One of the most unbelievable locations in the novel is Diamis Acre. These old underground cellars, where the merchants used to trade, haggle, have children and bury them, during the novel they are turned into a shelter in which Saeed and his alien brothers flee to (Habibi, 1974, p. 20). They are peripheral, indefinite places, which exist under the eye of the authorities even without being perceived. According to Saeed, the diamis were restored by

your government, surrounded with walls, supplied with electricity, unveiled their courtyards, decorations, and ornaments, we went away to the invisible diamis (Habibi, 1974, p. 33).

These diamis are an image of another venue, a venue which the authorities are unable to see or understand. It is a place of the undercity, inhabiting its edges, and simultaneously maintaining the secret of the identity. This is where Saeed encounters the Sheikh of the Aliens, the outer space creature, and here he composes his letters, and here he is safe. The forgotten roots of Acre, the symbol of collective memory, which cannot die, even in spite of all attempts to restore it so that its traces could be forgotten, are called diamis.

### ***The stake: the desecration and derision of place***

The closed space culminates in the picture of the stake on which the novel ends. Saeed is sitting on a stake whose head was cut off in a deserted desert, and he cannot get down because he is afraid of falling and cannot remain because he is afraid of being alone (Habibi, 1974, pp. 57-58). This unreal image turns the place into an existential one rather than the physical one. This place is not the stake, but a state. It is a picture of a man in the middle of heaven and earth between belonging and alienation.

The irony of it is that Saeed cannot make a decision whether this stake is a nightmare or not. He says to himself: When I become as near to being an illusion, as lying on a stake of illusion, and what the sleeper beholds in his dream or nightmare, then it will not last long... Then why must I have to race the time, and probably the minutes and seconds, until I come to that moment of awakening which is always forthcoming? (Habibi, 1974, p. 58). But the stake is left, and there is no waking up. Yaqoub arrives to him and tells him: We are sitting on the same!... Each with his own stake. And this is what we have in common" (Habibi, 1974, p. 81). The closed space is no longer the burden of the Palestinian minority itself, but has become the desolation of humanity in society of uncertainty.

### ***Beit Saeed: a neighborhood that is under constant surveillance***

Habibi introduces Beit Saeed in Haifa as a delicate location, which is always under attack. It is a home whose furnishings have been picked up in derelicted homes, shuffled to and fro, menaced at all times by the watchman of the property of those who have disappeared. According to Said: I used to wake up in a panic every time I was camping at night, I feared that the guard would come and seize my things

(Habibi, 1974, p. 45). The house in this case is not an estate, but a provisional gift, which may be recovered.

Home is a kingdom to others, here is a tent to me. Such vulnerability of space brings about psychological and existential vulnerability. Upon arriving at the house of Saeed in Mountain Street, Yaad (the daughter) goes up the steps which rolled her down two decades ago and goes into the room where she had gone missing but she is aware that she is a visitor and not a returning person. The place is now not a home anymore; it is a transition point.

### *The school and the mosque*

It is through a symbolic analysis of the location that we discover how the novel portrays the school as being turned into the headquarters of the military dictator: "I was sitting on one of the school benches which they had converted into the headquarters of the ruler, and they had converted the boards into a ping-pong table (Habibi, 1974, p. 30). This scene is a reversal of the role and symbolism of the place: the seats which were supposed to serve as a learning place took the functions of waiting and interrogation; the blackboard which was the source of explanation and education became objects of amusement among the soldiers of the governor (Roshnakfar et al., 1998, p. 8).

The picture is extremely sparse yet full of content: education is substituted by the authority, the intellectual work is substituted by the physical discharging, the school institution is absorbed into the system of military governance. Therefore, it makes the place lose one of the most significant aspects of familiarity attached to the place in the Palestinian memory and transforms it into a hostile or at least unclear space.

In the scene when the principal and Saeed are talking about the history of Acre and Haifa and the Crusades, Saeed questions why the school has concealed information to the students: My city, Haifa, is also sacred... My son, all our country has been hallowing with the blood of those that were slain, and it is hallowed. Your Haifa is no other than your holy cities... Why never told us of this sanctity, my teacher? (Habibi, 1974, p. 13).

The school, in this scene, is revealed as a de-meme space with the principal (Teacher Saeed) narrating the history of Acre, but he ends at the Crusader and English times, with no reference to the massacres of 1948. The teacher responds to Saeed, when he asks, why didn't you teach us about this sanctity? The English have the right to be proud of their own history... only history is real in the sight of the

invaders when it is distorted. In this case, the school is used to distort memory, in which Palestinians are eliminated in the history of the place.

To the other, school serves as a place of domination and reconstruction, a kind of instrument of symbolic displacement; the Israeli education system enforces curricula which are marginal to the Palestinian narrative. Said finds that the history that he received regarding was incomplete, as it conceals the atrocities of the occupation, namely, Hattin and Saladin. School now is no more a seat of learning, but of intentional ignorance, that Palestinian students are ignorant that their city of Haifa was consecrated with the blood of the slain.

This is the same case with the mosque. The Al-Hazar Mosque that should be the place of prayer and spiritual calmness is utilized in the novel to incarcerate homeless individuals and refugees who have not yet settled down, Saeed himself during the night of the first entrance: Take him to the Al-Hazar Mosque (Habibi, 1974, p. 30). As the door of the mosque opens, it does not shed a reassuring light but an aged man who greets an unfamiliar face, who has to show his presence in the center in the morning (Habibi, 1974, p. 30). Instead of a mosque there is a mosque annex to the police station, a transit room in the security bureaucracy (Roshnakfar et al., 1998, pp. 810). The sound in the mosque courtyard is also not the same: with the recitation, we hear a woman crying; the girl is not sleeping, Shukriya, the girl is dead, Shukriya (Habibi, 1974, p. 32).

This audio has turned out to be a space created inside with the help of feelings and emotions, not stone and walls (Shukri et al., 2018, pp. 10-11). The mosque is not quite a building, but a boat of the general anxiety, where is bound together the fear and hope, that puts to expression the condition of the Palestinian ego in its own city.

### *The absconded residences: the current absence*

The homes of the Palestinian exiles are interspersed all through the novel, manifested in their absence. Saeed explains how he used to access the deserted houses of Haifa via their shattered doors and discovered the presence of coffee cups poured, and the house owners. House without having drunk them" (Habibi, 1974, p. 23). This pitiful photograph summarizes the tragedy of the Nakba: life was on a standstill in a moment and time stood still at the door. The house exists in its entirety, with no people in it. The location testifies to the expelled flight and is a testimony to the lost right.

Parallel to that, Habibi gives the homes of dignitaries of Haifa, who gave them to guards until

they come back in a month at most (Habibi, 1974, p. 23). Such homes were later used as exhibition areas of Abbasid and Katamon carpets, which were used as a marker of social status amongst the newcomers. Here place is turned into spoils, memory into oblivion and rights into privileges.

## ***Part II: Open Spaces: Reclaiming Dreams and Betting on the Future***

The spatial structure of the novel by Emile Habibi *Al-Mutasha'il* is extremely complicated and multifaceted. The open spaces of the novel are not only the geographical backgrounds; they are also living creatures, with their history, identity, which are strongly connected with the tragedy and the paradox of Palestinian experience.

The sea is depicted in the novel as the most powerful open space in the text the only space which is impossible to fully occupy. It is the beaches of Tantura, and the al-Zarqa that become the significant spatial places in which sea is turned into a memory deposit. It is here that Baqia conceals the family treasure and embrace that in the final analysis, takes the life of Yaad and her son Walaa in the open ending of the story. Sea is the symbol of the old house which is not yet destroyed and it is the last place of dreams. In the meantime, Haifa and Acre ports are presented as the places of meeting and defeat. During the train ride between Haifa and Acre, Saeed encounters Yaad as they are the two sides of the sea. In this case, the sea is served not as a separator but rather as an agonizing connector.

The open space in *Al-Mutasha'il* looks like a stolen home seen behind a glass window, a place of corpses, ghosts, and the living dead. To Saeed, there is no pure and entirely safe place: his home is deserted or reclaimed, his street is Arab-Hebrew and his city, Haifa, first seems to him as the city of Israel.

The confined spaces within the novel are compensated by other areas that look open, at least they seem open. Such spaces are not always the liberated spaces in reality, although in the Palestinian collective consciousness they portray the prospective spaces of salvation. The Palestinian view of space is founded on a deriving back, and the other on an establishing.

### ***Haifa: The Dual Holy City***

Haifa is a central place in the novel but is a dual city at the same time. It has Haifa on the slopes of Mount Carmel, the city of childhood and first love (Yaad), school, Wadi al-Nisnas, and Jabal Street. Next to it is another Haifa which is mentioned by the soldier that escorts Saeed as the city of Israel (Habibi, 1974, p. 22).

This remark makes Saeed feel that his chest is tightening and he questions why he feels tight when they wanted peace to be there (Habibi, 1974, p. 22).

This duality creates a space awareness that is fragmented. Saeed resides in Haifa, but he is not a true owner of it. He sees it on the sea, on the rock of the lighthouse in Acre and talks about it in the following way: The burning Haifa has become two Haifas: Haifa bent over Carmel, and Haifa immersed in the sea, deprived of earrings, necklaces and rings (Habibi, 1974, p. 33).

The Haifa stripped is the Haifa which was created following the Nakba, when people who inhabited it were stripped. However, Saeed still is connected with the city; he keeps on dreaming about it and keeps on writing letters to it in the Diamis of Acre.

The most obvious instance of a conflict between my place and the place of the other is in Haifa. It is the city of childhood and upbringing in the consciousness of Emile Habibi and Saeed Abi al-Nahs, the location where the Palestinian consciousness of the modern city is established. A significant spatial emphasis is thus made to the city of Haifa since it is the place of birth and where the writer resided (Roshnakfar et al., 1998, p. 5).

In this case, the space changes into the place of other people. Haifa which was a natural atmosphere that people could recollect their childhood- its flowers, the sea, and the Arab streets, now turned into a structure of Israeli traffic laws, policemen, and Israeli military governor offices. Although the city is still an emotional property of the narrator, it is not his legal or political property anymore. This split reflects that of Saeed: a native son and a subordinate worker in the state machine, existing in an ambiguous state of loyalty, and alternating between his position as a servant of the state and his desire to be with the family (Shukri et al., 2018, pp. 12-20).

The sense of belongingness of Haifa is also highlighted where Saeed employs the possessive pronoun and calls the place as his city Haifa (Habibi, 1974, p. 56). This grammatical use has a very emotional overture as it makes the city more than a geographical place, it is a dear thing. Just as a lover says the name of his/her beloved with a longing, so does the narrator refer to his city with longing and attachment (Roshankfar et al., 1998, p. 6).

One of the turning points in depicting this change is when Saeed comes back to Haifa. He remembers driving with two Israelis in a car: until we missed my city Haifa at the time of joy. I never avoided the anemones since I was sure that the childhood memories had no place on this seat that could not fit the three of us (Habibi, 1974, p. 56). This sentence comprises 3 sets

of meaning: the main one is when the narrator says that it was my city of Haifa, and he claims his ownership; the next is the allusion to childhood, innocence, natural beauty, the anemones; and the third is the physical and social exclusion signified by the fact that the seat could not hold the three of us.

The space conflict in this scene is used symbolically as a sign to political dominance: the few seats occupy the few, and the two Israelis sitting on both sides symbolize the new power which occupies the center and thus the Palestinian has to be on the periphery, being uncovered and marginalized (Roshfek et al., 1998, p. 7). The order of the driver, who says that everyone should remain in their position (Habibi, 1974, p. 56), obtains a political accent, to which a Palestinian is pushed to the fringes even in his own city.

### ***Nazareth: And the Place of Other and My Place***

Nazareth symbolizes a crossroads between my place and the place of other people. It is a place of origin and belonging to Palestinians as is the case of other Arab cities, but real control planning, policing, and administration are not in their control (Roshfeker et al., 1998, p. 228). Nazareth in Al-Muta'ashil is not a region within a geographical setting, but a symbolic stage where the dialectic of personal versus forced space is acted out. It represents Palestinian identity and the reidentification of Israeli authority that results in it being a conflict over memory, identity, and belonging.

Habibi emphasises this two-sidedness as she narrates the 1967 surrender of arms in the remaining Arab cities, such as Nazareth. Saeed describes that the army asked people to turn in weapons, and the mayor responded, in a humorous way, as the novel is written with a satirical tone, that Nazareth only had the shish kebab tables where people used to sit after the curfew (Habibi, 1974, pp. 72-73; Shukri et al., 2018, pp. 4041). With these lines, Habibi criticizes a shallow attitude that replaces leisure with resistance in a besieged city, the symptom of what he terms as a crisis of Arab consciousness (Nabulsi, 1992, pp. 93-77; Al-Asht, 2008, pp. 75-80).

However, this criticism is also aware of the constraints that circumstance plays: play can be a medium of coping within a closed space that has political restrictions. Nazareth is thus complicit and victimized, the symbol of stagnation of besieged cities of Arab countries.

### ***Nazareth to me: A Capital of memory and Refuge***

To Saeed and other Palestinian persons who are left in Israel, Nazareth gains cultural and national

weight following the Nakba, and it gives shelter to the internally displaced. The family of Yaad, as an illustration, moves to Nazareth instead of out of Palestine which is the case of thousands of Palestinians who became refugees in Palestine. In this case, Nazareth is used as another destination and as a symbol of strength.

The underground resistance is also a cradle in the city. It is the foundation of young communists and where the father of Yaad is kidnapped. Nazareth is not merely a city but a storehouse of collective memory, the oppressed, the workers and the hungry, and having the identity of Haifa and Acre stretched all the way up into the Galilee.

### ***Nazareth in the Eyes of others: A Space which is controlled***

The point of view of Israeli authorities, who are personified by characters like the big man, Yaakov, and the military governor, is that Nazareth is a place to be punished. Its ongoing presence of Arabs is seen as an anomaly, which puts it under surveillance, searches and limitation of the law. Movement in the city and outside the city like Haifa is a controlled and punishable undertaking.

This relationship is demonstrated as Israeli soldiers go through houses to identify people who may have gotten inside their houses, and one of them is Yaad. Saeed narrates: Yaad, a girl, had arrived unauthorisedly to Haifa, thus, she was an infiltrator. At any given time, they were intruding into homes going through their doors in search of these intruders (Habibi, 1974, p. 74). Nazareth is a part of the state which is reflected in the legal provisions of the state, but the freedom of movement of its residents is provided with the condition of the state permission. Although it is not physically confined, the city is surrounded by a legal-security structure that changes the normal movement into possible transgression (Shukri et al., 2018, pp. 18-20).

Nazareth, thus, turns into a city of false familiarity: Palestinians are not allowed to move around and act in their own city, and their movements and activity are under surveillance all the time. They will be subject to potential security threats even when they commit minor violations, which include a road mishap (Habibi, 1974, pp. 156-157).

### ***Acre: The Resilient City***

Acre compares with Haifa in a number of aspects. It is a primeval city, the walls standing, the Mosque of the Butcher above it, and the dungeons underneath it running. Traditionally, it resisted the

Crusaders more than any other city, it fended off Napoleon and was never penetrated by the Tatars (Habibi, 1974, p. 8). It is also the city of ghosts, as it harbours those who are kicked out of its mosques during the night.

Acre is both a city of the past and the present. It is the first time that Saeed encounters the Sheikh of the Aliens where he goes fishing with friends and writes letters. It is like a protector of identity, whereas Haifa is an open theater of war. Nevertheless, tragedy is not lacking in Acre. Saeed is hearing the names of lost villages in its square; Al-Burwa, Amqa, Al-Damun, Al-Kabri, Mi'ar, and so on (Habibi, 1974, pp. 10-11).

***Acre welcomes exiles only to expel them, yet remains a witness to their existence. Its historical and cultural weight is emphasized in the novel when Habibi recounts:***

“They had indeed destroyed the villages mentioned by the people and displaced their inhabitants, but, my son, sing in their hearts for the mercy that our ancestors did not receive from the invaders who preceded them. Take Acre, for example. When the Crusaders conquered it in 1104, after a three-week siege, they slaughtered its people and plundered their wealth. It remained in their hands for 83 years until Saladin liberated it after the Battle of Hattin... Then the Crusaders returned and besieged Acre for two full years, from August 1189 to July 1191, forcing its people to surrender on harsh terms. When they were unable to fulfill them, their king, Richard the Lionheart, ordered the slaughter of 2,600 hostages, and Acre remained in their hands for a whole century, until the Mamluk commander Qalawun liberated it in 1291” (Habibi, 1974, p. 11).

This text in the novel *Al-Muta-ashil* is a fine illustration of the dialectic of place in the Palestinian literature in general and especially in the novel of Habibi. There we become aware of the soul of *mutaashil*, of seeing tragedy with the eyes of calamity, laughing at it with the eyes of sarcasm, and waiting in spite of knowing that the clouds might pass and the sun not shine.

This can be seen in the text (*My Place*) of Palestinians as a memory and emotional home. We discover that the burned villages (Al-Barawa, Al-Zib, Amqa, etc.) are not merely geographical places, but biographical places imprinted in the collective consciousness; the name of the village (e.g., Um al-Barwa) turns the place into a family and existential identity.

In this case, (*my place*) seems to be a place of doom and refugees, the place here is disintegrated: its inhabitants are dispersed, and their ghosts gather

in the court of the Butcher Mosque; the place is irrigated by blood, however, Palestinian blood in the novel is translated as the blood of victims, not of heroes (as the Crusader narrative).

The deconstruction of colonial discourse is what Habibi is doing here: he is comparing it to the discourse of past invaders, using negation and irony: We find that it is tragic irony that the phrase there is compassion in their hearts that our ancestors did not receive is the discourse: this compassion does not resemble displacement and the burning of towns, but instead reworks colonialism in the terms of humanitarianism.

***Tel Aviv as the land of utter otherness***

As the representative of the modern form of the Zionist project, Tel Aviv is mentioned in numerous Palestinian books: towers, infrastructure, urban planning, and well-organized beaches (Al-Saleh, 2004, pp. 90-95). Nevertheless, Habibi does not refer to these aspects directly, he puts them aside and concentrates on the political soul of the city: the center of power and decision-making. Therefore, when we speak of Tel Aviv in *Al-Mashail* we are indirectly speaking of a ministry, a military base or an intelligence post, not a quarter, or a market.

Generally, in his work, Habibi itself recycles the content of the official Israeli discourse concerning its cities: modernity, democracy, advanced urbanism, to explore in some detail the reality of the paradox that is a modern city that is operated with a traditional colonial mentality (Hafez, 1996, pp. 115-118). The city of Tel Aviv, which strives its best to become a prototype of a Western city in the East, is founded on a definite discriminatory order: the same traffic and construction codes apply to the movement of the Arabs in the space as well: they are subject to being inspected constantly, as is the case with Saeed.

In this respect, one can say that Tel Aviv in the narrative imagination of the other is the moment of the completion of the place to the others: the city which the other created to himself and then permitted the self to move through it as a human resource (as a worker, an employee, an investigator), and not as a collaborator in the creation of the city. This arises as Darraj does of Palestinians in Israel as second-class citizens who reside in a state that claims to be egalitarian yet its practices leave them out of the decision-making centers (Darraj, 1999, pp. 210-220).

***To Saeed place is not an abstract geography, but a body, a memory and a language:***

So here we have Haifa: it is my favorite city, the childhood recollection, Wadi al-Nisais and Jabal

Street. It is the place, whose name the guard renamed to the City of Israel, the name that makes Saeed tighten his chest; We find out that Acre is the nesting place of memory (the Mosque of the Butcher, the lighthouse), the place where he encounters the aliens and Yaad; and Tantura and the Blue Bridge: the grave of his beloved Baqiya and her hidden treasure, the symbol of the stolen land.

The location here is a found female body which is retrieved through digging in the sea and searching of the golden fish.

But Tel Aviv is the very personification of the location of the other, which in the novel is seen indirectly, fragmented, and satirical. It is something Saeed visits (he usually is not even allowed to do so) but a picture that reaches him; it is the factory that produces decisions and sausages in the sarcastic meaning of the destruction of the Arab village donkeys in the Tel Aviv meat factories (Habibi, 1974, p. 23).

Tel Aviv is historical nothingness. Unlike the sheikh and his discourse of the sanctity of Haifa with the blood of its martyrs over the ages, Tel Aviv does not exist as a historical space. The new city is the one to be opposed to the historical richness of Haifa and Acre.

Tel Aviv is also the best alternative: when Saeed and the old man are talking on their way to Shatta prison, the Palestinian, proclaimed as Mujtahid, Marj Ibn Amer, is turned into the Israeli, Emek Yizrael. Saeed tells the old man: "The greenery on your right and the left, look... We are the dead." In this case, Tel Aviv will be the point of view that Galilee will be viewed. It is the eye that makes our land look like it is green because it has robbed us of our water and our labor and it makes our mountains of the West Bank look like they are bare.

The city of Tel Aviv is reflected in the mirror of the Eastern imagination in the very heart of the novel which is the very heart of the table of Saeed. He does not view Tel Aviv as Israel, but rather by the cynicism of the pessimist:

We are the Sephardim, says Saeed in wonder: Is not the bastard Shlomo in the finest hotels of Tel Aviv Solomon, son of Munira, son of our neighbourhood? (Habibi, 1974, p. 47). In this case, Tel Aviv is a mutated offshoot of the Arab body, which has attempted to cut off its connection with its origin.

- The folklore theft: The daughter is shocked (once again) with the fact that the Jews understand Arab folklore (foul and hummus) in Tel Aviv, and Saeed answers her: But they belong to Arab countries and nothing has changed about them, including their insults (Habibi, 1974, p. 75).

The major distinction between these cities is:

- My place (Haifa/Acre): through the body, feet, exile, and return.
- The location of others (Tel Aviv): felt like an image, a press release and a broadcast.

Tel Aviv is a place of fear to Saeed, based on his personal experience, but not a geographical space. As a matter of fact, employment in the institutions of the state also guarantees him a salary and a certain degree of stability, but he is always threatened with a collapse at the center of it: investigation, termination, arrest. Since its inception, Saeed identified as a lackey who profoundly knew his lowly status and his place at the bottom of the hierarchical structure of power (Shukri et al., 2018, pp. 2022; Habibi, 1974, p. 13). This consciousness of marginality followed him everywhere, and was heightened in such places as Tel Aviv, where the state was concentrated in its stiffest forms.

It is due to this reason that Tel Aviv, himself, in his mind comes under the realm of a foreign place not simply as a foreign city, but as a place where human expression and behavior is squandered. Saeed has room to play his sarcasm in Haifa or Nazareth, and hide his loyalty and his two-sided nature in Tel Aviv; there the room is considerably smaller. In this case the gap between the authorities and their representatives is narrowed and so the maneuver space of the protagonists is diminished (Darraj, 1999, pp. 220-223).

Tel Aviv in the novel is not observed, but other parts of the country are observed through it. It is the ship that dies which memories will be retained and which ones will be forgotten, which vegetation is civilization and which one is border trespassing.

### *The sea: a freedom, mystery space*

The sea is represented as the place of openness of unsurpassed brilliance in contrast to the closed and suffocating spaces that overcrowded the lives of Saeed and his friends. Sea is the reverse of closed and inevitable space: when in the novel the suffocating spaces remind the reality of Palestinians after Nakba: the dungeons (the cellars of Acre), prisons ( Shata prison ) and even sorrowful memories. However, in comparison to these closed spaces, the sea is a space of freedom and openness: Saeed refers to the sea: Once, the sea was the refuge of so many troubled souls, including mine, trying to find relief in it and thus gaining comfort (Habibi, 1974, p. 33).

The sea signifies the infinite and the mysterious: it is linked to revelation and odd experiences, most the most memorable of which is when Saeed encounters the Sheikh of the Aliens in the Acre lighthouse taking

him on a tour of the city of Diamis and then back to his starting point.

The sea is not merely a physical place, but a place where Saeed fantasizes of being free. This is reflected in the dream of coming back: Baqia is waiting to get back to the beach of Tantura to pick up the jewelry box in the underwater cave. The sea turns into a warehouse of memory about the lost family and hope of its re-building (Habibi, 1974, p. 42).

The sea is another symbol of escape to reality: Saeed goes fishing in the beach of Tantoura to forget his problems and dream about the golden fish of his dreams.

The sea in Al-Mutaishil is the only open area that can provide Saeed with the temporary feeling of freedom and vastness. It is a place of memory, hope, and silent opposition yet it is also a place of loss and mystery. Ultimately, the sea is the horizon that the eye in the sky looks to, and the soul within the ululations looks to, assuring a coming back which in fact never occurs, or a coming back which comes in the shape of passing clouds and the sound of ululations upon the ground.

In one of the most eloquent scenes, Saeed and his alien friend are on a rock in the sea of Acre, gazing at Haifa shinning at night. Saeed says: See how great the sea, now calm, how stronger it is. The powerful that is peace-loving is stronger. And the gentle sea is the powerful that is peaceful. How can one count the troubled souls like myself who have resorted to the sea to extract this peace out of it (Habibi, 1974, p. 33)?

The sea is an endless area, which unites Acre with Haifa, Jaffa with Lebanon, and the past with the present. The Green Line is not noticed by the sea. The sea is a place where no-one can go wrong. When the Jewish child makes inquiries in relation to fish and what language they speak, Saeed answers: They speak Hebrew, Arabic and every language. The oceans are wide and inter-linked. There are no limits on their boundaries, and they can house any fish (Habibi, 1974, p. 57). The sea is the Utopia Saeed fantasizes about the location where the other fades into the self.

### *Corrected and Polished Version*

#### *The Abandoned Village: Presence through Absence*

Habibi's genius is evident in his portrayal of abandoned villages as spaces that remain powerfully present despite their ruin. Tantura, the coastal village abandoned in 1948, lives on in the consciousness of Baqia, who hides the secret of a golden chest in a cave beneath the sea. Jisr al-Zarqa, a village that survived against all odds, stands firm thanks to its isolation

and the resilience of its inhabitants. Al-Salkah, the unknown village that once sheltered Saeed and Yaad, disappears from maps but remains alive in the narrative.

In the novel, abandoned villages are not merely memories; they are projections of the future. Baqia dreams of returning to Tantura to retrieve the jewelry box. Abu Mahmoud imagines his family working on their land, now transformed into kibbutzim. The blind sheikh secretly returns to his village and lives there for twenty years. While the abandoned place for others is property, for Palestinians it represents hope.

Muhammad Hassan Abdullah notes that, in Arabic fiction, the village symbolizes origin, homeland, and a close relationship with nature (Abdullah, 1998, pp. 50-55). In Al-Muta'ashil, this symbolism is emphasized through the specific naming of villages such as Tantura, Kafr Yasef, Shatta, and others, each becoming "a mark of a specific spatial wound" rather than a generic location (Habibi, 1974, pp. 21).

For instance, in the story "Baqia," the protagonist tells Saeed of her desire to return to "the ruins of her village, Tantura" (Habibi, 1974, pp. 113-114). The term "ruins" here is deliberate: while the village no longer exists as a living entity, its traces—walls, damaged houses, caves—persist, and its name lingers in memory. As Roshnaker et al. note, this places a dual burden on the village: the weight of loss and the persistence of its memory and discourse (Roshnaker et al., 1998, pp. 9-11).

In this sense, the village embodies the pinnacle of place from a Palestinian perspective: it is a birthplace, the site of ancestral graves, and the land of forefathers. Yet, in reality, it has been transformed into confiscated land, a military zone, or a settlement. The place has been forcibly reshaped for others through the displacement of its inhabitants, occasional renaming, and the redefinition of land use. Here, spatial reading intersects with the "displaced self" (Shukri et al., 2018, pp. 30-38): the self that has lost its first home becomes a resident of a city, a camp, or ruins serving as a surrogate for the original village.

The story of Tantura highlights Baqia, who asks Saeed to retrieve an iron box from a cave on the village beach containing gold that "will make them rich" (Habibi, 1974, pp. 113-114). The gold symbolizes inherited wealth, yet it is hidden in a ruined place beneath the sea. Shukri et al. explain that Baqia's focus is not on material gain but on ensuring her children are "not constrained," unlike previous generations who labored under limitations

(Shukri et al., 2018, pp. 26–27). Tantura is thus more than a treasure site; it is a site for imagining the future. Returning to her village signifies not merely a return to stones, but to a place that can be rebuilt. In contrast, Saeed's life in the Israeli city is described as "donkey dung" (Habibi, 1974, p. 16), emphasizing the symbolic and generational power of the village as a site of resistance.

### *Deep Space: The Metaphor of Salvation*

One of Habibi's most imaginative elements in the novel is the depiction of the "extraterrestrial brothers," cosmic figures who encounter Saeed in Diamis, Acre. These beings are not merely science fiction; they function as a philosophical metaphor for salvation beyond historical constraints. When Palestinians cannot alter their reality using available means, they dream of external rescue.

Habibi, however, infuses irony into this metaphor. When Saeed asks the alien elder for salvation, the response is: "That is your business. When you cannot bear the burden of your miserable reality and cannot pay the necessary price to change it, you turn to me" (Habibi, 1974, p. 82). Deep space is not a replacement for earthly space; it mirrors humanity's inability to confront its own circumstances. True salvation emerges from the ground: from the earth, the villages, and the resilience of ordinary people.

### *The Street: Space for Protest and Resistance*

In contrast to enclosed spaces, the street emerges as a realm for collective resistance. The young man carrying the newspaper at the end of the novel, wielding his axe, proclaims: "Those who do not want to sit on it should come down to the street with us. There is no third option, so choose" (Habibi, 1974, p. 81). The street becomes a space of agency, where individuals connect with the community without requiring formal permission.

This call is complemented by the alien sheikh's message. Between the space of celestial salvation and the domain of earthly resistance, Saeed stands uncertain. Yet, the image of the people below—Jacob climbing down from his stake, women ululating, workers engaged in daily tasks, and the young man

wielding an axe—suggests that choices are being enacted. The street is the open space awaiting those who descend upon it.

### *Place and Body: The Conflict Between Settlement and Counter-Settlement*

The novel presents a dialectical relationship between body and place. The occupier imposes control over the land by subjugating the Palestinian body, rendering it fragile and threatened. Palestinians reclaim their space by reclaiming their bodies, consciousness, and memory. Scenes illustrating this duality include Saeed's fear of the union card verifying his property (Habibi, 1974, p. 45), Palestinians searching for their former homes across open bridges (Habibi, 1974, pp. 44–45), and fedayeen attacks beyond borders (Habibi, 1974, p. 50).

Counter-settlement manifests not through weapons but through steadfast presence. The blind sheikh remains hidden in his village for twenty years. The residents of Jisr al-Zarqa refuse to abandon their homes. The Arab laborers contributing to the construction of Israel continue to chant the name of Palestine. Collectively, they practice a counter-settlement of existence, asserting their presence and memory against displacement.

## CONCLUSION

The novel *Al-Muta'ashil* does not offer a definitive solution to the dialectic of my place and the place of the other. Habibi's genius lies in the fact that he did not offer us an alternative homeland, but rather made writing itself a homeland. My place is not necessarily a land I can reclaim, but it can be a story I tell, or a letter I write from Diamis Aka, or a fish that speaks all languages. The other's place is a closed kingdom; my place is an open dream.

Thus, the dialectic of place in the novel shifts from a conflict over borders to a conflict over meaning. The other monopolizes the land; I monopolize the story. The other builds wall; I dig Diamis. The other raises his flags on the roofs of my beauty; I raise the story as a banner that his eyes cannot see. The other owns the maps; I own the memory. In the end, the story remains the only place whose people are not displaced.

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