

After the Last Sky: Transnationalism and its Discontents

Shalini. M.

Abstract

The paper attempts to look at transnationalism critically in light of the propositions put forward by critics like Gayathri Spivak, Pascale Casanova and some other contemporary comparatists who have brought our attention to the politics of border crossing. While drawing for its theoretical frame from the above-mentioned critics, the paper attempts to analyse two novels by the Palestinian writer Susan Abulhawa to elaborate on this. Transnationalism, as a manifestation of globalization, too should be understood as multiple, complex and to an extent disordered. The paper is interested to look at how transnational practices are enabled, limited and coloured by all kinds of disparities in power and resources.

Keywords: Border-Crossing; Palestinian Novel; Transnationalism.

Where should we go after the last frontiers?
Where should the birds fly after the last sky ?
Where should the plants sleep after the last breath of air ?
We will write our names with scarlet steam.
We will cut off the hand of the song to be finished by our flesh.
We will die here, here in the last passage.
Here and here our blood will plant its olive tree. (Godrej 56)

Taken the first part of its title from a poem by Mahmoud Darwish, the Palestinian poet, the paper attempts to look at the phenomenon “transnationalism” critically by asking questions like who has the privilege to be a transnational?, who can cross borders? and whose nation is it anyway? Transnationalism is a celebrated interdisciplinary field which crosses over the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, geography, political science, law, economics and history, as well as interdisciplinary fields such as international relations, development studies, business studies, ethnic and racial studies, gender studies, religious studies, media and cultural stud-

ies and migration and diaspora studies to comparative literary studies to many others. Transnationalism nowadays is understood as a product or by-product of globalization. It suggests the fraternity over many countries, free movement between them while sugar coating the harsher aspects of the conflicts and competitions between different countries. It also conceptually blurs the hierarchies between countries to different worlds as east and west, privileged and unprivileged, rich and poor, under siege or war. Transnationalism along with similar worlds like cosmopolitanism that have emerged in the post globalised world attempt to smooth over the differences that create unequal power and denial of access to amenities what we term as basic human rights.

The paper attempts to read two Palestinian novels in order to discuss how literary works critique and problematize the high ideals of transnationalism. The paper considers critical engagements with this phenomenon as part of Comparative Literary Studies/ Comparative Literature, a field which has been looking at the politics and global implications of terminologies of this kind. Comparative Literature, a Eurocentric approach like most modern disciplines, has undergone several reformations and rebirths. The intention of this paper is not to define or idealise this concept but rather to de-romanticise it and cautiously point at the dangers of idealising it. The paper draws its theoretical frames from the ideas put forward by critics like Gayathri Spivak, Edward Said, Franco Moretti, Pascale Casanova and a few other contemporary comparatists who have brought our attention to the politics of border crossing and to the role of national literature. The paper attempts to take a closer look at the two novels titled *Mornings in Jenin* (2006) and *The Blue between the Sky and the Water* (2015) written by the Palestinian writer Susan Abulhawa, through a theoretical frame borrowed from the above mentioned critics.

Transnationalism is generally understood as sustained cross-border relationships, patterns of exchange, affiliations and social formations spanning nation-states. In that sense transnationalism is in several ways connected to globalisation and is also facilitated by improved transportation, technology, telecommunications etc. Greater transnational connections between social groups signify an important index of globalization. (Vertovec 2) Over a period of time, we have learnt to view globalization critically and cautiously, considering the various ways in which the global capital, cultural capital and western hegemonic values play in the process. Therefore, as many critics of globalisation contend "globalization itself has not produced a smooth, borderless, integrated global order." (Vertovec 2) James Rosenau in his work *Distant Proximities: Dynamics beyond Globalization* (2003) opines that globalization is not essentially economic

or political or sociocultural or environmental, rather as all of these, taking the form of multiple, complex, messy proximities and interconnections. In that sense, we should understand transnationalism as a manifestation of globalization, too is multiple, complex and to an extent messy. As a result, it is not free from the clutches of capitalism, the new forms of the empire, market and so on, contrary to the assumption which places transnationalism in an idealised platform and comprehend it as something that does not possess the evils of globalization. The paper is interested to look at how transnational practices are enabled, limited and coloured by all kinds of disparities in power and resources. Just as transnationalism is a manifestation of globalization, its constituent processes and outcomes are multiple and messy too.

Transnationalism is definitely a neighbouring field for an interdisciplinary field like Comparative Literature as many key concepts in the field like World Literature and Cosmopolitanism etc are close to the conceptual terrains of Comparative Literature. Pascale Casanova argues in her work *Literature, Nation and Politics* (1999) that world literature, rather than being a kind of timeless entity where great works from different cultures coexist in harmony, is a field of endless struggle for centrality or domination. Writers from peripheral regions negotiate the unequal power relations between their national traditions and powerful metropolitan centres. (Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature, 329) Any kind of global border crossing in that sense has to be cautious about moving beyond mere assimilation to Western norms on the one hand and a defensive localism on the other. It is interesting to note who faces difficulty in crossing borders. One set of people cross borders legally while the majority attempts to cross borders through visiting visas, boats, by walk.

Gayatri Spivak, in her book *The Death of a Discipline* (2003) addresses how the differences are accounted in border crossing. She writes:

I have remarked above that borders are easily crossed from metropolitan countries, whereas attempts to enter from the so-called peripheral countries encounter bureaucratic and policed frontiers, altogether more difficult to penetrate. In spite of the fact that the effects of globalization can be felt all over the world, that there are satellite dishes in Nepalese villages, the opposite is never true. The everyday cultural detail, condition and effect of sedimented cultural idiom, does not come up into satellite country. (Spivak 16)

Franco Moretti, another comparatist, also alerts us against getting com-

fortable and cozy with terms like World literature. While revisiting Goethe's concept of Weltliteratur, she contends that contemporary literature in terms of a world system that is "one, but unequal." (Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature, XV).

From these, the paper would like to put forward the argument that the present transnational approach privileges the nation, instead of moving beyond it as the term self-proclaims. Who has the privilege to own and disown nation? Whose nation is it anyway? Who can afford to have a nation? And who does not? – The two Palestinian novels are read in light of these questions to see if a Palestinian can afford to be a transnational where he/she doesn't have a nation and is not permitted to move freely even within their place of residence. The two novels written by Susan Abulhawa—*Mornings in Jenin* and *The Blue between the Sky and the Water* open before us a group of people who have lost the taste of independence and freedom on account of the dream of another's nation. All these narratives shuffle between myth and reality, past and present, and memory and history. Here we see that a nation's presence is preserved through the memories of people while there is a strong institutional and state power which is adamant to remove it from history. A place gets slowly wiped away and it appears with new names on the map, the map being the tool of the powerful. The visual and documentary erasure of a geographical place and its culture through official maps is resisted through tales of compassion and humour, pain and pleasure, death and birth. Here, memory becomes a mode of resistance, a tool to dismantle the institutionalised and biased history.

Mornings in Jenin was originally published with the title *The Scar of David*. It is interesting to note that *Mornings in Jenin* is one of the first mainstream novels in English to explore life in Palestine through 1948 Nakba or cataclysm. The novel tells the story of four generations of the Abulheja family through upheaval and violence in their tranquil village of olive farmers called Ein Hod from 1948 when Israel declares statehood. The novel reads less like a fiction at times as it unceremoniously documents one of the most obdurate political sieges of 20th century. Without much narrative techniques of flashback and foreshadowing, the novel narrates the story of Palestine through the multigenerational story of the Abulheja family. The story opens in a pastoral setting where an entire village of olive farmers gets ready for harvest. Yehya and Basima and their two sons are all set for the harvest. The elder son Hasan is married to Dalia and he has two sons. Amidst the celebrations the first Zionist invasion takes place. The villagers, not strangers to different kinds of colonizations, only wanted to cling on to their land.

“In May 1948, the British left Palestine and Jewish refugees who had been pouring in proclaimed themselves a Jewish state, changing the name of the land from Palestine to Israel. But Ein Hod was adjacent to three villages that formed an unconquered triangle inside the new state, so the fate of Ein Hod’s people was joined with that of some twenty thousand other Palestinians who still clung to their homes. They repulsed attacks and called for a truce, wanting only to live on their land as they always had. For they had endured many masters—Romans, Byzantines, Crusaders, Ottomans, British—and nationalism was inconsequential. Attachment to God, land and family was the core of their being and that is what they defended and sought to keep” (*Mornings in Jenin* 27)

The villagers attempt to reach a truce and decided to prepare a friendly feast as a gesture of friendship to the Jews. However after the feast, Israel broke the truce and started bombing the villages. The people of the village who have been living there for generations are forced to move to a refugee camp in Jenin. In this chaotic shifting, an Israeli soldier named Moshe snatches baby Ismael from the arms of the young mother Dalia Abulheja. The soldier takes the Palestinian child home to his childless wife Jolanta, a Polish Holocaust survivor. Here, baby Ismael grows up as David, an Israeli who will unwittingly hate and fight his own people. The novel documents this contradiction of life as the victim becomes the victimiser as follows:

As the people of Ein Hod were marched into dispossession, Moshe and his comrades guarded and looted the newly emptied village. While Dalia lay heartbroken, delirious with the loss of Ismael, Jolanta rocked David to sleep. While Hasan tended to his family’s survival, Moshe sang in drunken revelry with his fellow soldiers. And while Yehya and others moved in anguished steps away from their land, the usurpers sang “Hatikva” and shouted “Long live Israel!” (*Mornings in Jenin*, 39)

The novel is told through the eyes of the younger daughter of Abulheja family, Amal. Although she is the granddaughter of the old village patriarch, she was born in the refugee camp. She lives through losses from the beginning. She loses her loving father who read Arabic verses to her in the camp and her mother who lost her mind in different wars, while she continues to live in different refugee camps. Later, she is shifted to an orphanage and then she goes to the US on a scholarship. After many years, she comes back to Lebanon to meet her brother Yousef. She finds her brother living happily with his wife and kids. She meets her brother’s

friend and falls in love with him to get married to him soon. But in Lebanese war she loses everyone except her brother who by then had moved to extremist positions. Amal leaves for the US again to raise her new born daughter. This is when she is visited by an Israeli named David, her lost brother who lived his life as an Israeli. The novel ends when she goes back to her homeland with her daughter where the everyday life is marked with refugee camps, poverty, restriction, and the fear of soldiers, guns, checkpoints and beatings.!

Two threads in this novel are of importance in the analysis as it symbolically represent the predicament of Palestine and Israel. One: Her first brother Yousef, the Palestinian one who turns into a terrorist and gets involved in terrorist activities after his wife and children were brutally murdered in the Lebanese war. The novel portrays the transformation of a compassionate, sober, loving man to an extremist position which is in a way a closer look at terrorism and extremism itself. This in a way could also facilitate a justification on behalf of Israel, how the holocaust victims turned to victimisers. In another subplot, Moshe, the soldier who stole Ismael from his Palestinian parents and committed many crimes against Palestinians, while confessing in his last moments to Ismael/David says: "Mercy was a luxury we could not afford" (277). An adjoining parallel plot is also important as the novel talks about a friendship between Hasan and Ari Perlstein, "the son of a German professor who had fled Nazism early and settled in Jerusalem" (8) as boys before Israel declares statehood. With Ari's father reminding us of Erich Auerbach, Theodor W Adorno and all those Jewish scholars who fled Nazi Germany, the novel talks about this steady and compassionate friendship between the two boys, despite the changing fortunes. "Thus a friendship had been born in the shadow of Nazism in Europe and in the growing divide between Arab and Jew at home, and it had been consolidated in the innocence of their twelve years, the poetic solitude of books, and their disinterest in politics." (9) And years later Hasan reminisces about their friendship to his little daughter Amal saying "He was like a brother."

The second and the most important thread is the predicaments of the two brothers who get estranged- Yousef, the one remained to be brought up as a Palestinian while the other named Ismael gets stolen to be brought up as an Israeli. Here, we get to see the conflictual yet inseparable, bonded from within fraternal relationship which is symbolic of the relationship between Palestine and Israel. The beginning of the novel talks about an accident the baby Ismael meets with which leaves him scarred for his life. It is actually his older brother Yousef who gives Ismael this scar although it was an accident that the baby fell from the four-year-old

Yousef's hands. It is this scar that makes Yousef identify his brother years later. The author, after narrating the accident makes an ominous remark which points to the future: "The physical remnant of that day was a distinctive scar that would mark Ismael's face forever, and eventually lead him to his truth" (22). Years later as while Yousef as a young Palestinian could not move freely and was examined and intimidated by Israeli soldiers at every check point, his brother Ismael/David joins the army like his foster father. Abulhawa vividly narrates the episode when David gets to see his Palestinian brother for the first time when Yousef is captured by David's fellow soldiers. As the superior tells him to come and take a look at a Palestinian who looked like his twin, David knew that he was going to have a proof to the secret he did not know and did not want to know. "He did not want to see that Palestinian again. The one who had his face without a scar" (105) As David is taunted for the similarity in their appearance by his fellow soldiers, he gets into a frenzy of violence, where he beats his brother black and blue. "David slapped the Arab. He struck him next with the butt of his rifle. He knew not why, but now he could not stop." (105) The episode highlights the thin line between the victim and the victimiser and the self-hatred that one carries within.

The second novel too dwells on these dual nature of identities and its subsequent conflicts. It is again a multigenerational tale of a family that takes place in Palestine in post Nakba. *The Blue between Sky and Water* (2015) is set in Gaza, which is often described by many as "the largest open air prison in the world" (*The Blue between Sky and Water* ix). Unlike the first novel which focused on history and memory, the second novels attempts to bank on myths, supernatural events and powers with techniques of magical realism. This story of displacement also discusses issues of rape, survival, loss and belongingness. The novel opens in the historical Palestinian village of Beit Daras in 1947 before the Nakba telling the story of Baraka family. The Baraka family is often the subject of ridicule in the village as Um Mamdouh Baraka, a single mother of three is known for her eccentric behaviour. She is possessed by a spirit named Sulayman. She gets the status of a seer and being respected after she predicts the Israeli invasion. Nazmiyeh, the eldest daughter of Um Mamdouh is beautiful but foul-mouthed. The second is Mariam, who is clairvoyant and has mismatched eyes -- one brown and the other green. Mamdouh is the youngest son of Um Mamdouh.

Things go astray as the Baraka family and many others are forced to flee their village by the Zionist militia just after Nazmiyeh is married to Atiyeh. Nazmiyeh goes back to her village in search of her younger sister Mariam with whom she had a deep connection. Some people who see

her go back warn Nazmiyeh against doing so saying the soldiers could harm her suggesting sexual violence. However, Nazmiyeh is determined to go. She finds her little sister, but soon the two sisters are found by two foreign soldiers. The soldiers rape Nazmiyeh. Nazmiyeh is worried about her sister and bears the pain of rape in silence so that her little sister will not be traumatised. Both soldiers who rape her command her to scream but she does not. They slap her violently. One of the soldiers says to the other he knows how to make her scream and he kills Mariam. The soldiers kill Mariam after they realise that Nazmiyeh as a girl who couldn't be destroyed by rape. Her stone-like severity while getting raped offends the soldiers and they kill her baby sister. This throws light onto the fact that although we understand rape as sexual violence, the reasons behind it are as wide ranging as racial and socio-political domination. The novel highlights how rape is more than a sexual violence and in contexts of this kind. It is not the sexual aspect that often leads to rape as most of the studies on rapes during ethnic violence and wars have shown us. She starts screaming and wailing seeing her little sister dead as the soldiers laugh. She gets raped by many more. Nazmiyeh walks back to life, half alive knowing she will never be fully happy again. She goes back to the refugee camps in the southern shores of Gaza.

Of those who take refuge in Gaza, some migrated to the Gulf and America, while some remain in the refugee camp. The first part of the novel takes place in the refugee camps in Gaza focusing on the lives of those who stayed behind especially the matriarch Nazmiyeh. Nazmiyeh, although heart-broken at the loss of her sister, is a strong-willed woman who tries her best to keep her family together. The second part of the novel brings in the character Nur Valdez Nur, a Palestinian from her father's side and Nazmiyeh's grandniece. Nur has been mostly raised in the foster care in the U.S. and has her own share of miseries which leave her mind wounded. She was neglected by her mother while her step father abused her sexually. Her Palestinian connection is mostly established through the time she spent with her paternal grandfather Mamdouh, Nazmiyeh's brother. Nur, except for her time that she spent with her grandfather did not have any connections to Palestine. The author however states an apparent connection that Nur shared with Palestine as follows:

History took us away from our rightful destiny. But with Nur, life hurled her so far that nothing around her resembled anything Palestinian, not even the dislocated lives of the exiles. So it was ironic that her life reflected the most basic truth of what it means to be Palestinian, dispossessed, disinherited and exiled. That to be alone in the world without a family or

a clan or land or country means that one must live at the mercy of others. There are those who might take pity and those who will exploit and harm. One lives by the whims of the host, rarely treated with the dignity of a person, nearly always put in place. (89)

Nur slowly recovers from all these as she comes to Palestine and its refugee camps to be with her people. She feels at home here although she had never been to Palestine before. Nur's cousin Khaled, a 10-year-old boy, is another main character in the novel. We hear his voice before he is born and after his death. Khaled meets with an accident as he, like many other young boys started smuggling day to day provisions and goods through the tunnel between Gaza and Egypt. His prophetic voice functions as a spiritual connection between the happy old Gaza and the present day refugee camps. Khaled was in the imagination of Mariam as she spoke about him to Nazmiyeh although he is Nazmiyeh's grandson. And after his accident, he was physically present but psychologically absent.

Two important moments in the second novel take us to mull over the paradoxes of identities. The first one is an image or a symbol that gets recurred throughout the novel. It is the image of the mismatched eyes. Nazmiyeh's baby sister Mariam had one eye brown and the other green. Mariam gets killed while Nazmiyeh gets raped brutally by the Zionist soldiers. The mismatched eyes of Mariam appears throughout the novel as a reminder of Palestine's past, its history preserved through memory and myths. Decades later, Nur, with the same mismatched eyes, comes from the US to feel at home in the refugee camps. Nur always hid her mismatched eyes by wearing contact lenses when she lived in the US. Nazmiyeh, seeing the mismatched eyes of Nur finally is at peace. She has been waiting for the reassuring presence of Mariam in her life in some form and she gets it as Nur comes back to her life. She says: "I know you have a hand in this Mariam. I know you are here. You never left." (198) It is Nazmiyeh who stands by Nur when Nur falls in love and gets pregnant by a married man. Nazmiyeh is also seen as someone who does not wear hijab and defends her culture which didn't use it. The novel celebrates memory, belongingness and filiations to commemorate a disappearing nation.

The second moment reminds us of the sundered brothers David and Yousef of the first novel *Mornings in Jenin*. Nazmiyeh, who gets conceived after the incidence of rape, decides to give birth to the child with the support of her husband. Nazmiyeh was terrified to see the same grey eyes of one of the soldier who raped her in her first born. She was reluctant to take care of the child. She cried: "This one is the son of the Devil. Is Allah testing me? How can I love this thing? How do I love the son of a

devil?" (44) It was her husband who asked her to feed and take care of the child. They rear the child along with their other children. The community often murmurs this among themselves and the way the first son looks different. However, the child who was conceived after being raped by the Zionist soldiers grows up to be one of the important leaders of anti-Zionist movement in Gaza. These moments call us to rethink the way in which identities are formed and shaped in the contexts of nationalisms.

It is strange that in the case of Palestine, people who haven't migrated to other places too are experiencing exile. Edward Said, the Palestinian critic and thinker writes about Palestine and exile in his "Reflections on Exile" as follows:

Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: it's essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind for ever. (Said 173)

Said, as a close observer, an expatriate sympathiser and compassionate advocate of Palestine, reflects on the way we experience exile in the modern world. Said says that the exchanges between nationalism and exilic states create the notions of insiders and outsiders. Historian Beshara Doumani in his recollections of Palestine talks about a song from World War II Haifa. He is unable to archive this ditty which even dates back to times prior to his own birth. He says he cannot remember his father or anyone singing the song. However, he remembers the song in its bits, sung in a Haifa accent which is wiped out of Palestine. He says: "The ditty is a perfectly pristine memory that is ... well...not so memory-like. It must be a miracle memory: a memory of immaculate birth." (Johnson and Shehadeh, 18) Gayatri Spivak, in her book *The Death of a Discipline* argues for the importance of imagination in cross cultural engagements. It is through these coincident meetings between unaccounted memory and imagination that a place like Palestine exists.

It is probably appropriate to turn back to the works of Erich Auerbach, one of the most memorable Jewish intellectual and comparatist of the 20th century at this juncture. The first chapter of his remarkable work *Mimesis: Representations of Reality in Western Literature* (first published in 1946) titled "The Odysseus's Scar" while comparing representations

of reality in the *Old Testament* and Homeric tradition also discusses the shared traditions of Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Here in the contexts of the Zionist question, Islamophobia and the role of the United States in connection with Palestine, it is curious that we are reminded of the intuitions of this Jewish intellectual. Written during his refugee years in Istanbul from the Nazi Germany, leaving his university position and all his material possessions, Auerbach wrote *Mimesis* from his memory. Abulhawa's books too, through its tales, highlight the important role memory plays when there is an organised attempt from the part of institutionalised history writing to erase the existence of some peoples/cultures. The paper is an attempt to rethink whether transnationalism or similar concepts enable those in the margins to leave behind their marginality and cross borders freely as it claims or does it deepen the discriminations and push them further to the margins and borders.

The covid-19 hit world is probably the best context to critique the high ideals of transnationalism and globalization. The year 2020 locked us in our own homes, making us aware of every single border we have in our everyday life, which we normally wipe away superficially or pretend to ignore. We experience the fear of shortages of provision, we panic-shop and we worry about the weak, the unwell, the kids and the aged. And the only thing that lets us cope with this is the hope that it is soon going to end and we will get back to normal life. Weeks before all these lockdowns and restrictions, we saw world leaders meet to assure cooperation, alliances between countries. Can transnationalism address closed borders, cancelled flight services, restricted entry, and exclusive admission of any kind? But here we are living a Palestinian life, without the expertise they have managed to amass and without the courage they have mustered out of their long years of blockage.

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