



## RESEARCH PAPER

### Identity Affirmation and Cultural Preservation: A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of *I am From Palestine*

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates how identity affirmation and cultural preservation take place in the Award winning animated short film *I Am From Palestine* (2023). In this film, the protagonist, Saamidah, a young Palestinian-American, experiences identity confusion when she realizes that Palestine is absent from her classroom map. She finds her identity in question. In the following scenes, through various modes, she affirmed her identity. Multimodal Discourse analysis and social semiotics theory of meaning-making by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen has been employed to explore how visual, linguistic, aural, and symbolic modes combine to put Palestinian identity in question first and then to restore it, linking it to cultural preservation for diasporic children. Semiotic features are prevalent in the film including symbolic imagery, narrative shifts, cultural motifs and emotional sketching as consistent patterns in the film. Future studies can be done on this movie from political signaling perspective.

**KEYWORDS** Identity Affirmation, Multimodal Discourse Analysis, Palestine, Cultural Preservation

## Introduction

Palestinian Conflict dates back to 1917 when the nation of Great Britain, during World War I, pledged to establish a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine under the Belfour Declaration and adopted a plan for the colonization of Palestine, (Neal, 1995), (Aljazeera). As a result, Yasser Arafat, one of the central figures of the Palestinian national movement, emerged on Palestinian disputed land. He endeavoured for decades for Palestinian liberation and their identity crises and affirmation. He served as the chairman of the Palestinian Liberation Organization from 1969 till 2004. Identity affirmation is rooted in many theories. One among them is the Self-Affirmation theory in the late 1980s was the concept given by Claud M. Steele. This phenomenon of Self-Affirmation helps people maintain their sense of self-integrity when they encounter threats to their self-image. Furthermore, Identity affirmation process concentrates on restoring self-concept through actions and explanations. The ultimate is to preserve identity, (Steele, 1988). This established the ground for the modern understanding of identity affirmation in psychology and beyond. Later on, David K. Sherman and Geoffrey L. Cohen expanded this theory in their work '' *The Psychology of Self-Defence: Self-Affirmation Theory*, (2006). Emile Cove, a French psychologist, is regarded as the father of affirmation as he has done quite great work in this sense. Next, Henry Tajfel and John Turner (1979), social identity theorists, focused on how individuals adopt a sense of self from the group memberships. What is more is that the importance of sense of association to one's group particularly

minority group individuals has been highlighted in their work. In both written and digital literature much has been done on Palestinian Conflict from religious, cultural, political perspective; however, this study investigates identity affirmation in the film *I Am From Palestine* through the lens of multimodal discourse analysis and social semiotics. The study from this perspective has not been explored in earlier works. Multimodal Discourse Analysis is one of the theoretical frameworks which focuses on analysing the multiple modes used in text to explore and deconstruct social realities, power dynamics and so on. Social semiotics is theory by Kress and van Leeuwen which focuses on three meta-functions (meaning-making functions) drawing from the work of Michael Halliday's Systemic Functional linguistics. This work has chosen animation award winning film so animation refers to moving images in video to convey important message to masses. The animated short film, *I Am From Palestine*, is a case in point in which this research is focusing on exploring identity affirmation through multimodal discourse analysis. The film has been directed by Iman Zawahry, written by Rifk Ebeid in 2023.

## Literature Review

Identity Affirmation is the process of affirming one's identity when encounter external threats to one's own self-image of self-integrity. While this process is associated to cultural preservation, Cultural preservation is about protecting the heritage of society. It involves both tangible (physical features) and nontangible (invisible values) heritage for future. It is about protecting the past to inform and enrich the future, (sustainable directory, 2024). Palestinian conflict refers to the conflict with its root sin 19<sup>th</sup> century Belfour declaration which imposes colonisation of Palestine and liberation of Israel. From this point, the conflict adopted its present crucial shape with struggle started by Yasser Arafat to later poets and authors who in their writing mentioned and voiced the liberation for the chained Palestinians. There is plethora of literary work on Palestine conflict. For instance, in Ghassan Kanafani's novella *Men in the Sun* (1962), the author talks about Palestinian plight in the context of 1948 Nakba. In Manor H. Makhoul's non-fiction work *Palestinian citizens in Israel: A History through fiction* (2020), the writer explores Palestinian identity evolution. In Joe Sacco's graphic novel, *Palestine*, the novelist sheds light on the struggles and complexities of life in Gaza. As far as digital narratives are concerned, many movies, documentaries work has been done on Palestinian plight focusing on diverse themes. ARTE's *Gaza-Sderot: life in Spite of everything* (2008), *iNakba* (2014) by Zochrot, *Jerusalem* (2010-2015) by Naaman are examples of documentaries addressing Palestinian people plight from the particular perspective. In all of these digital narratives as well as in the traditional books, the documentary makers and authors have talked about erased history and lived experiences and resistance struggles during Nakba in Palestine. However, digital cinematic narrative analysed through Multimodal discourse analysis for identity affirmation in the animated short film *I Am From Palestine* has not been explored in traditional as well as digital media.

## Material and Methods

This study employs Qualitative Multimodal Discourse Analysis. Multidimensional features of the digital discourse, award winning animated short film *I am From Palestine*, has been analyzed.

This study has employed Social semiotics approach to multimodal discourse analysis, by Gunther Kress and Van Leeuwen, which explore various modes of discourse as socially shaped resources. The social semiotics framework is an appropriate model because film depends heavily on integrated semiotic features rather than word alone. This theoretical lens discusses three metafunctions in any text. The framework includes;

Ideational Function refers to the depiction and representation of surrounding or environment such as how places (classroom, Palestine) are depicted in the film. Interpersonal Function denotes relationship between the text and the reader or viewers and audience like how film portrays the young protagonist Saamidah and the viewer, focusing on emotional states anxiety and power, etc. Textual function include any new knowledge highlighted in the text such as the scene 4 where Saamidah shows the map of her country proudly to her class fellows by declaring her identity as I am Saamidah and I am from Palestine. Further, it focuses on how various modes are integrated to form a coherent and impactful meaning.

The data for this study consisted in film. The film has been directed by Iman Zawahry, written by Rifk Ebeid in 2023 and became popularized in digital world as it received international acclamation for voicing Palestinian identity. Total duration of the short film is five minutes and thirty-five seconds. The film under study is award winning (several awards) animated and short film because animation medium is used to convey multifaceted messages. Among them, few are there to convey crucial social, cultural, religious and political issues of the society through lively images. Particularly this movie has been chosen because of its visual significance and no one has conducted research specially discourse analysis on this film. The film is viewed multiple times and four scenes have been selected based on thematic significance. Each of the scenes is analysed across: Visual mode: colour, character positioning, symbols; Linguistic mode: dialogue, narration, key lexical choices; Aural mode: music, salience, rhythm, tone; Symbolic mode: olive trees,

This study selected sixteen images from four different scenes of the movie ranging from home scene of Saamidah's preparation for American school with her father till joining the school, finding map in class and immersing in reminiscence of Palestinian culture and identity as narrative shift occurs. Theoretical Framework of social semiotics has been employed to see the significance of symbols, dialogues, visuals, aural elements that not only entertain people but deconstruct social realities as well. Furthermore, narrative shift occurs; cultural motifs appears in scenes 1-4 which affirm the identity threatened in second scene of world map in classroom.

## Results and Discussion

Narrative shift occurs from positive, bright, melodious, vibrant environment of the home mirror where dove flies, Saamidah wears Palestinian map necklace and hair band, to school where social semiotics reveal that colours are solid but no sound is there. Her identity is in question when she finds that Palestine is not on map in her classroom. In scene 3, meaning making process through multi modes of colours, al-funoun's music, the beauty of blue waters in Jaffa, the local markets, the clothing, the cuisines, affirm not only her identity but cultural association so she feels contented, pride in that, her father realises her the importance of her country then in scene 4, her self-declared name in front of everybody further affirms her Palestinian identity and thus her culture is preserved through all these cultural motifs, narrative shifts and so on and through all modes. There is proper ideational, interpersonal and textual functions employed in all scenes to see the consistency of patterns supporting identity affirmation, thus is cultural preservation.

This section analyses the film *I Am From Palestine* from the multimodal discourse theoretical lens. The scene one from the film has the colour scheme, sounds, dialogues that are related to cultural association but in scene 2, Saamidah finds her identity in question. All semiotic features support this point including linguistic choices by the teacher, the no-sound background, and the dull colours of the classroom and creation of the sense of threatening of one's identity. In Scene 1, Saamidah, a Palestinian-American

girl, entered into school along with her father. She is confused and shy on her first day at school. Her father hugs her daughter and holds her hands, wishes her best of luck for school. In scene 2, as she joins the class, the teachers asks everybody to share their names and come on stage to pin their homes on the big map shown in the classroom. The other students pinned their homeland easily on the map. When Saamidah's turn came teacher first confused her very name, her identity, her association, she mis-pronounced Saamidah's name as,

Teacher: "Sam....uh Sami...S-Samid...Um? Saamidah. Samida. Okay," (I am From Palestine, 2023, Scene 2, Classroom).

Here, Saamidah found her identity in question as her name which was her identity, was not properly pronounced by her teacher, leads to confusion, and shatter her confidence the first day in a western school. *The Visual Mode* includes the map which dominates the frame and Palestine is absent, visually enacting erasure. Moreover, Saamidah appears small and isolated. Additionally, the colours are dull, the map is dominant over other things, and there is no life in the colours of classroom and classroom in contrast to scene 1 where the sound was quite energetic, the colours were bright indicating her pre-school excitement. Next, in scene 2, *Aural Mode* includes the soundtrack that becomes minimal, reflecting discomfort. Silence emphasizes the teacher's inability to respond to Saamidah's question. The ideational, interpersonal and textual functions have been identified in the following scenes in detail,

Next, she sees the map astonishingly finding that Palestine is nowhere and then she asks,

Saamidah: " .... Palestine?" while wearing the Palestine map key chain in her neck which symbolizes identity loss. (Figure 3-4, scene 2, I am from Palestine).

*The linguistic Mode* includes the question " ....Palestine?" foregrounds identity loss. The lack of an answer signals institutional power.

The teacher says: "Huh, there's no Palestine on the map. I'll mark Israel for you..." (Figure 5 and 6, Scene 2, Classroom)

The multimodal ensemble constructs identity destabilization. It sets the stage for the necessity of affirmation. This analysis highlight the need to raise research questions 1 and 2.



Figure 1: Scene:1



Figure 2: Scene 2



Figure 3: Scene 2



Figure 4: Scene 2





Figure 5: Scene 2



Figure 6: Scene 2



Figure 7: Scene 2

In scene 3, Saamidah enquires her father anxiously, her eyes were full of tears here, and the camera positions her timidly which shows the overall pain she gone through when

she faced her identity erasure from the map. She said: '.....Baba, where am I from?'" (Scene 2, Home)

Then her father consoles her providing home as Sanctuary indicates linguistic and emotional reaffirmation. He said, 'you're from Palestine. They call Yafa the "bride of the sea" with its golden majestic beaches...."' (Figure 8, scene 3, Home).

Here, Saamidah's journey takes turn as her father words take narrative shift and memory transition. She begins to glow and shine like a morning star. Light begin to emerge from her Palestinian map necklace. All cultural motifs ( the colourful Palestinian streets full of sweet vendors, the specific white and black piece of cloth , the hair band around her head, the sweet bread in her hand, the traditional music) here in the following figures of scene 3 affirms her identity as Palestinian girl. She visualizes all the history, the sweet music, the sweet donuts of her homeland. Visual Mode here turns into warm colours instead of the cold classroom palette. Close-up shots frame intimacy and security. Aural Mode includes Soft Palestinian musical patterns create emotional grounding. Linguistic Mode includes Baba who explains Saamidah's name, linking it to cultural endurance (sumud). Identity is reaffirmed through familial discourse, which carries history, memory, and emotional security. Here the research question is answered as there are various ways I which Palestinian identity has affirmed through analysing the multiple modes utilizing social semiotics model.



Figure 8: Scene 3

In Scene 3, Saamidah's Journey to the Homeland begins which symbolizes Identity reconstruction.

All the Olive trees, embroidery, keys, landscapes symbolize continuity in the scene three. Vibrant colours including blue, pink, white, and red, orange represent revived identity. So, Research questions 1 and 2 are addressed here as Saamidah feels ecstasy in her imaginations. All cultural motifs mentioned in the images and video affirms her identity as Palestinian girl which leads to her cultural preservation. She lives every word of her father that was about her homeland; the streets, the ancestors, the monuments, the landmarks, the food, the clothing, the music, and the beautiful seas-all cultural symbols (tangible and non-tangible). The traditional songs by El-Funoun evoke communal pride. While narration describes cultural practices and enhances sense of association. The multimodal cluster reconstructs identity through collective symbols. The homeland is reimagined as a source of strength. There is constant repletion of words with its music,

Al funoun's music: ".....with its golden majestic beaches...." (Figure 9-13, scene 3, and imaginary world)



Figure 9: Scene 3



Figure 10: Scene 3

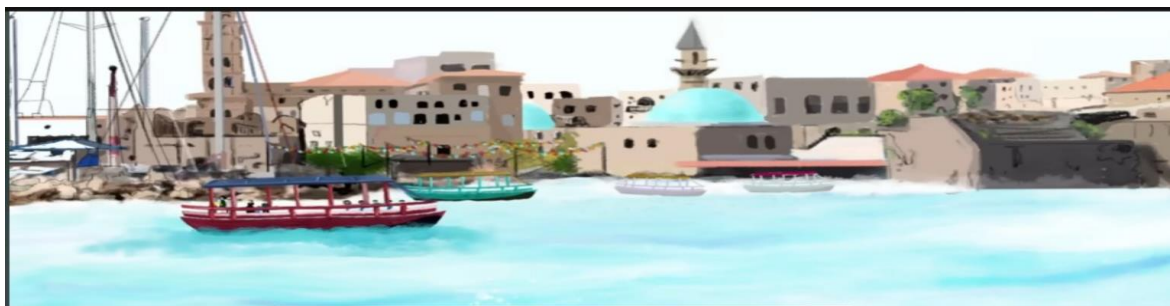


Figure 11: Scene 3



Figure 12: Scene 3





Figure 13: Scene 3

In Scene 4, Saamidah returns to her classroom with Palestinian scarf tied around her neck, a satisfactory smile on her face, big heart-shaped Palestinian flag embedded on her white shirt, holding Palestinian map in her right arm (ideational function). The teacher welcomes everyone once again in her classroom and continued the previous class activity that was to pin homeland in the big map shown in classroom. *Visually*, Saamidah now appears centered and confident. Her posture signals empowerment. The symbol of flying dove at the end with olive leaves indicate peace inside Saamidah's heart and also outside her environment. *Aural mode* includes strong, uplifting music that signals resolution. She raised her hand with her eyes straight into viewers eyes ( interpersonal function) , her cheeks blushing, lips smiling, holding Palestine map in her hand, standing in front of so called world map, she proudly said, as shown in the picture,

Saamidah: "Saamida? My name is Saamidah, and I am from Palestine...." (Figure 14-17, scene 4, and classroom)

Linguistic mode here includes the dialogue, "I am from Palestine" that becomes a declarative act of identity. The scene performs identity affirmation through multimodal harmony. The film ends with a restored sense of belonging and cultural preservation that answers the research question one and two.



Figure 14: Scene 4



Figure 15: Scene 4



Figure 16: Scene 4



Samida? My name is Saamidah, and I am from

Figure 17: Scene 4

Therefore, scene 4 contains all the semiotic features that affirms the identity of Saamdiah and preserves her culture. Multimodal discourse analysis has played crucial part in exploring the identity affirmation in this short animated film *I am From Palestine*.

The findings reveal that the short film *I Am From Palestine* affirms identity through various modes of linguistic, visual, aural and symbolic elements. Moreover, Cultural motifs are significant in restoring the identity of diasporic children. Multimodal discourse has been used to magnify the cultural preservation and identity affirmation. Linguistic choices including, “.....Palestine?” from, scene 2 indicates identity in loss. “I’ll mark Israel for you” in scene 2 further confuses Saamidah’s existence as Palestinian on world map. The symbol of hope, identity and perseverance, the dove and olive, are present in scene 1 and scene 4. The Palestinian map necklace and Palestinian Keffiyeh around Saamidah’s neck further shows her belonging and Palestinian identity which was threatened in scene 2 and then when the film was analysed through social semiotics theory, it is revealed that in scene 4 the same necklace becomes her real identity when she shows to her class the separate map given by her father. In the last scene, she also wears shirt with Palestine flag consisting of black, green, white, and red colours creating vibrant, stable smile on her face; camera gives her central position leaving bigger world map behind portrays empowerment through cultural motifs. Therefore, findings show that all these meaning making modes integrated to affirm Palestinian identity of Saamidah in particular and identity of Palestinian people in general, ultimately preserving their cultural identity as well.

## Conclusion

To recapitulate, identity affirmation has been achieved in the award winning animated short film *I Am From Palestine* (2023) associated with the cultural preservation through various semiotic features including narrative shifts, cultural motifs, dialogues, colour transitions, cameras angles and so on. Palestinian girl in particular and Palestinian people in general exercise their agency through all the selected scenes and their images followed by Al-funoun’s music, the white dove, Palestinian necklace, and the map of Palestine in Saamidah’s hand.

## Recommendations

In future, more studies should be conducted on this film from political signalling perspective. Policymakers, educators and stakeholders can make marginalised minorities of world feel at home in classrooms by adopting inclusive strategies. What is more is that this movie can be explored and deconstructed further from political discourse perspective and historical discourse perspective and so on. This exploration will add significant linguistic contribution to existing body of literature.

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