



RESEARCH PAPER

Cognitive Poetics and Readers' Experientiality in Contemporary Palestinian War Poetry

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ABSTRACT

War poetry voices the traumatic cultural productions and sensitivity through the formal, aesthetic and creative dimensions of psychical responses. A perpetual trauma is imprinted on the psyche and the cultural memory of the people living through wars. To witness the representative suffering, war poetry needs to be examined from experiential and embodied dimensions of cognitive perception. Mosab Abu Toha is an acclaimed Palestinian poet who represents his affective experiences, to lament over the displacement, loss and cultural clashes he witnesses, in his autobiographical poetry. The research highlights that Abu Toha, in his transitional poetic space of the selected poem, invokes the receptiveness of witnessing through the defamiliarized graphic images and syntactic representation which are foregrounded. Further, the prototypical cognitive models in his selected poem are both situational and cultural. The research is significant in examining the embodied and experiential dimensions of language processing in the poetic space to encode the readers' positionalities and the linguistic structures that invoke the specific perspective in readers' imagination.

KEYWORDS Cognitive Perception, Cultural Memory, Defamiliarized Graphic Images, Mosab Abu Toha, Poetic Space

Introduction

Psychological and social shocks being the integral feature of the immediate environment is borne by the large majority of Palestinian populace (Khamis, 2020). WHO, World Health Organization (2022) documents that "1 in 5 people (22 %) of conflict-affected population have developed a wide range of mental symptoms such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), bipolar disorder or schizophrenia" (Abudayya et al., 2023)

Since the first quarter of twentieth century, Palestine and its people are witnessing the political as well as resulting literary changes. The imperialist threats, dislocation, identity crisis and the unprecedented traumatic havocs of war are accompanying them constantly. The Palestinian writers especially poets, from time to time have been voicing the intergenerational trauma and the cause of their nation (Mir, 2016) through their creative poetic spaces.

I must be open with you about life in Gaza, even though many of the facts may make some of you feel uncomfortable. Unfortunately, the Palestinians in both Gaza and the West Bank experience the deadly consequences of the occupation many times-without ever knowing what will come next. (Toha, 2021, p.53)

Mosab Abu Toha has been providing the latest and updated information to *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker* and the rest of the world about the struggles and plight of Palestinians inside Gaza, trapped in war and atrocities. He is a contemporary Palestinian librarian, essayist, activist, short story writer and poet whose poetic oeuvre in English language is both an individual as well as collective effort to comprehend and reflect on the continuous crisis of existence in Palestine while “speaking straight to a Western audience, many of whom understand little of how growing up in Gaza impacts the human residents. Abu Toha's method of communicating this experience is therefore very comprehensible with stark imagery and language” (Woffenden, 2023, p.60). Abu Toha being conscious of his cultural tradition not only strives to emulate the stylistic variations of his predecessors but also follows their emotional appeal to the readers.

Though literary work being an artifice is the simulation of reality, reading it as “a natural object of exploration” (Stockwell, 2019, p. 2) involves a natural cognitive practice with engagements at the levels of society, culture, aesthetics, linguistics, psychology, and neurology. This subconscious, complex and intertwined natural process implicates the agency of language and its relation with mind to unfold the intricacies of manifold experiences the readers encounter.

The genre of poetry carries the potential value for the representation of graphic, aesthetic and literary account of the catastrophic or traumatic events (Reilly, 1986). The notion “War poetry” had been coined in literary horizon through World War I with a significant output from the poets/soldiers who witnessed and fought in the battlefield (Reilly, 1986, p. xii). Cathy Caruth defines trauma as a condition when someone is “possessed by an image or event” (1995, p. 5) of a painful memory or loss. Freud also argues that through abreaction, the patient recollect the memory by “put[ting] the affect into words” (1957, p. 6). This traumatic affliction through wars and massive destruction possess the same feature as the survivors repress the initial symptoms and then recollect them consciously and unconsciously as an indication or remedy. As Freud terms the unconscious recollection of traumatic events, the desire of mastery, in case of poetry, we can ascribe this recollection as the meaning-making practices by the survivor poets witnessing or going through the traumatic havocs. Many theorists of trauma recognize the role of witness which is required in the processing of trauma (Felman and Laub, 1992 & Lifton, 1991) to observe and empathize the suffering of the subjects as “For Felman and Laub, it is only through the complex exchange of witnessing that the survivor reconstructs his own narrative of the past” (González, n.d, p. 183). For this therapeutic task of witnessing, art work carries the value as a “transformational space” transporting both the reader and the artist in association with trauma opening the opportunities for a more clear reflection (Winnicott, 1993; Bollas, 1987). While having the limitation to provide the therapeutic role, such an artwork brings its reader at the position of witnessing “which the reader may or may not accept” (González, n.d, p. 183).

To investigate the stance of readers as the witness of the presented trauma, resistance and agony in the selected poem, the research engages cognitive stylistic model of interpretation. It argues that Mosab Abu Toha through his transitional poetic space invokes in his readers the receptiveness of witnessing through the dynamism of figure and ground, the defamiliarized graphic and syntactic representation and prototypical cognitive schema which is both situational and cultural.

Literature Review

Diverse scholarship consolidated on defining the notion of power-resistance struggle in the political and social contexts (Grinberg, 2013; Foucault, 1978; Weber, 1978).

Whereas Foucault relates power and resistance by asserting that “where there is power, there is resistance” (1978, p. 95), Grinberg (2013) highlighted the Palestine-Israel context to understand the relationship between power and resistance. For him, the dominant group is Israel that exercise violence and the dominated group are Palestinians who are the oppressed. He defines resistance as “the collective action of dominated groups in reaction to the physical and symbolic violence exerted on them by the dominant groups” (2013, p. 210).

The horrific predicaments that entail the observation of war include witnessing the critical situation, death threats, ultimate injuries or sexual harassment and unfortunately the children and other people in the Strip of Gaza are the experiencers and carriers of such traumatic memory load (Farajallah, 2022) and even so this constant trauma has transformed the whole Palestinian nation into a “traumatized nation” (Altawil et al., 2008; Baker, 1990; Hein et al., 1993). Trauma can be defined as the distressing experiences resulting in helplessness, fear or confusion influencing drastically the person's, behavior, attitudes and overall functioning. The cause of the traumatic events may include human behaviors for instance war, dislocation, rape, an accident or any other unfortunate happening but nevertheless through these experiences the perception of the world as being safe and predictable is challenged (VanderBos, 2015, p.1104).

War poetry manifests the dilemma of the inexpressibility of its subject matter as often the employed language proves to be inadequate to express the great expanse of suffering and destruction and thus entails a lack in its comprehensibility by the readers as well. The war writer, Tim O'Brien (1990), while reflecting on his experience of Vietnam War articulates this incapacity as

There is no clarity. Everything swirls. The old rules are no longer binding, the old truths no longer true. Right spills over into wrong...The vapors suck you in. You can't tell where you are, or why you're there, and the only certainty is overwhelming ambiguity. (p.98)

During the First World War, the poets who significantly transmitted the shock and unbearable sufferings of war are Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen. Through their empathetic abilities and therapeutic connectivity of literary works, they showed the potential of biographical poetry in transmitting the voices and glimpses of traumatic emotions (Maiti & Naskar, 2017). The horrors of the twentieth century articulated through world wars, civil wars and imperial wars and the poetic responses to them were not of celebrations of victory but rather deals with absurdity and the pity of the war (Campbell, 2003). Considering the stylistic uniqueness of war poetry, Featherstone (1995) highlights the simultaneity of writing and the war as the war poetry ‘seem to insist on the closeness of writing to often appalling personal experience’ (p. 3). Fussell (1975) encapsulates the issues of style and rhetoric, for instance, which Rudyard Kipling faced while writing *The Irish Guards in the Great War*, that the actual events when are shaped or deformed by the stylistic intervention of rhetoric, metaphor, rhythm, alliteration, assonance, and connectives to match the “the reader's expectations that written history ought to be interesting and meaningful and the cruel fact that much of what happens – all of what happens? – is inherently without ‘meaning’?” (pp. 171–2). Yeats (1936) termed war poetry as being the representation of “passive suffering” while explaining the reason of not including Wilfred Owen in his *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* he explains that “I have a distaste for certain poems written in the midst of the Great War. If war is necessary, or necessary in our time and place, it is best to forget its suffering” (p. xxxiv–xxxv). Yeats attribution seems to suggest that as in war poems the poetic personas endure their fate helplessly with a sense of surrender hence their circumstances appear to be preordained.

The technological and military originations of World War I initiated the new era of modern warfare and resultantly the entire generation witnessing the war had to acclimatize with the new experience of 'shell shock'. During these extreme sufferings, poetry proved to be an "outlet to express their thoughts, feelings and experiences" (Fleshman, 2019, p.2). Poets like Brook, Sassoon, Owen and Graves played a catalyst role in influencing the public opinion concerning war and Britain's participation in war. The sentiments range from that of patriotism verbalizing the code of conduct for a soldier and fighter and then shifted to the images of doubts on the efficacy of the country's participation in war through these poetic oeuvres.

Trauma has turned out to be one of the fundamental signifier of our time. It is both an individual as well as collective imprint on a group of specific historical experience. Whether it is genocide, terrorist attacks, rape or any natural disaster; a victim is not a passive sufferer but rather with the "open wound in the collective memory" testifies and at the same time redefines his relationship with "misfortune, memory, and subjectivity" (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009, p. 7). The social reality of trauma is visible when we look at the way history is appropriated and past is recalled but this social reality mostly is covered under the domains of psychology and medicine as for instance the PTSD Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Nevertheless, the history of the vanquished being the colonized, the suppressed, the victims, the refugees, the subjugated is reconstructed in the memory of their subsequent generations and does not dissipate even if their defeat and loss is compensated or it vanishes. Trauma also carries the potential to redefine the vocabulary of human and dehuman as while living the therapeutic recall of it as it tends to bear witness to the "persistence of the human even in those extreme situations that threaten to dehumanize the victims" (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009, p. 20).

Material and Methods

The study conducts the cognitive stylistic analysis of the selected poem. It employs the framework of cognitive poetics outlined by Peter Stockwell (2019) to emphasize the construction of reader's experientiality in the poem. In order to consider the experiential positioning of readers in interaction with the texts, cognitive poetics provides us a potential avenue. It transforms the conventional characterizations of both language and literature, rendering these more pulsating than before. Language, then, delineates the entire multifaceted experientiality of an individual's interaction with utterances and texts. It is neither "what is on the page nor what is buried in some imagined deep and unprovable structure inside your mind" (2019, p.3) but a whole web of enacted and enacting affective experience. Hence the demarcation between context and text seems to be insignificant because the texts already embody their contexts. This critical yet dynamic experientiality of language solidifies literature as a medium of activating our consciousness. Literature as is composed of same values that we have gleaned as the effects of language, might perform "interesting and compelling things". Reading is not an object but rather a reflective and engaging science which scrutinizes not "the artifice of the literary text alone, nor the reader alone, but the more natural interanimating process" (2019, p.3) that manifests it.

As the research aims to investigate the stylistic choices for the involvement of readers' embodiment, hence it focusses to explore the prototypical cognitive schema and the foregrounding technique projected by the poet.

Theoretical Framework

All of our knowledge, experiences and beliefs that are grounded in our existence can be inferred through language. Interestingly most factors pertaining our existence are

shared and similar in languages across the communities, cultures and even humanity though there may be variations at the level of sociological factors like age, gender, environment, religion, ethnicity etc . Cognitive poetics play a contributive role in explaining both the individual and shared communal interpretations. Embodiment, thus, can be understood as “not simply in our own individual form but in terms of an extended embodied cognition, in which the human conditions of other people near me or held in my mind are also part of my conscious experience and articulation” (Stockwell, 2019, p.8). There is an explicit relationship of cognitive poetics with the domain of literary theories and criticism. The triangulated relationship of ‘author-text-reader’ is well attended by this methodological exercise as it focusses on both psychologically and linguistically informed reader and author-oriented dimensions of the world. Whether it is authorial creativity or textuality or an affective practice of readers, cognitive poetics attempts to reevaluate the whole process. A systematic instead of an impressionistic reading is required to analyze the readerly processes of interpretations.

Along with the information from cognitive science, we need to know about literary and critical theories and practice as the primary and fundamental guiding principles since seeing literature as merely a body of data will just be the concern of cognitive linguistics and not of cognitive poetics.

The term “cognitive poetics” was coined, more than two decades ago, by Tsur(1992) in his work, “Toward a Theory of Cognitive Poetics”, a precursor of many insights of cognitive sciences especially cognitive linguistics. Though Tsur was particularly interested in poetry, his approach of literary perception is both similar and divergent to what researchers have been attempting under the domain of cognitive poetics ever since. In his second edition of the book, published in 2008, he defined cognitive poetics as being an interdisciplinary inquiry of literature facilitated by the tools of cognitive science involving linguistics, psycholinguistics, cognitive psychology, artificial intelligence and viewpoints of science. Considering the processes of acquisition, use and organization of knowledge stretching from the immediate stimuli to the schema of subjective experience, cognitive poetics attempts to explore the dynamism and shaping of poetic form and language (p. 2). Stockwell (2019) summarizes the guiding precepts of cognitive poetics as being a descriptive discipline which continues and extends the descriptions of language use, literary readings and the association between sensation and sense as “our cognitive faculties arise from our physical condition” (p. 12). Both social and psychological aspects characterize cognitive poetics as our embodied cognition encompasses the experience, thinking and frames of other people too. Cognition is not only limited to experience and feeling but also involves the interpretation of meanings. In this regard, two useful analytical tools of inquiry are figure and ground and the concept of prototypicality.

Stockwell (2019) defines prototypicality as a cognitive linguistic concept that highlights that the categorization of the things is not based on “category-member” relationship but on the rule of “best-fit”,

No concept is a prototype; but all concepts display prototypicality in any given, situated context. Nevertheless, we can say that prototypicality is the basis of categorisation, with central examples that we habitually think of as good examples of a domain acting as cognitive reference points in the middle of a radial structure. (p.18)

The best example of the fruit is that of apple not any other specific fruit. We can term it as the degree to which something is best representative of a category. The emotional distance or the closeness with the character, while reading, exemplifies that how that character is good and known example of a person. However, it is also important to think

of a situated context in which our customary judgements for familiar practices need to be altered. Psychological domains of researches have clarified the phenomena that the human cognitive system specifically for the task of categorization does not work in simply fitting in and out of the compartments of mind but rather “an arrangement of elements in a radial structure or network with central good examples, secondary poorer examples, and peripheral examples” (Stockwell, 2019, p. 28).

Whereas prototypicality heightens our consciousness of how we carry out general cognitive categorization and cognitive perception in specific situations, on the other hand, the concept of figure and ground deals with why we pay attention to some specific entities in comparison to others. In this regard, Mahlberg et al. (2016) argue that it is the patterning of the text in the mind of the readers that allows them to foreground and background certain concepts and things. He further maintains that literary language and art has the ability to foreground the same things which exist commonly in non-literary language. Because literature serves to “defamiliarise the subject-matter, to estrange the reader from aspects of the world in order to present the world in a creative and newly-figured artistic way” (Stockwell, 2019, p.33), the reading process slows down as readers engage themselves with the texture of the text.

Results and Discussion

Imagism and the Prototypical Situatedness

The poem is organized in an expected narrative structure and an idealized cognitive schema where the subject and its existence, an occurrence to it and a concluding statement from the poet’s perspective is articulated through viscerally material images. The prototypical beginning of the poem’s narrative represents that a defenseless human being is assaulted with the shot of gun which is commented upon by the poet as “even/ the sparrow on the lemon tree nearby wondered how they/ could move/ with/ no/ wings”. Whereas the embodied narrative of the poem conjures a specific situation and culture, the culture and the situation which the poet is experiencing and which the poem tries to make sense of, is the prevalent apartheid and massacre inflicted on the Palestinian civilians and mostly children. Our reason, emotions, perceptions and beliefs are embodied as they are the product of our experientiality and are thus relative. Thus, to get the sensual and emotional perception of the poem, its delineation of the specific situation and social setting is needed. This situational experientiality of the poem, being traumatic in nature, evokes the prototypical perception in readers. Keeping Israel-Palestine war in context, several images of wounded, killed, suffering and inflicted children sheltering in the hands of their parents come in our mind. This offers the prototypical image of suffering in the current situation. These images turn into the icons as they provide ‘a picture directly representing a prototype’ (Heck & Erenstein, 1999, p. 34), the prototypes of anguished people.

The imagist narrative of the poem draws the situation of an individual whose identity is implied as “someone”. However, the condition in which that someone is trapped, is the recent Palestine-Israel war and battle field hence the implicit emotional appeal of the character of the poem is hued with the collective affective lining of awe and horror. Yet in this conventional opening, *someone* is non-normative as it allows the readers to start plunging in their worlds of inferences. The traumatic experience of both the poet and eventually the reader, witnessing and experiencing the horrors of war on daily basis is naturalized as nowadays the spectacles of torments, starvation, destruction, hopelessness and misery is not new to us, we are being accustomed to these through the media news. The imagist shading of the poem resonates what Hama (2020) argues as the belief of the imagist poets to paint a picture through which they can convey their message

and thus it is more important than the message itself. They rely on words to create pictures in the minds of readers and then they leave the interpretation and the comprehension of the texts for them. (p.88)

This imagist bent of the poem also voices the traumatic experience of the poet and his attempt to articulate the 'discourses of the unsayable' (Coupland & Coupland, 1997, p.117).

The items and concepts which portray prototypicality in any given situation are chained and collectively may offer the family resemblance (Stockwell, 2019). Likewise the imagist scheme of the poem is rendered through a chain of cultural and situational signs like

Someone... yawning → shrapnel → His chest...his heart → no wind.....movement with wings.

In order to convey the desired schema in the mind of the readers, one image is linked to another. The poem does not start with the description of the war but rather paints the picture of the innocent and unarmed civilians who, both expectedly and unexpectedly, is assassinated. The chest and the heart are representations of these brave people who eventually fly to heaven after being martyred, a cultural rather a universal belief that martyrs go straight to heaven and paradise. Noteworthy is that the readers' accustomed perception of moving even after death and flying with wings is the cultural belief in the specific situation where innocent children after being assassinated are flown to the heavens. Meaning lies not in the language but in its situatedness within a culture and society. Socially-shared custom of bravery, receiving the attack on the heart and chest is stabilized in the sense of cognitive model which is cued up through the lexical choices of the poet. Then further, the setting of the incident is accentuated with "even/ the sparrow on the lemon tree nearby wondered" about the preeminent status of the victims being steadfast, brave and notorious even after death. The possibility of completely inferred simulated experience can be configured when the reader starts indulging in the inference of who is meant by somebody, where that shrapnel is coming from, why the person is attacked, where is he flying to after death. Of course, in each of the instances, the pattern completion is not hard as anyone can conceptualize the recently encountered war trauma that is infused in us through the media and news reports. The interpretive value of a literary writing turns it "engaging, vivid, and personally moving or significant" (Stockwell, 2019, p. 23).

Defamiliarized Experientiality

Defamiliarization foregrounds the desired perception to "awaken fresh perspectives and new feelings about familiar and once neglected things" (Zhang, 2022, p.261). Originated by Russian formalists, it involves the techniques like distortion, deformation and anomaly applied aesthetically on the narrative subjects and objects. This process revitalizes the treated phenomena along with the life itself enriching the narrative texture and aesthetic appeal (Shklovsky, 1965).

Language structure foremostly helps to defamiliarize the objects and in the selected poem, the syntactic structure i.e the line length foregrounds the figure and ground of the narrative. There are single word, double words and multiple words lines which all contribute in delineating the desired shape of object and thus facilitates the desire witnessing.

Someone's mouth is still open. He hadn't finished

yawning
when shrapnel
pierced
through
his chest,
stung his
heart.
No wind
could
stop the
flying pieces
of shrapnel. Even
the sparrow on the lemon tree nearby wondered how they
could move with no wings

The right flank from its inner boundary constitutes the shape of a bird, whereas the inner texture or the background of the shape signifies the child or even a human. *The sparrow on the lemon tree wondered how* serves as a ground or the surface of the outer realities while the movement underneath it is representative of the belief that even after death, there is life for the martyrs. The figuring of an eagle and the grounding of a human on the inner and outer corner is suggestive of the cultural beliefs highlighting the instantiation of bravery and valor of innocent civilians who are victimized on daily basis. Though they may seem shelterless and helpless beings but in fact their resilience marks their individuality and unique courage.

The defamiliarized image is constructed through unusual choices of words like shrapnel which on one hand can stand as a metonymy for the misery of the Palestinian people and on the other hand serves as the signifier of identity which is stamped by the occupying forces of Gaza who are most intolerant of every Palestinian citizen.

Further the poetic line, *the sparrow on the lemon tree nearby wondered how* raises the question as well as serves the function of metaphor. It represents the division between the real world's paradigm and the cultural beliefs. The whole world is witnessing the victimization of Palestinians but their endurance is based on their cultural belief that even after death, the martyrs have a life. This life is the exalted and revered one by God. The wings are defamiliarized by the polysemy which is attached to it. *No wings* coupled with the ability to fly epitomizes the flight of the departed souls. Contrarily it also can refer to the movement of the bullets and shells which are so frequent in the war afflicted area that even the sparrow is mistakenly considering them the birds without wings. But these are the humanly created birds unleashing horror and misery to the inhabitants. The pathetic fallacy of sparrow wondering and reflecting on the prevalent state of affairs is one of the stylistic feature that the poet employs to convey the environmental damage. The sparrow is a symbol of community and hope, whereas the lemon tree indicates the shared peaceful past.

The compound category "sparrow on the lemon tree" connotes a combination of meanings grounded by the poet. It can be an element of Nature, the voice of reason in the witnessing world or the culture and history which is the bearer of both human history and affliction. Sparrow is serving the function of a historian who is unable to write a descriptive detail of the accounts but rather is surprised of what he is beholding. In compound categories "attributes are joined to produce a new unified object. However, the concepts

underlying compounds are often more than the sum of the parts" (Stockwell, 2020, p.35). Sparrow on the lemon tree in a war-zone area shifts the attention of the reader from the existence of Nature serves as a defamilairized idiom of hope and fertility. Why are there still the birds and the citrus trees, why are they not victimized yet. This defamilairized image represents the unconscious desire of the poet for the regeneration of things. It serves as the foresight of the poet that life will again revisit the affected Palestinians and among a lot of brutality there are still the souls who can empathize with them.

Conclusion

The cognitive stylistic interpretation of the poem reveals that the readers' engagement being the witness to the traumatic suffering is achieved through prototypical cultural schema of innocent versus the war. The emotional and sensual experientiality of the poem is constituted through its contextualization in the specific cultural setting and situation. The images of war-afflicted, wounded and killed people serve as the icons directly presenting the prototypical frames. This offers the chain of coordinated images exhibiting suffering and helplessness of the victims. Further the multidimensional figuring of the emotional resilience, courage and suffering of the victims is accentuated through defamilairized syntactic structure, unusual choice of words and an extended metaphor of division. This division signifies the binary of peace versus war, innocent versus their affliction and oppressed versus oppressor.

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