

**PLACE IN MUHAMMAD 'ALI TAHA'S SHORT STORY COLLECTION THE
LEANING DATE PALM. THE ROLE OF PLACE IN THE LITERATURE OF THE
ARAB MINORITY IN ISRAEL**

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ABSTRACT: *The present study deals with the function of place in the short-story collection The Leaning Date Palm by the Palestinian writer Muhammad 'All Taha, published in 1995. The study begins with a definition of the concept of place in the context of narrative fiction, and the important artistic, sensory and semantic functions it has as an artistic component in the story. This is followed by a discussion of the writer's background and his literary output, after which we provide a survey of the main topics and ideas, as well as the prominent other features, of the story collection The Leaning Date Palm. Our study leads to the conclusion that place plays an important role in this story collection, especially due to the author's focus on national issues in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Place, after all, constitutes a fundamental element in that conflict. The author, our study has found, deals with the concept of place from a number of different perspectives: Longing for the past, the traditional place, the importance of returning to one's homeland, and protecting one's land.*

KEYWORDS: Muhammad 'Ali, Taha's short story, leaning date palm, literature, Arab minority, Israel

INTRODUCTION

The present paper deals with the role of place in Arabic short stories in Israel, as reflected in The Leaning Date Palm, a short story collection published by the writer Muhammad 'All Taha in 1995. The paper's objective is to illuminate the element of place in short story fiction, its artistic and emotional dimensions and its meaning, in light of the fact that it is an artistic component of short stories in the Arab world as well as in the West. Perhaps the main motivation behind the choice of subject is the dearth of studies on the esthetics of place in Arabic fiction in general, as well as a desire to focus on the local Arabic literature that represents the Arabs in Israel, a mobilized literature which deals with the local and national issues with which the Palestinian Arabs living in Israel are preoccupied.

The concept of place in narrative fiction

For many decades place has been considered an element of narrative fiction, like time, characters, language, prose rendition, and others. However, critics and critical theories did not pay as much attention to it as to the other artistic elements which make up a story (Bahrawi 1990:25; Weisgerber 1978: 9).^{1 2 3} However, as the story-telling art evolved more importance began to be attached to place in the narrative text, and to the way in which its meanings, its symbolism, and the intellectual and ideological issues it raised were dealt with, (Rossum 1970:

61) . Among the critical studies which do deal with place as a research topic are Gaston Blechard's *The Esthetics of Place* and Mikhail Bakhtin's *The Forms of Place and Time*, both of which have been translated into Arabic (Bakhti 1990; Balshar, 1987). There also exist some modern studies which focus on the concept of place in literary texts generally (Lutwack 1984 ; Chaudhuri 1997; Poulet 1963).

..4 These general studies contain analytic and critical theories on the concept of place, and on the values and the esthetic dimensions of place in narrative fiction.

Place is an important element in narrative structure. It is where the events occur and the characters move. In drama it constitutes the background, and also plays an important role in presenting the social or political contents of a story. Writers use place as in introduction to the story, and so give it a specific textual form which bears meanings and thoughts that conform to the story's contents and events (Lutwack 1984:12). The elements of a short story cannot be categorized randomly;⁵ rather, any classification must serve the purposes of the study and the convenience of the reader and the researcher. Nor is it acceptable to give one element of a story's artistic structure preponderance over others. Both critics and writers have given conflicting definitions of the short story. Some have defined it according to the time it takes to read it: a short story in this view is one which can be read at one sitting. Others have used the number of pages as a criterion: a short story is thus one which is no longer than three or four pages. Still others have gone beyond such definitions and maintained that unlike a novel, a short story does not go into great detail, but rather focuses on a specific event at a certain time and in a certain place or in a limited number of different places. In the latter view place thus constitutes a defining element of a short story. When one speaks of place in narrative fiction it does not refer to "its limited geographical meaning, associated with a specific territory in a certain region. Rather, it possesses a broader meaning, and includes the environment, the territory, and also its inhabitants, events, concerns and hopes, traditions and values. Place in this sense is an entity full of life and movement, which influences and is influenced, interacting with the characters' movements and thoughts, and with the novelist himself" (Uthman 1982:59). The writer must therefore take great care in defining the place so that the reader will accept the plot as logical and interesting. Likewise the components of the place in which the characters move should be carefully depicted, since the reader can obtain from them important indications which can help him interpret or gain a deeper understanding of the events, the personalities, or both (Wadi 1993:36-37) . This is so because a place cannot be separated from the objects in it or from its components; these enrich it and distinguish it from other places (Husayn 2000:209) . Some critics are of the opinion that a place is connected to the things in it: "It is not independent of the kind of objects found in it" (Tsa 1991: 5), and that events are nothing but materializations of a place and its circumstances. A place and its space in a story text would thus appear to be connected to the course of events in the narrative, so that we may say that it is the path which the narrative follows (Mitterand 1980:201) .

See: (Bahrawi 1990:25. It is worth mentioning that literary criticism has paid scant attention to the way in which stories present man's situation and problems in relation to his geographical environment, except for the Russian critic Yuri Lotman. See: (Weisgerber 1978: 9).

The German critics distinguished various types of place in narrative fiction. According to some there were two types of place in stories, namely a specific place and what was called "meaning space", which Hermann Meier considered a fundamental element in fictional and narrative imagination. See: Françoise van Guyon, Rossum: Gallimard, (1970), 61. Languages and were subsequently translated into Arabic. Here we used the Arabic translations, whose references are as follows: (Bakhtin 1990; Balshar, 1987).

4See, for example, (Lutwack 1984; Chaudhuri 1997; Poulet 1963).

⁵.A number of critics have pointed to the necessary connection which exists between place and event in stories; in fact, one critic has said that "where there are no events there are no places". See, for example, (Ge Blin 1954: 77)

Although place precedes the existence of man, the latter plays a major role in a place's organization, its components, and its features, thanks to his human knowledge and experience. For man is the creator of symbols, one of which is language. There are many languages in which terms and metaphors related to place have an important role in the rendering of abstract thought, and in the formulation of political, social and ethical concepts as well as metaphorical expressions.⁶ A person can have a sense of belonging to a place without necessarily being there. The place in question can be far away, deserted, in ruins, or connected with the past, as in cases of emigration and exile. This makes memory important, since it is what preserves the place or, in the words of Meierhoff: "It is a kind of continuation, identity and unity within an individual's personal past" (Meierhoff 1972:49)

.. Loss of memory must of necessity be comparable to a loss of identity and of belonging. We thus conclude that a strong connection exists between man and place, and that man needs a place through which he can confirm his existence, where he can work and from which he can obtain experience and knowledge. A place that is empty of human presence will also remain empty of values, of history and of significance (Nasir 1986:5) . On the other hand, a feeling of estrangement from one's place means feeling estranged from one's self and having one's identity annihilated (Godkin 1980:75) . In the human psyche and consciousness place is associated with location and with movement from one location to another. When a person thinks about a place he is led to remember numerous things which his senses or his emotions associate with it. The recollection of certain places may evoke memories from various periods in one's life, thus showing the great value which place has in the minds of people of all types. Place constitutes an important esthetic dimension in all narrative prose. However, it would seem to manifest itself more clearly in short stories than in longer works. The text of a story is "a journey equally in place and in time" (al-Qasim 1984:74) . The reason for this is that every story must be defined within a place and a time. In fact, the mutual inseparability of time and place in a work of literature is the subject of a theory formulated by the Russian thinker Bakhtin, who borrowed the term "chronotopos" from the exact sciences, and especially from Einstein's theory of relativity, to which he added philosophical concepts expressing the necessary relationship between time and place, and the fact that the two cannot be separated (Bakhtin 1990: 5-6). It is impossible to detach a short story from place and time. In fact, the artistic novelty of many stories comes from the way time and place appear in it together. Because of its important role in the techniques of narrative fiction, place has become the subject of observation and study (al- Mahadin 2001: 27). In many cases place serves as a vessel into which the narrator pours ⁷

The contents of his story and mixes its elements expertly to create its fabric (Mahmud 1999:194). Motifs connected to place (spatial signs), their meanings, details of place both small and large, and specific words denoting place, all help enrich the text and make it more poetic, especially when these elements are turned in a literary text into suggestive symbols, for "the details of anything can point to a new world which like any world possesses features of greatness" (Blanchard 1987: 149).

⁷ Cf. the discussion of the concept of chronotopos by (Rashid 1985:47-59)

Place in a story is not merely a framework for events, nor is it only location for the characters. Rather, it is an active element in both the story's events and its characters. Place has functions and tasks which go beyond location. Lavin and Agatstein found four functions which place has in literature with respect to the characters' basic structure. These are the following.

1. The symbolic function: The importance of this function lies in that it deepens the feelings of belonging to a place and in that it strengthens the structure of the characters. This it can do because repeated experiences in a given place enhance the feeling of continuity and belonging. There is no need, however, for the places which provide a man with feelings of belonging and identity to be the same places where he lives and operates in real life, since the former may belong to the past, exist in memory as places from which one has been exiled, or perhaps be a figment of the imagination.

2. The expressional function: A person may choose a place for the purpose of expressing basic individual or collective values. Such values may be human, religious, esthetic, or others. Depicting the places where the action of a story takes place, or speaking about the places and the activities which take place there, can be a means for expressing what we do or feel at present, and what we would like the future to be.⁷

3. The cognitive fiction: Through this function place provides us with the information we need to proceed, as well as with the means to retrieve our public and private memories.

4. The instrumental function: We use place as an instrument for repeated communication with various groups and for carrying out the activities appropriate to the place in question, such as a cafe, the home, or the street (Lavin 1984: 52-53).

Place plays an important role in the lives of Arabs in modern times, because of its close connection with the political, social and cultural realities of the orient in general and the Arab world particularly. For Arabs place is something which gives scope to love of the fatherland.

It is the source of a sense of belonging to one's land and home and provides an important standard by which to measure one's distinctness and difference from others. In many cases place for Arabs is not just a specific limited geographical region in which their personal relations take place; rather, it constitutes something which a person will not forsake or leave.

When the Arab-Israeli conflict broke out at the beginning of the twentieth century the issue of land and place became a dividing line between two groups in a race to impose a new reality which would change the national identity in the geographical area of Palestine. After the war of 1948 Arab consciousness evolved and nationalist political parties and movements of resistance emerged in every Arab country, turning the issue of land/place into a major concern for Arabs and a source of feelings of belonging and of political identity. In Palestinian literature, too, because of what had happened in the country place came to occupy an important, prominent position, understandably so since the Arab-Israeli conflict from 1948 until today has been basically about place

Place in Palestinian short stories continues to be the subject of individual struggle and the focus of identity and belonging. Place in the life of Palestinians means roots, heritage and culture, but also pain, dispersion and exile. It also means a fate of bearing an ideology of fidelity, tenacity and struggle as the spirit of revolution, because it represents existence, identity and the future.

⁸For more on the motif of place in Palestinian literature see the important comments made by (IOdeh 1997) Cf. Parmenter 1994)

The future of the Palestinian individual has become linked to his place and his identity, and therefore place in Palestinian literature has come to symbolize the national consciousness and a spiritual and existential conflict. In local short stories place has thus played an important role; in fact, we find hardly any stories at all in which place does not bear various meanings and symbolisms, due to its close connection to the social, political and intellectual realities. Place is not just an artistic esthetic element, but also reflects feelings of belonging and identity, especially since the beginning of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Stories written in the 1950s, the 1960s and the 1970s mostly deal with the land which the peasant works, defends and protects from expropriation, and with mourning over villages, homes and lands that were destroyed or seized. This situation is contrasted in these stories with an idyllic past and a dream-like future which is certain to come.⁹ In the mid-1970s the motif of the “city” began to appear in Palestinian short stories in Israel. Previously the city had been something foreign and not present, but had then become a place of work and study, and contact with had had become unavoidable. Arab writers were therefore no longer able to remain within the bounds of the village and the countryside in order to mourn the past and dream of the future; they began to reflect the present and to record it with their pen.

Palestinian literature expressed the warm relationship between the individual and his place/land. This was the case in the poetry of the resistance as well as in the various genres of prose writing, in which the lost place/land/fatherland and the lost identity were among the most tenacious motifs.¹⁰ The status of place in Palestinian short stories as a focus of struggle, identity and belonging has not changed since then, although the motif has taken on broader meanings and more varied details. What distinguishes the function of place in Palestinian stories is the variety of perspectives and meanings, due to the different experiences of place and the different chronotopical views taken by various Palestinian writers. Thus place for writers in the dispersion is something different than for local writers on either side of the Green Line, and as a result the modes of spatial expression, and the symbolism and spiritual and social meanings of space differ as well.

Muhammad 'All Taha: A biographical sketch

Muhammad 'AH Taha was born in 1941 in the village of Mi'ar in Galilee (northern Israel). His village was destroyed in 1948 and its lands expropriated. The inhabitants found shelter in nearby villages and some emigrated from Israel. Taha lives in the town of Kabul near Acre in the north of Israel. He graduated from high school in 1960 and attended Haifa University where he graduated with a degree in Arab Literature and History, and then for about twenty-five years worked as a teacher of Arabic in Haifa. He was one of the founders of the Arab Writers' Union in Israel in 1987 and in 1991 was elected as its President. In 1997 he received the Jerusalem Prize for Culture and Art. He was also the culture editor of the newspaper al-Ittihad and in 1990 was appointed editor-in-chief of the journal al-Jadid and the managing editor of the Arab Writers' Union's journal 48. In 1998 he was elected chairman of the Committee for the Revival of the

⁹On the motif of the land in Palestinian literature see: (al-Qadi 1982)

¹⁰On Palestinian literature and national identity and the controversial issue of place and individual, see Abdel-Malek 1999; al-Osta 1993).

Memory of the Catastrophe and the Perseverance which undertook numerous activities in Israel in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the catastrophe of the Palestinian people in 1948. His stories have been translated into Hebrew, Russian, German, French, Polish, Bulgarian, English and Greek.¹¹

The following is the list of Muhammad cAli Taha's published works:

- ◆ Short story collections: Li-kay tushriq al-shams (1964); Salaman wa- tahiyyatan (1969); Jisr cala al-nahr al-hazin (1974); Aid al-mian yabi al- manaqlsh f Tall al-Zatar (1978); Warda li-caynay Hafiza (1983); Aid wa- Hafiza (1989); Wa-yakunu f al-zaman al-Ati (1989); al-Nakhla al-maila (1995); al-Walad alladhi qatafa al-shams (2000); Bir al-safa (2004); al-Asal al-barri (2008).
- ◆ A novel: Sirat Bani Ballut (2004).
- ◆ Children's stories: al-Amira Rashsha, Malik al-fawakih, al-Hafla al-kablra and more.
- ◆ Satirical articles: Manaqlsh (1991); bi-Arabial-fasih (1995).
- ◆ Plays: Hawd al-nahac (1996); Idrab maftuh (1999); Ya hek ... ya balash!! (2001); Fasatin (2002). Al-Nakhla al-ma'ila (The Leaning Date Palm)-. Contents of and main ideas in the short story collection

The short story collection al-Nakhla al-maia (The Leaning Date Palm) contains ten

stories, written in the years 1990-1995. The stories are the following, in order: "al-Nakhla al-ma'ila" ("The Leaning Date Palm"), which also gives the collection its title; "al-Bayt" ("The House"), "Lahzat hayat" ("A Moment of Life"), "al-Khatt al-jamil" ("Beautiful Script"), "Mishwar al-asil" ("Afternoon Walk"), "al-Khatim" ("The Ring"), "Zawjat al-

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A number of stories in this collection aroused a considerable furor in the local Arabic press in Israel. Local clerics were incensed at some of the texts, called for protest marches and demanded that the book be taken off the market and out of the hands of students because, so they claimed, it was an evil book full of erotic scenes. They called for taking steps against the author, who became the victim of a campaign of incitement and was accused of being hostile to the Muslim faith. On the other hand, he and his texts also received many expressions of support.

The collection provides a miniaturized reflection of the evolution of the content and structure of Palestinian literature in Israel from 1948 until the 1990s. The stories in the book deal with political, social and national issues and contain nationalist slogans, nostalgia, social criticism, irony and ambition, and also reflect reality by moving in a field of meaning built on what can be described as an archive of the present.

Taha in this collection shows his continued predilection for mobilized writing in which issues of the homeland and its people are treated in a way which charges them with educational energy in the usual manner of his extended career of writing short stories. In the most prominent of which are the home in various forms, Jerusalem, the date palm, the street, the train, places of exile, and Moscow.

The places in the collection are of various types. There are some absolute places which cannot be located on a map and are not geographically defined (the date palm, the home, a refugee camp at a certain time of life, the village). These are actual although undefined places, which are therefore absolute and general and can represent any number of places which the reader can imagine in accordance with his mental and ideological leanings; in short, the places in the stories can be interpreted as being in any place or time.

Another type of place is a well-defined geographical locality. Of this type are the street in "Journey of a Native", the place where the colonel's wife lives, the train, and Jerusalem. Here the reader is led to think about a definite actual place by means of a documentary style which reflects the writer's inclination to explore the place and attempt to go beyond the narrow geographical boundaries within which he lives and which lack an Arab dimension. Some places allude to nationalism, namely Palestinian Arab places which evoke memories and which are characterized by permanence and stability (the village, the tree, the date palm, etc.). Then there are the places of settlement, the actual objective places where the necessary activities of life take place, such as work, study, etc. (Haifa, the city, the university in Jerusalem). Yet another type is the ideological place, the focus of intellectual aspirations and mental horizons (Moscow). There are also familiar places (the house, the street, the village and so on), hostile places (Jewish settlements, the city), closed places (the home, the classroom) which are associated with habit, protection, and a sense of belonging, open places (the street, the date palm, the field) which symbolize fear, anxiety, or running away from solitude and emptiness, and a moving place (the train) which is also closed and symbolizes freedom, liberation and a change in the situation. The latter represents the desire by someone living in a closed place to embrace the spatially and temporally absolute. "The Leaning Date Palm"

This story begins with an allusion to Muhyi al-Din b. cArabi's *Ard al-haqiqah al-futuhah al-makkiyyah* through which the author personifies the date palm and turns it into a symbol. This is a story about the sixty-year-old Yusuf al-cAli who returns to the ruins of the village in which he lived as a child with his family. He finds no signs of the place except for "Mabruka" the date palm, which he addresses and to which he expresses his longing and his suffering after five decades of exile. He thus personifies or humanizes the date palm, which he imagines is his soil and which reminds him of the good smells and the names of the hills, the roads and the paths. He alternates between the idyllic past and the sad present, and calls to mind his songs to it. He then imagines that the date palm answers him and assures him that it has kept its promise. It sings to him and he is reminded of Fatima, the neighbors' daughter, to whom he wrote letters which he stuck in Mabruka's trunk. He goes on to tell us that she died in the cAyn al-Hilwa refugee camp. He searches for some trace of Fatima in the trunk of the date and suddenly realizes that the trunk is leaning. He asks himself why that should be. Is it because of its resistance to the wind? Or because it wants to smell the people in the soil? He then sings a sad song, with which the story ends:

Mabruka o Mabruka

The eye of your mother and your father

Do not blame the time Blame those who went and abandoned you

Place plays an important role in this story, whose name is also that of the entire collection. The encounter between the story's main character Yusuf al-cAli and Mabruka the date palm represents an encounter between an emigre and his homeland. The palm tree in the story is not just any palm; it is rooted in the homeland and thus represents the principles of patriotism and steadfastness in the life of the narrator and the story's main character. The land and the palm influence the main character's spirit, heart and emotions, as shown by the warm description of his encounter with Mabruka: some steps and I threw my tired body on your breast, like a fighter coming back from the uproar and throwing himself into his mother's or his wife's arms. I will give you kisses the likes of which love did not know!" (Taha 1995: 6). The imagery used by the narrator to describe the palm, which he compares to a mother or a wife, demonstrates the main character's attachment to the palm and the place which it occupies. The emotional nature of the metaphors is consistent with the story's overall atmosphere, of Yusuf's strong attachment to and yearning for his town and his homeland.

The author, it should be noted, reifies the homeland by way of personifying the date palm. He imagines it as his land and alternates between the happy past and the sad present. It reminds him of the houses, the valleys, the roads, and the good smells. He then imagines that it speaks to him and ensures him that it has kept its promise to him. "The story 'The Leaning Date Palm' is the only one which connects the two periods, before and after the Palestinian-Israeli accord, since it describes the Palestinian who returns to his homeland and follows his impressions and his memories of long ago, of what his grandmother and father and mother told him, but then comes up against the present, although he does not rebel but accepts it as the only satisfactory choice" (al-Qasim 2001: 122). The date palm is a place which evokes the narrator's memory of his happy childhood, a childhood marred by the war of 1948, when Yusuf cAli left but continued to remember it and to hear his father talking about it. Throughout the years of his absence it thus became for him a symbol of the homeland in its entirety. Then, after the Israeli-Palestinian agreement he returned and found the palm tree, which he named Mabruka, a permanent witness to a time which he tried to retrieve through the song which he transmitted to the palm: "Carried on a carpet of yearning I return to you, Mabruka, with chest held high, my arms like eagle's wings, I hear you, greetings, greetings!" (Taha 1995: 7). He then evokes the names of the warm places to which the date palm remains a witness: "The air above the soil of 'al-bayyada' is cold and refreshing in the summer and the morning breeze in 'rubac al-sitt' reminds the youth of the perfume of a young woman who passes near him ... it spreads in the air and fills the nose with your memory of slumbering desires. The air of 'al-marrah' carries the smell of the livestock, the cattle the goats and the sheep" (Taha 1995: 7). The narrator uses some expressions which indicate his yearning for the homeland and occasionally depicts the homeland and his own place using traditional expressions associated with the place's features in Arab Palestine. Here are some examples: ". he inhaled the dawn air perfumed with the aroma of the orange trees for an hour. and became intoxicated with the cool refreshing sea breeze which caressed his dark face and his neck which was creased from walking. They say that Job came to the sea shore with his frail, blistered body, threw himself into the water, remained immersed a few moments and came out cured, with the body of a strong youth drying out in the light!" (Taha 1995: 7). The text just quoted clearly shows that the Palestinian sea breeze and

the smell of the orange trees on the shores of Arab Palestine constituted an ideal among the people, especially those who were far away from the homeland and always sang the praises of the Palestinian oranges whose pure smells they wished to experience once more in their homeland, in addition to the agreeable air which can cure the ill. All these features of the Palestinian place affected the narrator and the story's main character alike. Note also the reference to an ancient religious figure, Job, whose patience became proverbial and whose personality became a model of endurance. Perhaps this reverence in the context of the beautiful views of the Palestinian place in the narrator's mind emphasizes the vitality of that place and its importance in the narrator's psyche and his spiritual and historical culture. The text after all clearly shows how Palestine as a place affects Job's worn-out body which chronic disease had ruined. Job was cured by the air of Palestine, a clear indication of the ability of the place (Palestine) to revive those who are absent and far away.

Job is not the only Old Testament figure to which the narrator alludes. In the course of the story he mentions a number of ancient religious symbols which have a definite connection with the place and its qualitative value in the mind of the narrator and the story's main character. Among the examples for this we may mention the Book of Exodus (Taha1995: 9) and such Old Testament figures as Adam and Eve, and Cain and Abel (Taha1995: 9). The clearest evidence for the status of place in the story and for the connection of the date palm as a spatial and religious motif with the text and its components, is the attestation of the birth of Christ in this country under the shade of a palm date, whose existence is thus associated with the birth of a person who changed the face of history. The narrator recalls the story of Christ and his mother the Virgin Mary in the shade of the date palm which contains sacred meanings that are associated also with the place's sanctity. In the course of his account of his exile from home and his longing for the soil of the homeland and the features of the absent place the narrator says: "My father would praise God in moments of ecstasy. He would say that God created the date palm in Paradise and in the House of Islam. He did not choose any fruit but the date with which Our Lady Mary was nourished when she gave birth to Our Lord Jesus may peace be upon him. It witnessed the Nativity and provided Him with milk! Date palms have sleeves, Yusuf al-cAli. Not every birth is a Nativity, and not every midwife is like this one. The date palm was Mary's midwife, and her son was nourished from its dates!" (Taha1995: 10).

Yusuf al-cAli returned and found that the palm's trunk was leaning under the pressure of time. However, he did not blame time for this, but those who had abandoned it. He forgives it its tilt and reassures it that he has returned and will never abandon it again, for he sees in it the homeland, the soil, the home, the people, and the hope which he tries to reincarnate. Now he comes back and embraces it with an embrace that encompasses his home, the alley, the people, the bridge, the peach tree, the jasmine bush, the yard, the entire homeland, to which it is the only witness. The story consists of an admirable mixture of reality with fantasy, of shock with dream, of man with soil. If we were to read the story against a background of heritage we would see that the "date palm" did not emerge in the narrators mind out of nothing, or as a random choice; rather, it is a symbol which is tightly connected to Palestinian existence.

¹¹On Taha as writer and on his literary role see: (Ibrahim Taha 2001:7-8 ; al-Qasim 2007; Taha: 2007; al- Jayyusi 1997:2, 125) He has been honored on numerous occasions, the latest at a celebration in honor of his sixtieth birthday held in 2001 by the al-Aswar publishing house,

which also put out a special issue of the journal *al-Aswarlll-abhath al-flkrlyya wal-thaqafa al-watanlyya* 23 (2001), pp. 367-392.

¹²For example: Calycotome, anemones, daffodils, plums, cyclamen, and more. See(Taha 1995:For example: Rooster, eagle, bird, and finch.

The date palm is the tree of the holy Ishtar, the goddess of fertility. It is said that the date palm is associated with birth and reproduction, and that the Phoenix is the bird of the date palm. Phoenicia or the Land of Canaan was therefore the land of many date palms, where this tree occupied an important place throughout the generations. The story's opening alludes to this, when the narrator says: "I was assassinated, killed many times. I arose from among the bodies of the dead as Christ arose" (Taha1995: 6). His return to the land which he had left against his will was like a return to life or, as the author expressed it, like the resurrection of Christ. It would thus appear that Taha's date palm is the palm of place, of roots and survival, a date which keeps its promise, preserves and resists. The author chose this species of tree because of its ability to withstand periods of drought and because of its permanence in the soil. In fact, it is the justification for this survival and historical continuity, and its return as the Phoenix bird (Mawasi, 2001: 324).

The story contains the names of places (al-Bayyada, Rubac al-sitt, al-Marah, etc.), the names of plants as well as of birds. These all evoke an adherence to the homeland, nay, they evoke the meaning of the homeland. The narrator is an expert on the homeland's geography and hides from our sight the "air of exuberance" and the smell of the high land in the hours of the morning. He is familiar with the gentle breeze over the slope, which is not surprising since the place is deeply rooted in his psyche, as the home for whose warmth no substitute exists. For Taha the place thus stands for the dreams and hopes which fill the narrator's heart and turn him into a bird which journeys through the geography of the homeland by way of his broad imagination. This shows the dynamic of spatial imagination and the role which place has in entering the world of the story and breathing through it.¹⁴

In this story the author gives preference to nature in Palestine and especially the social customs expressed through the local culture in the Palestinian countryside (such as horseshoes and blue pearls) and the buildings there (such as the skylight and the bridge). These items of nature provide the story with a realistic character and help the main character, be it the narrator, the date palm, or the entire place with all its details and components. The importance of the place lies in the fact that it encompasses the past that is ended because they have been, lived, been happy, and passed away. It is important because it deepens the narrator's relationship with his past, and first and foremost with his father cAli.

The author frequently asks "Where?" (Taha 1995: 12). The repetition of this question makes rhetorical and provocative, as if meant to evoke the past. The "where?" questions concern both tangible and conceptual matters, all of which are poured onto the soil of the homeland, in this case the soil of the date palm. The question "where?" is part of his search for his being: "So where are the sparrows which used to jump around him in the yard of his home? In fact, where is the yard? And where is the home? Also, where is the ripe green Fatima who became desiccated like a dry stick?". Fatima symbolizes the Palestinian loss. The story continues to stress this romantic yearning even in the narrator's determination, which he threw away in exile

with his gun on his side. The leaning date palm was bowed down by shocks and catastrophes, but he asks why it leans and gives three possible answers: yearning, exile, and time. He then asks again “What made you lean? Do you lean in order to withstand the wind? Do you lean in order to smell the people in the soil?” (Taha1995: 14).

The choice of a “leaning” date palm may be an allusion to Mary’s “leaning” palm. Furthermore, the date palm is a Palestinian-Canaanite symbol, the Phoenix, a symbol of rejuvenation and resurgence, of patience and perseverance in the face of even the strongest winds.¹⁵ The leaning of the palm reflects the fact that it partakes of the people’s sufferings and yearnings. The story ends on a surprisingly sharp note: “Do not blame time, blame those who left and abandoned you” (Taha1995: 14). Repeated readings of the text have left us with no doubt that the place, in this case the homeland and the soil, is the real objective which motivates the text, the main character, the narrator, and everything which passes through the minds of the latter two.

“The House”

The story’s main character bemoans the bitterness of having to forsake his homeland and his home. He speaks much of this home, which for him represents the happy past that was and the hoped-for future, the house of his childhood and dreams, a place of safety and security. However, he was forced to leave his home together with his family, leaving him with no childhood memories of it. He then tells us about the small, miserable house in the refugee camp, which was not his original home but one in which he was forced to live. The games there were not his games, the yard did not belong to him, the neighbors were temporary, and the whole place was like the waiting room of a train station. He goes on to speak about his yearnings for the homeland and mentions its towns and cities, such as Nazareth, al-Maghar, al-Rama, Nablus and Bir Zet. Then he mentions the vegetation of the homeland, the olive, the rue, the tumbleweed, the hyssop, the chamomile, and others. After that he attacks the “Arabs of 1948”, whom he accuses of being neither very intelligent nor very strong; however, he then corrects himself and praises God for the fact that they remained in the homeland and managed to preserve its shape, smell, heritage, cheers, songs and Arab nature. He tells the story of how he left his home in the Yarmuk refugee camp to study in Rome, where he chose the subjects of engineering and home decorating. Many people expressed their scorn at his choice which, so they claimed, did not prepare him for a profession in which he could make a good living such as medicine or law. However, he remained firm in his decision, because these same people would need an engineer when they would build a home in their homeland. He made the acquaintance of an Italian youth named Alberto who told him that he was going on a trip to Israel in order to study the situation of the Palestinians. He asked him to go to the city of Nazareth, where he was to take a taxi driven by an elderly Arab and ask him to drive him to the village of al-Sajara, so that he could describe to him what was left of it. After Alberto returned the story’s main character obtained some photographs and chose one which he asked the photographer to enlarge and put it in an elegant frame.

¹⁴On this issue see (Balshar 1987: 71).

¹⁵According to some historians the word Phoenix originally meant a certain type of date palm which grew along the Palestinian coast in antiquity. See (Buyumi 1997:120; Shawqi 1995:666)

Later his father became ill and came to him in Italy for treatment. When he entered his son's room he stared in shock at the photograph and told him that it was a picture of their home in the lost homeland. He embraced the picture and collapsed on the chair.

The story's title, "The House", is not the only piece of evidence for the central position of place in it, although it does show the author's awareness of the importance of place here. The story's narrative structure is simple. It reflects the situation in which many

Palestinian refugees find themselves in various countries. The story's main character suffers the pains of homelessness and by chance acquires a photograph of the home in which he was born and which he was forced to leave together with his family, at an age when he was too young to remember anything. The photograph is a valuable treasure which the narrator and main character see as an important trace that documents their connection to the far-away homeland. This photograph also had a great effect on his father, whom it reminded of their old home and caused him to collapse on the chair as he embraced it (Taha1995: 24).

Place imposes itself on the story's every facet and phase. The narrator moves from one place to another, but he is constantly driven towards a single place which never leaves the mind of the narrator and the story's main character, namely the village of al-Shajara, near Tiberias in northern Israel.

The narrator begins with a description of his house in exile, a quiet, peaceful place where a person can relax as nowhere else. Then he speaks about the place in the home where a person usually sits and the importance of such a regular seat where one spends his time at home. For the narrator this is a place of value which has an effect on the spirit.

The story presents scenes of Palestinian homelessness outside the borders of the homeland. It shows a person moving from one place to another, from one temporary shelter to another. In this way the narrator wants to make the point that the only place where a person can find unbroken peace and quiet is in his true homeland, Palestine, where he was born. In the story the main character moved from the homeland to the Yarmuk refugee camp in Syria, then to Rome, to Jordan, to Beirut where he remained for some time, then back to Rome where he remained until the end of the story. Throughout all these wanderings the main character's mind never strayed from his first home where he was born, as he explains: "Had I known peace, quiet and stability I would have written a book on houses. It would certainly have been a very strange book, on our first house in al-Shajara" (Taha1995: 18). The narrator announces more than once that the houses in which he lived outside the homeland were not homes, nor were the lands among which he moved his countries: "A man moves around the world. Traveling. Visiting. Loitering. Reviving. Amusing himself. Being happy. Being sad. Being tired. Then in the end he feels that a string, seen and yet unseen, pulls him towards his home, on which he lays his head as he laid his head on his mother's breast in order to relax, fall asleep in security, and dream sweet dreams. But a house in a refugee camp is not like that..." (Taha1995: 18).

The narrator openly attacks the "Arabs of 1948" (the Palestinian Arabs in Israel), their values and their conscience. Among the faults which he ascribes to them is that they are less intelligent and less courageous than the Palestinians who lived in dispersions outside the homeland. He compares villages which had been abandoned with villages that remained on the ground and

whose inhabitants did not go into exile. His comparison shows his clear preference for the people of the abandoned villages. But the narrator then ignores what he just said and says that it was a good thing that these people remained on the soil, that this was a useful thing and made these people positive. He asks: "What form would the homeland have without you? What smell would the air have without you? ... What value would returning have without your being at home like a mother welcoming back her son, crying out in joy, while he puts his head on her breast and relaxes" (Taha1995: 21).

The narrator opens the story with the imaginary and unseen link which connects the homeland and the true home with a person who is far from his home and his homeland. This idea, which created the text and powered it throughout, is carried on by the narrator to the end of the text (Shalhat 2001:306). The use which the narrator and the writer make of place at the beginning of the story, at the end, and in between, are an attempt to highlight the importance of retaining the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homeland. It calls for holding on to this option and not to accept other options which are inconsistent with the right of the homeless to return to their original home.

"A Moment of Life"

This story tells of an event during the intifada in the Occupied Territories. A youth named cAdnan prepares to throw a Molotov cocktail at the car of an Israeli settler but changes his mind at the last moment because he sees an innocent baby lying in a small bed on the car's rear seat. The focus here is not on the attack by the Palestinian youth but on the humanitarian aspect. cAdnan then goes on to describe the homes of the Jewish settlers in the Occupied Territories as hostile, as houses which took his homeland and his soil away from him. For the youth these homes have no positive meanings and do not arouse humane feelings. They are ugly and strange houses with tiled roofs built on the people's chests and have the color of blood. Their presence on these lands is strange and unacceptable. He then speaks about the old mud houses of the refugee camp, which signify the unity of the houses' inhabitants with the soil that embraces them.

The story begins with a survey of the suffering of the Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, especially those who had been forced to accept new and unwelcome neighbors on their lands, which had been expropriated to make room for Jewish settlers who came to the region from various countries around the world. "A Moment of Life" possesses a tenderness of thought and a beautiful style of presentation, which on the one hand reflects the pain and suffering of the Palestinians in the Territories, and on the other stresses their high morality, their innocence, and the beautiful and noble humanity to which they adhere despite the circumstances. The youth refrains from throwing a Molotov cocktail at the Jewish settler's car because the Palestinian child compassion towards the Jewish child in the back seat of his father's car, thus showing how the Palestinian problem is hard on children of both sides. It also shows the child's good heart and its ability to show love in an atmosphere filled with hatred and hostility. The author at the beginning of the story succeeds in presenting the reader with a beautiful and exciting picture of nature which can arouse good spirits and noble morality. He starts thus: "The sun was rising slowly and lazily into the blue sky. A woodpecker on the green olive tree near him twittered with rapture like a baby at his mother's breast and whispered its love..." (Taha1995: 14). The author goes on with further depictions of nature which give the

text a romantic air that evokes humane behavior. This is indeed what happened, as the narrator points out, when the Palestinian child “on the way back felt that he was borne on a rug of sunlight. The tiled-roof houses disappeared and the youth heard his comrades extol the hero who carried out his mission with a perfection that no one expected. He saw Hayat laughing, Sami smiling, and the two small kids jumping around their mother” (Taha1995: 33).

Place does not play a real rule in “A Moment of Life”. Rather, it is symbolic. The place and its romantic natural setting greatly influences the mind of the main character, who has set an objective to himself for whose attainment he worked until just before the end of the story. However, what happened eventually at the end of the text was not what he wanted to attain at the beginning; quite the contrary, in fact. The Palestinian child let the Jewish child and his father live. He did not take away their lives although it was in his power and he was fully prepared to do so. Here we see the role of a covert place in changing the child’s objective completely. The wonderful natural setting and the features of the place chosen to carry out the attack on the Jew’s car made the child change his objective into another, quite the opposite of the first. The place here is full of life and arouses noble feelings in the heart, thus enabling the narrator and the author to show the beauty of those who live there.

“Beautiful Script”

This is the story of the narrator’s acquaintance with cAbd al-Karim whom he taught in a classroom located in an old house with a clay and wood roof. The place was used for evening classes for teaching illiterate adults. cAbd al-Karim lived alone in the village, but no one knew the reason. The narrator noticed cAbd al-Karim’s beautiful handwriting and how orderly and clean his notebook was. When he asked his students to write the word “Zib” he noticed that cAbd al-Karim wrote it on a separate page and embellished it. He found out that he was from the town of Zib,¹⁶ whose inhabitants had emigrated to Lebanon after it had been destroyed in 1948. Then cAbd al-Karim learns to write the words “father”, “mother” and “light” (“Nur”), which makes him very happy. A few months later the narrator meets him again and this time he has a wife and a child with him. These turn out to be his wife and child who came back by way of Ras al-Naqura as part of what is called “family reunification”. Now the narrator understood the secret of cAbd al-Karim and why he insisted on embellishing the words “father”, “mother”, “Nur” and “Zib”.

“Beautiful Script” deals with the relationship between Palestinians who were forced to leave the country, their abandoned villages, and their memories of them. The character of cAbd al-Karim represents a Palestinian who yearns for his homeland, from which he is separated by only a few kilometers and border posts which do not recognize his right to live on the soil of the homeland. cAbd al-Karim’s attachment to his abandoned village of al-Zib in the north of Israel exemplifies the meaning of place in the lives of many Palestinians who left their villages and moved north and south out of fear during the war of 1948 and did not subsequently return to their towns but moved to refugee camps where they suffered because of the loss of the place that was dear to them. The author intentionally obscures the facts and excessively blurs cAbd al-Karim’s personal situation. The latter lives alone in the village without anyone being aware of this secret, until his family returns from exile (Shqir 2001: 339).

Place is important to those who are absent from it, through their memories of it which remain and maintain its presence. The features of al-Zib which cAbd al-Karim remembers and describes in the story show how attached his is to this place and how much he loves it. He tells us many of the things which his father used to say about the village, its families, plantations, orchards, the sea, the boats and the fish (Taha1995: 41).. In addition, we see that cAbd al-Karim's incentive to learn to write and his joy in this skill are evident only when he writes the word "al-Zib" first, and then the words "father", "mother" and "Nur". These four words are used by the author to tell us that cAbd al- Karim's main purpose in life and his greatest wish is to live with his wife and son Nur on the soil of al-Zib.

The story ends with the family's reunification: the father cAbd al-Karim, his wife, and his son Nur meet again, but not in al-Zib. cAbd al-Karim certainly seems happy to meet his wife and family after their absence, but his beautiful script does not bring him back to the place of his birth which he loves as well. Here as well as in other stories Taha brilliantly demonstrates his ability to take the simplest everyday details, put them together and create a story fabric which provides a human look at some aspects of the Palestinian tragedy.

"Afternoon Walk"

This story is about the daily walk which the main character, Suhayl, a man in his early sixties, takes every afternoon along one of the streets of the maritime city of Haifa. Suhayl is a retired official who spends the waning hours of daylight this way. He looks at the shops and watches the passersby. On one of these walks he noticed a graceful, pretty young woman walking in his footsteps and smiling at him. Her unashamed stare made him apprehensive. Strange thoughts began to enter his mind. He thought that perhaps she was a prostitute who wanted to solicit him, and made plans on how to get rid of her. When she reached him she told him that she as Amal, who had been a fellow student of his daughter Maha in high school. Suhayl was confused. When Amal left him in the middle of the pedestrian crossing he remained in shock, unmoving. At the end of the story a youth crossing the street says to Suhayl: "Go on, go on, sir". The youth's friends laugh out loud and Suyahl stares at them "perplexed, perplexed" (Taha1995: 55).

In this story the author gives us a picture of Abbas St. in Haifa, a place with which the main character is familiar and in which he feels happy and relaxed, and that he belongs. Every afternoon he spends two hours "looking and observing, studying people's faces, looks and movements. He then returns to his home on Abbas St. happy and satisfied with the state of the world and with his own state, sits on his favorite chair and gazes out at the sea, the port and the ships" (Taha1995: 47).

The street makes the main character feel at peace and in contact with the outside world. It arouses in him a love for and enjoyment of life and a trust in people. We see him behaving like a teenager when he makes his daily preparations for going out: "He shaves his beard, puts on his best clothes and some perfume and stands a number of times in front of the mirror in order to check on the coiffure of the hairs still left on his head, make sure that his moustache is cut straight, and look with pleasure at his elegant dress and the shine of his shoes" (Taha1995: 45). During his walk along the street he behaves like an adolescent. The author lets him express his inner inclinations freely, without any direct intervention on his part. He appears to be in

harmony with himself, not caring about anything but his own private thoughts and following the call of life hidden in his depths (Shqir 2001: 339). He often stares at the calves of girls and women wearing short skirts and laughs to himself at the word “wearing!!”, swallowing his saliva and repeating his usual saying (Taha1995: 46-47). He then raises his head, pushes out his chest, and feels as healthy as a youth despite his sixty-odd years! (Taha1995: 47). In the street he is carried away by his newly found feelings when he notices a young girl looking at him.

He thinks she has fallen in love with him and says to himself: “I’m am neither old nor senile. I’m still slender, my face is unwrinkled, and I walk like a young man” (Taha1995: 52). He feels suddenly young again, as if his age were decreasing. As if he were in his fifties, or even his forties, in the prime of youth, with the blood rushing through his arteries” (Taha1995: 53). The story then provides an insider’s view of a man-father and his relationship with a woman-daughter. The street here differs from streets which appear in other stories. It is open to this person, who enjoys the time he spends in it and the exciting views it offers, which would be impossible in a traditional rustic setting (Taha1995: 47).

But the author focuses on the time element and the changes in the situation. He reminds himself that he is retired, and after he discovers that the girl is a former schoolmate of his daughter and that she only wanted to ask how she was doing, the word *asil* (late afternoon) made him realize his age as he walked: “The little girl spoke freely and a smile spread over her small face. The man looked at her, confused, dismayed, lost” (Taha1995:54).

This story differs from its predecessors in the collection in that it takes place in the city, whose space serves as an arena for the instinctive sexual feelings which blaze in the main character’s soul. The city has its social norms, its morals, the behavior and dress of its women and more, all of which would be impossible in the Palestinian countryside. Nor could the main character have behaved as he did had the place been a narrow, limited rustic village. The story and the event recounted in it are used by the narrator to acquaint us with the difference between the city and the countryside, and the atmosphere in each. We see the allure of the city, its women and its houses in the leisurely behavior of the main character, and the continued leisure he feels in his favorite chair as he gazes at the sea, the waves and the ships (al-Qasim 2001:352).

“The Ring”

The story is about a youth, Khalid, who returns home from the city in a good mood and somewhat intoxicated. His worried parents were waiting for him and when they all sat down to dinner his father noticed that Khalid’s ring was missing from his finger. The ring was one which he had been given by his mother two years previously upon graduating from high school. It was a small gold ring embellished with a red ruby and had been given by his grandmother to her daughter, Khalid’s mother, on her wedding day. His two sisters often pleaded with his mother for it, but she preferred to give it to her only son Khalid. Khalid claimed that a friend of his had borrowed it from him and that he would give it back in a week or two. When Khalid lay in his bed he heard his father talking to his mother about his gold ring set with a large stone. The boys and the girls frequently stared at it and he once put on the finger of a girl he had met in the fig orchard because she said sweet things to him that intoxicated him like wine. But his mother was furious when she saw that he did not have the ring on his finger and so a few weeks

later when he happened to meet her again he took the ring from her and put it back on his own finger. But, the father said, “that girl was from our village, not a city girl!! It’s gone, it’s gone, it’s gone”.

This story may well be considered less impressive than others in its artistic style and in the spectrum of human emotions it conveys, since the only thing we find in it is a comparison of the father’s generation with the son’s when love burns in the heart. The comparison itself is quite stiff, and contributes little to the story’s inner world.

And yet the story does allude fleetingly to a number of places, including in certain expressions which the youth’s mother uses to convey her negative opinion of the city and its morals, which go against the customs of the countryside: “The city is an accursed whore” (Taha1995: 58), as the mother says, adding her fears of the city’s heat and the dangers which people in the city face due to the terrorist attacks there against the background of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Taha1995: 58).

“The Colonel’s Wife”

The story tells the tale of Ahmad and his friend Mustafa who work as sports editors in two competing newspapers. The two meet in the airport of Athens on their way to Tunis where they are to cover the final games in the African Nations Cup, which received quite a bit of media attention. The two share a room at a hotel in Tunis and when they sit down to dinner there Ahmad notices that Mustafa is staring at the body of the slim girl who poured coffee into their cups. After that they met the teams and the players, and recorded their reports on tape. Ahmad then notices that he forgot his cigarettes in the restaurant and goes to get them. There the pretty girl tells him that his colleague had taken them. He makes her acquaintance and she invites him to her home. He accepts her invitation, which is repeated every day, to be with her from nine p.m. until ten-thirty, because her husband, a police colonel, comes home at eleven p.m. They have a sexual relationship which makes him scorn his colleague Mustafa who, so he thinks, spends most of his time meeting players and watching the games. When the two were on their way back to Athens and then to their own country they drank some wine on the airplane and Mustafa told Ahmad about his nights with the pretty girl, with whom he stayed from eleven p.m. until one a.m., because her “accursed” husband, a police colonel, came home at one-thirty. This story takes a look at issues of a different kind, which are not directly connected to politics and its implications for the Palestinian people. This time the story enters into the individual’s world of instincts, outside the bounds of the Palestinian place, as if the author wanted to use this story and one other in the collection, “A Night on the Riga Train”, that a Palestinian’s sexual drive comes out of its closed bottle the moment he goes to another place where he breathes air which differs from the air which asphyxiates the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza or in the miserable Palestinian refugee camps.

“Lady ‘A’isha”

The story begins on the day of the Feast of Sacrifice when the butcher was busy slaughtering the holiday sacrifices. On that day the children and grandchildren assembled at the home of grandmother ‘A’isha to get their portions of the sacrifices. Her name (literally: living) befit her, since she was over one-hundred-and-twenty years old. She spoke to those present about bygone times she remembered. Over the years she became stooped and shorter with age, bearing

witness to the time she lived. Some said that she saw Ahmad Basha al-Jazzar with her own eyes while another claimed that she had seen Zahir al-cUmar on his way from Acre to Dayr Hanna. If one asked her how old she was she would say "I'm not young".. The narrator accuses his grandmother of being tight- fisted, but at the end of the story she announces that the sacrifice would be divided as follows: One third to the loved ones, one third to family members, and the remaining third to strangers. Then everyone busied themselves with dividing the flesh of the victims among themselves. When the grandson (the narrator) received his portion he whispered to himself: Why did I accuse her of being a miser all these years? It was an untrue and unfair accusation!

The events depicted in this story are taken from the life of rural Palestinian society. The narrator compares the village atmosphere with that of the city and expresses his admiration for the personal interrelationships among the members of a single family in the village. Despite the primitive nature of life there, the soil is blessed and always productive. It is "a pure soil which is fit to be prayed to" (Taha1995: 83). Even the way in which the sacrificial victims are slaughtered on the soil of the village, although not in keeping with the it is done in the slaughter houses of the city, is much to be preferred. Grandfather Salih points this out when he says that "in the city's abattoirs who is to say whether they slaughter according to the ritual law and whether they pronounce the formula 'In the name of God the Kind the Merciful' before they slaughter, and differentiate between the permitted and the forbidden? This is religion, boy, not just figs!" (Taha1995: 84).

In Taha's stories the home is the fundamental element which ties the Palestinian person to his homeland, his heritage and his culture. It is the base from which he goes out to realize the dream of the future. The home as depicted by the narrator in this story is of the old rustic type which represents warmth, cooperation, love, customs, traditions and an adherence to the heritage and the soil. It is perhaps a natural outcome of the author's situation, his rustic surroundings and his local heritage, with which he has been preoccupied ever since he began writing.

"A Night on the Riga Train"

In this story we read of comrade Marwan's visit to the Soviet Union. It was not as a tourist that he came there, but to obtain a cultural and political education. During his stay in that country he had a full curriculum. Marwan relates the events on his train ride back from Riga to Moscow in the form of a monologue. He tells us how he became a zealous communist thanks to Michel whom he met in prison. The place where he found himself (the train) witnessed significant changes in his mental state and his behavior. He underwent a sharp internal conflict as he sat alone in his train cabin. The scene shifts from social to individual concerns, as he is attracted by the feminine voice which reaches him from the adjoining cabin. The motion of the train cars did not make him fall asleep, and his lonely wakefulness made him turn to his memories. These, however, did nothing to alleviate his solitude or fill the emptiness he felt. He therefore became restless, left his cabin and moved from one car to another. He was attracted to a cabin in which a boy and a girl traded kisses, and another in which two girls sat alone and one of them smiled at him as if inviting him in. But his serious thoughts refused to be led off track and he returned to his own cabin and his solitude. He then experienced a sharp crisis of conscience in which his innocent or even naive ideological beliefs were pitted against the call of the body.

Eventually the latter won out; his naive beliefs were defeated and a fake ideology made its appearance. So he went to where the two girls were and made love to one of them, saying again and again to the rhythm of the car's movements and his body's slapping against that of the girl: "Good, good, yes to socialism".

The place where the story takes place is the train, a closed, moving space. The events which can possibly occur in such a place are necessarily limited to those in which a person connects to himself or to another person. The main character, Marwan, sat in his cabin hoping to sleep after a long day full of activity and work. But the train (a public place) does not provide him with what he wants: "The friction of iron on iron, the movements and swings of the cars, ... the sound of the train wheels on the railway tracks is irritating, hurts the ears and interferes with one's train of thoughts" (Taha1995: 100). That is what caused the story's main character to move out of his own mind and create a kind of harmony between the train's movement and the movement of his personality: "Usually a moving place (car, train, airplane, boat) is a miniature world in which numerous human types come together. Because it is closed and moving it is bounded and framed, so that the people in such a place come closer to each other than the same types would had they been in an open, unmoving place in the wide world".ⁱ Marwan is aware of the importance of the place's movement, as the instigator of his search for something to occupy himself with as long as he cannot sleep or think in a focused manner, while "the trip is long, long, and Moscow is very far away from Riga. This country is vast and a journey here means long hours" (Taha1995: 100). The text is chronotopical: the time - a silent night, the place - closed and moving. The chronotopical distance between Riga and Moscow is long and extended. These facts, in addition to his inability to sleep or think, made him turn to external things and adapt himself to circumstances, and eventually also to change his views and ideology in order to keep up with the different variables in its chronotopos and not to become petrified or immersed in them. Marwan hears the sound of a laughing girl near the cabin door and the sound of a youth flirting with her. This causes him to leave his own cabin and move from one car to another, where he saw a boy and a girl embracing on their seat, indifferent to what was going on around them (Taha1995: 100-102).

These scenes with their profusion of femininity and passion aroused his own feelings and desires, and drove sleep ever farther away. The story opens with some background statements about Marwan's personality, about his faith by way of thoughts closed in upon themselves in many domains, consistent with their primary objective, sleep and contentment. Marwan maintains a monologue with himself about memories of the past, without providing any thoughts about the present or the future. This monologue represents the frozen, non-moving aspect of the character, whose inability to sleep makes it leave the past and moves it forward to the next moment, to the near and far future.

Marwan needs inducements to make him leave the locked place and go outside of it. These inducements take a sexual form. Apparently this is what he needs in order to fulfill at least a part of himself. This fulfillment does not take place spontaneously through just a pure movement in place; it needs a movement of the spirit as well. The two movements proceed intertwined (Taha 2001:283). His inner spiritual movement thus cannot be detached from his movement in place. If we were to examine the scenes which aroused his sexual desire we would find that these external manifestations were translated in his mind into a feeling of distress

which demanded a solution. The family he saw reminded him of his wife and thus aroused his desire for a woman, and the embracing young couple made him tolerant, so that he did not “curse their dissolute morals, nor put the blame on colonialism and corrupt and deep-seated Western imperialism” (Taha1995: 102), as he did on his previous visits to the Soviet Union whenever he saw such scenes, almost as if he was preparing to perform such acts himself at some time in the future. He thus legitimized something which he had always condemned on his other trips to Moscow, and when he came to the cabin with the two girls one of whom smiled at him, his subconscious drove him to expend his sexual energy. When he returned to his own cabin he was overcome with weariness, worry, and a desire to go out. His cabin suppressed his breath until he could not stand it anymore. So he went out, not to look at the boy and the girl who were making love, but straight to the room with the two girls in order to have sex himself. Then he no longer felt the weariness and worry that had accompanied him for many years. It was the place which made him into a different person than he had been before; his reactions changed due to the change in place and in environment (al-Qasim 2001:124).. The place in this story is thus one, since the cabins are all the same. However, each one has its own specific meaning and symbolism. Thus whereas his own cabin represents a dark place in which his feelings and desires for freedom are shut in, the couple’s cabin represents the spirit of liberation and change in behavior in Soviet society, while the cabin of the two girls represents the dreamlike world of beauty for which the story’s main character yearns with his repressed emotions and human instincts, the world for which he desires in his frozen mind which rejects change and refuses to face reality. The cabin reflects the youth’s liberation from his mental rigidity and his social bonds, gives him back his normal human nature, and sets him free in an open world that is very different from the stiff, closed-in world in which he lived for years. In this story place is shown to successfully change character and give it a different form than it had before; the main character’s cabin, which he occupied alone, differs from the others in its silence, which forced its occupant into solitude, thought, and made him try to convince himself of the truth of the ideology which he adopted, in which he believed, and according to which he judged the outside world. But the cabin with the kissing boy and girl shook his thoughts and his solitude, and made him doubt the truth of the facts in which he had believed. It awoke emotions in him which had been dormant and with which his conscious mind refused to go along (al-Qasim 2001:128-129).

The author chose Moscow as the destination of Marwan’s trip. This is no coincidence; Moscow represents the socialist ideology which he embraced. He believes that Marxism and communism are the epitome of freedom of every kind, freedom of the individual, freedom of thought, of literature, of art, of expression. It is well-known that many ideologies in the Arab world adopted the principles of Marxism and communism. This is understandable, because when the individual feels trapped inside a place he will rebel and seek to break through his boundaries and expand his space. More space is the equivalent of more freedom: “Comrade Marwan was convinced that the people in the land of the October Revolution did not know hunger, never encountered poverty, did not complain about the high cost of the state, and did not worry about the future of their children, since there were enough schools available to everyone, and enough textbooks, too. There was therefore no reason for deviation, and the people’s paradise on earth was surely devoid of thieves, deviants, drug addicts, stock brokers, AIDS, and so on. Everything appeared ‘the best of the best’ to comrade Marwan. The world was a good place, no wars, no occupation, no unemployment, no exploitation, no

discrimination, no persecution, no worries in this world or suffering in the world to come, as they say" (Taha1995: 97). It is as if he sees in this society an alternative to which he can only aspire in the social reality of Israel, where Marwan lives in a political and ideological exile. He feels that his place is too confined, because he wants to implement an ideology and does not possess the means to do so, because he is different, an Arab: "Mawan began to hate the high-handed exploiters and cursed the devil, America and imperialism. He felt solidarity with the African and Asian peoples, celebrated May Day and the anniversary of the October Revolution, brought his wife a bunch of roses on March 8, and defended women's rights. But what makes Marwan different from the others is his great hatred of treason. He swears and curses it soundly. For him treason is just that, whether it is betraying the Party, or the people, or one's wife, these are all treason, and the world can't allow such anarchy [...] Anyone who betrays his wife cannot be trusted not to betray his party, his people or his homeland!!" (Taha1995: 100). But despite these principles Marwan does not rebel and does not demand that these objectives be realized. Instead we find him amenable to change and willing to modify his fossilized thinking. He no longer curses what he calls "dissolute" morals and no longer blames colonialism, imperialism and the corrupt and stubborn West as he did on his previous visits to the Soviet Union. We see him descending from his ivory tower and doing something for himself. Perhaps his change in attitude is due to the collapse of the communist regime at that time, or perhaps it was the author Muhammad cAli Taha who was thus influenced and expressed his feelings through Marwan who gave up on his principles and his ideology. After all, ideologies change with time, as do people's opinions. We may thus summarize by saying that the place of residence and the place of ideology may change under the pressures of life, of time, and of material and intellectual changes, while the place of national identity is fixed, because it is linked to existential tendencies and to memories which preserve the place and participate in the integral creation of a person's identity.

"The Sura of the City of Splendor"

This is a collection of religious tales and stories from the Old and New Testaments and other historical sources, used intertextually to talk about Jerusalem, the "City of Splendor", its sanctity and its importance. Jerusalem is a place with pervasive meanings in both life and literature and numerous symbolic attributes. Jerusalem is a city of many dimensions, historical, religious, ideological, mythological, and esthetical. The struggle over this place therefore also takes many forms, religious, political and historical. This is made manifest in the last story of this collection, which is not really a short story at all but rather a beautiful prose picture in which the author has brought together religious and historical testimonies which champion Jerusalem in its difficult times and reflects the nationalist feelings which connect the author to the city (Shqir 2001:337). Here Jerusalem has a symbolic function of deepening the feelings of belonging to the national identity.

"O Jerusalem, o city of splendor, o sweetest of cities, have you testified to killing, robbery, pillage, destruction against us? What if those colonialists veiled in the cross have forgotten cUmar and Sophronius, ... they have forgotten peace and security, forgotten love, forgotten the teachings of Christ" (Taha1995:122).

16 This is not the only case in which Taha uses the village of al-Zib as the place where a story takes place. Another is his story "Risalat al-Zib fi al-amr al-ghanb", in his collection *Wa-yakunu fi al-zaman al-ati* (1989).

“O city of splendor ... o our mother . o Jerusalem the troops are still slaughtering men and women and children ... and the soil of al-Aqsa is still being irrigated with our blood ... and our love for you still grows each day ...” (Taha1995:124) The author uses the method of intertextuality to present us with a prose composition of historical, religious and mythological texts about Jerusalem, its sanctity and its importance. This shows how pervasive this place is in the author’s consciousness. For him there are many places and histories which have significance in the memory of that city, which in its entirety conveys the meaning of the occupied homeland and its history. The text ends as follows: “O Lord of heaven and earth, o Victor of the believers, o Ally of the believers, do not let a child lose a stone, do not let a child lose a stone” (Taha1995: 125). It is as if in this climate of peace and harmony between the two peoples he still dreams and yearns for Jerusalem’s liberation so that it can become the capital of a Palestinian state. The collection’s stories are of varying quality, but in any case the last story does not belong to the category of short stories at all. Rather, it is a beautiful piece of prose in which the author collected selections of what he had read in order to champion Jerusalem in its difficulties.

CONCLUSION

Place is an important element of short stories in general, and especially in Arab stories, because the Arabs are very attached to their place. In Palestinian Arab stories written in Israel place holds a unique position, because these texts deal with specific national issues concerning aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This has given place an important status, because it lies at the base of this conflict. As a result the artistic treatment of place in Arab narrative fiction in Israel to a large extent fits the internal Arab view on this political, cultural and geographical conflict over the two sides’ common homeland. This short story collection is an example of mobilized Palestinian Arab literature in Israel. The collection follows the general line which has characterized Palestinian literature in Israel over the past decades. The author uses his texts, as well as the dimension of place in the story text, to deal with a number of issues that are important to his people, such as the principle of returning to the homeland, protection of the land, national consciousness and its enhancement among the people, and more.

The motif of place in *The Leaning Date Palm* serves is of major importance in understanding each of the collection’s stories. In most of the stories it constitutes an important objective and it is the basic motivation behind all of them. However, we must not forget that when reading these and other texts, it is necessary to balance the various elements of the story which participate in determining its integral meaning and its various dimensions.

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