

**From “My Dovecote” to “My Building”:
Intertextuality in Jarrar’s “The Story of My Building”**

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Abstract: *This paper aims at investigating how Arab American writer Randa Jarrar’s short story “The Story of My Building” (2016) appropriates events, themes, tropes and motifs employed by Russian writer Isaac Babel in his short story “The Story of My Dovecote” (1925) to portray the hard conditions and circumstances that Palestinians endure due to recurrent Israeli military attacks on the Gaza Strip. Jarrar’s story alludes to anti-Semitic violence, known as pogroms, that marred the lives of Jews in Russia in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Through strategic employment of intertextuality, Jarrar’s story vividly portrays how a child’s dream of building a dovecote has turned into a nightmare due to the demolition of his house by Israeli tanks. Borrowing certain episodes from Babel’s story, Jarrar sets up a link between her story and Babel’s, creating a parallelism between Palestinian people’s aches and anguishes at the hands of Israeli military forces at the start of the twenty-first century and Russian Jews’ sufferings and torments at the hands of pogromists almost a century ago. The connection between the stories is made even stronger as each story is narrated by a smart ten-year-old boy who is traumatized by the pillage and carnage he witnesses and experiences. In Jarrar’s story, Israeli tanks destroy the protagonist’s house and kill civilians; similarly, pogromists loot the protagonist’s house and murder his grandfather. Eventually, the two boys are reunited with their families who have taken refuge at a friend’s house. Yet, while Babel’s protagonist does not lose his house, in Jarrar’s story the protagonist’s family along with several other Palestinian families become homeless and displaced.*

Keywords: Gaza, intertextuality, Isaac Babel, pogroms, Randa Jarrar

1. Introduction

In May, 2021, Israel launched an 11-day assault on the Gaza Strip, killing at least 248 people, including 66 children, with more than 1,900 people wounded from Israeli air and artillery attacks (Al Jazeera). This war was the latest in a series of more than 70 years of incessant Israeli attacks on the Gaza Strip, the most recent of which occurred in 2006, 2008-2009, 2012 and 2014. Palestinian novelists, dramatists, artists and poets have constantly and vividly portrayed these military invasions on the Palestinian people. Some of these literary works were translated from Arabic into English, and hence, have become more accessible to a vast array of worldwide readers. The works of Ghassan Kanafani such as “Letter from Gaza”

(1956), *Men in the Sun* (1962), *All That’s Left to You* (1966) and *Returning to Haifa* (1970) are among the best-known literary representations of Palestinian resistance literature, a term that famous critic Barbara Harlow (1987) has used to describe the works of Kanafani and other authors of contemporary “Third World” liberation movements. More recently, Arab writers who live in the USA and Europe have written accounts of these military raids and incursions in English and other European languages, exposing their works to yet a wider range of international readers (Awad 2012: 113). Susan Abulhawa, Selma Dabbagh and Randa Jarrar are among diasporic Arab writers whose literary works shed light on the plight of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. These authors follow a Palestinian tradition of literary resistance that chronicles Israeli attacks on Palestinian civilians.

This paper investigates how Arab American writer Randa Jarrar’s short story “The Story of My Building” (2016) draws on Russian writer Isaac Babel’s short story “The Story of My Dovecote” (1925) to portray the hard conditions and circumstances that Palestinians endure due to recurrent Israeli military attacks on the Gaza Strip. Jarrar pays homage to Babel as she acknowledges in the subtitle of her story that it is written “[a]fter Isaac Babel’s *The Story of My Dovecote*” (p.163). Jarrar’s story alludes to anti-Semitic violence, known as pogroms, that marred the lives of Jews in Russia in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. By borrowing certain episodes from Babel’s story, Jarrar sets up a link between her story and Babel’s, creating a correspondence between the Palestinian people’s present-day anguish at the hands of Israeli military forces at the start of the twenty-first century and Russian Jews’ sufferings and torments at the hands of pogromists almost a century ago.

By drawing on Babel’s story, Jarrar strategically foregrounds a shared history of victimization between Russia’s Jews and the Palestinian people. The connection between both stories is made even stronger as each story is narrated by a ten-year-old high-achieving boy who is traumatized by the pillage and carnage he witnesses and experiences. In Jarrar’s story, Israeli tanks destroy the protagonist’s house and kill civilians; similarly, pogromists loot the protagonist’s house and murder his grandfather. Eventually, the two boys are reunited with their families who have taken refuge at a friend’s house. Yet, while Babel’s protagonist’s house remains intact, in Jarrar’s story the protagonist’s family along with several other Palestinian families become homeless and displaced since the building in which they live is reduced into rubble. There is an expansion in destruction from the dovecote to the building of the titles and from a house for birds to a living space for people.

Isaac Emmanuilovich Babel is a Russian writer, journalist, playwright, and literary translator. He was born in 1894 to a Jewish family and was tragically executed in 1940 on unsubstantiated charges of terrorism and espionage. His narratives smartly challenge mainstream accounts and offer alternative viewpoints and perceptions on contemporaneous events and episodes. He is best known as the author of *Red Cavalry*, *Story of My Dovecote* and *The Odessa Tales*. Randa Jarrar (born 1978) is an Arab American writer with an Egyptian mother and a Palestinian father. Her debut novel, *A Map of Home*, which was published in 2008,

won the Hopwood Award and an Arab-American Book Award. In 2016, Jarrar published a collection of short stories titled *Him, Me, Muhammad Ali*, which tackle several themes of the Palestinian diaspora, young Arab women's experiences and familial and cross-generational issues. "The Story of My Building" is one of the stories in this collection. In 2021, Jarrar published a memoir titled *Love is an Ex-Country*.

Babel's story is narrated by an unnamed Jewish boy who lives with his family in the district of Odessa. The story opens in 1904 with the boy preparing for examinations to be admitted into the preparatory class. Although the narrator does well in the exams, a rich Jewish boy gets his place illegally. The narrator sits for the exams the next year and this time he is admitted to the preparatory class. To celebrate this occasion, his grandfather builds him a dovecote and the boy sets off to the market to buy doves. In the meanwhile, a pogrom erupts, and the boy returns home only to find his grandfather murdered by pogromists and their home ransacked. The boy is eventually reunited with his parents who were waiting for him at the house of the tax inspector.

Jarrar's story is set in 2006 and is narrated from the perspective of ten-year-old Muhannad, who lives with his family in an apartment in a residential compound in the Gaza Strip. Muhannad's father is a translator of Russian literature and, as the story opens, he is embroiled in a row with his cousins and friends on the issue that the Jews have been ill-treated in Tsarist Russia. To convince people of his point, he reads to them Isaac Babel's "The Story of My Dovecote." The men calm down, show respect to the unnamed narrator in Babel's story and even sympathize with him. A few months later, Muhannad passes his exams with the highest honors in school and his father's cousins and friends decide to build him a dovecote. The next day, Muhannad leaves his apartment to the hardware store to buy wood and paint but returns to find out that the residential compound in which his family, along with scores of other families, lives is destroyed by Israeli tanks. Just like Babel's unnamed narrator, Muhannad is eventually reunited with his family the next day at a friend's house.

The two stories portray how Jews in Tsarist Russia at the start of the twentieth century and Palestinians in the Gaza Strip at the start of the twenty-first century are subjected to violence and vandalism by Russian pogromists and the Israeli army, respectively. The two stories are separated by a century but depict how Babel's unnamed narrator and Jarrar's Muhannad are traumatized and broken down by the appalling events they witness and experience. Both stories are narrated by boys whose academic performance at school is impressive. Moreover, the two stories end tragically as the Jewish boy's grandfather is ruthlessly murdered by pogromists and many of the Muhannad's neighbors are killed by the Israeli bombing of their building. Yet, the two stories differ in the fact that in Babel's story anti-Semitic violence is perpetuated by Russian peasants during turbulent times in Tsarist Russia whereas violence in Jarrar's story is spearheaded by the Israeli army. Moreover, in Jarrar's story, the narrator's house is razed while in Babel's story, the narrator's house is not destroyed. In other words, Jarrar's story is modelled after Babel's in a

way to create a parallelism between the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century anti-Semitic violence in Tsarist Russia and contemporary violence against Palestinians by the Israeli army. This paper will explain how Jarrar draws on Babel’s representation of anti-Semitic violence to portray Palestinian people’s sufferings due to continual Israeli military attacks on the Gaza Strip.

2. Allusions, borrowings and intertextuality

Jarrar clearly acknowledges the connection with Babel by titling her story “*After Isaac Babel’s ‘The Story of My Dovecote’*” (p.163). This means that Jarrar wants the reader to be fully aware of the fact that her story “The Story of My Building” is modelled after Babel’s “The Story of My Dovecote”. From the onset of the story, Jarrar is drawing the reader’s attention to an intertextual relationship between her story and that of Babel’s. Thus, although almost a century separates the two short stories, there is a strong link that connects both texts. Hence, it is quite important to explore this intertextual relationship and investigate its implications. To start with, Julia Kristeva (1986) argues that a text is “a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (p.34). Similarly, in his seminal essay “Death of the Author,” Roland Barthes (1977) argues that the writer’s “only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them” (146-147). Graham Allen (2000) affirms that any text “emerges from a complex history of previous works and addresses itself to, seeks for an active response from, a complex institutional and social context” (p.19).

In fact, one may convincingly argue that Jarrar’s choice of writing a short story, rather than a novel or a poem, to explore the theme of war-related violence and trauma is quite strategic. The short story has also long been a form in which marginal voices could find expression, as Ronan McDonald argues (2005: 205). This practically means that the short story offers writers from underprivileged groups and minorities the opportunity to express their ideas and thoughts and write back to mainstream narratives. McDonald maintains that “the short form [is] particularly amenable to expressing the condition of ‘submerged population groups’ [. . .]. Predictably, it has proved remarkably congenial for emerging or post-colonial literatures” (250-251). In the Palestinian context, “the short story’s defining characteristic, namely its brevity, permitted it to be published and circulated far more widely than the novel in the mid-twentieth-century publishing landscape of the Arab world” (Frag 2017: 5). Quoting an interview with famous Gaza-based Palestinian writer Atef Abu Saif, Frag highlights the fact that the short story has become a popular cultural production in Gaza as it “‘flourished during the first occupation in the 1960s when printed material was censored, so writers wrote short manuscripts by hand as they were easier to smuggle” (p.5). In the same interview, Abu Saif concludes that “in the 1980s and 1990s Gaza was known as the exporter of oranges and short stories” (p.5). Thus, intertextuality as a subversive technique and the short story as a malleable literary form is Jarrar’s main tools to convey the worries and anxieties of the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip.

3. Babel's representation of pogroms in Tsarist Russia

In his article "The pogrom paradigm in Russian history," John Doyle Klier (1992b) explains that the word "pogrom" is Russian and it has become "inextricably linked to anti-Semitic violence after the outbreak of three great waves of anti-Jewish rioting in the Russian Empire in 1881-2, 1903-6, and 1919-21" (p.13). He argues that pogroms are characterised by "spontaneous and confused character, devoid of long-term objectives or goals" and they took place in urban spaces (p.14). Klier concludes that Tsarist police and military authorities proved "inept" and indecisive in controlling these urban riots which "could easily be viewed as tacit approval by the pogromschchiki or as malfeasance of duty by Jewish victims" (p.33). Shlomo Lambroza (1992) argues that more than forty pogroms occurred in 1904 due to several reasons. Lambroza maintains that "Jews actively defended themselves [. . .] in areas where the Bund [a Marxist workers' group established in the 1890s] was most active" (p.218). Robert Weinberg (1992) stipulates that the pogroms "cannot be understood apart from the complex nature of social, economic, ethnic, and political life in Odessa" (p.250). Weinberg also points out that the vast majority of Jews in the city "eked out meagre livings as shopkeepers, second-hand dealers, salesclerks, petty traders, domestic servants, day laborers, workshop employees, and factory hands" (p.254). In the aftermath of the October Manifesto in 1905, supporters of the Tsar showed their anger and frustration "by turning on Jews, for they viewed them as the source of Russia's current problems" (p.261).

As the above discussion shows, Russian Jews suffered from relentless violence in the late nineteenth century and the start of the twentieth century. Babel has vividly portrayed these pogroms in his literary works. Efraim Sicher (2012) argues that Babel "revisits Jewish cultural identity with the hindsight of Civil War pogroms," a move that enraged ideologues because it is a return to the pre-revolutionary past without the correct political revision of history (p.49). He maintains that Babel signals an attempt to resolve "the contradiction between the desired identity of a budding Russian writer and the reality of pogroms in which, as a Jew, he is himself the victim" (p.51). According to Carol J. Avins (2009), "'The Story of My Dovecote' emphasizes the burden of being marked as a Jew and the impossibility of liberation from that fate, no matter what one's attributes" (p.92). Elif Batuman (2009) argues that the narrator is punished for "coveting the doves, for memorizing Putsikovich and Pushkin, for achieving the two fives" (p.169). The boy, in other words, "betrayed his great-uncle for Pushkin" (p.172). For Zsuzsa Hetényi (2009), the story shows the horrors of the pogrom indirectly, only to the extent of their influence on the child's life (p.176). Hetényi concludes that the very title of the story underlines the importance of the boy's dovecote which is "a home for the bird symbolizing peace and reconciliation," the exact opposite of the violence of the pogrom (p.179).

4. Eyeless and homeless in Gaza

Palestinian fiction writers and filmmakers have portrayed the horrible repercussions of the Israeli military attacks on the Gaza Strip. For instance, in her analysis of

several Gaza-based documentaries, Hania Nashef (2020) argues that with the help of recent technology, Gazans are able to narrate their stories, take control of their lives, and demand to be heard (p.2). Nashef insists that the discussed documentaries, made by directors from various nationalities, have allowed Gazans a voice and highlighted decades of their long suffering (p.14). Similarly, Isabelle Hesse (2017) discusses how short stories by Atef Abu Saif, Jehan Alfarra, and Yousef Aljamal “addre[ss] and remed[y] the representation of Palestinians in the Israeli narrative but also in the international imaginary, where Palestinians are either seen as abject victims or terrorists” (p.191). She illustrates how the above writers focus on the quotidian experiences of Palestinians in Gaza, “encompass[ing] the sensory experience of the siege more widely” (pp.191-192). In addition to Gaza-based writers who have been portraying the horrible situation in Gaza, several Palestinian writers who live in the diaspora and write in English have recently published novels, short stories and poems to describe the hard conditions that people in the Gaza Strip negotiate on a daily basis under a strangling Israeli blockade, intermittent military attacks and an internal political conflict between Fatah and Hamas. These works include Sahar Kayyal’s short story “Shakespeare in the Gaza Strip” (2004), Selma Dabbagh’s *Out of It* (2011) and Susan Abulhawa’s *The Blue between Sky and Water* (2016). For instance, Abulhawa’s novel adapts Shakespeare’s play *Romeo and Juliet* to depict how continuous Israeli attacks on the Gaza Strip destroy love stories, traumatize children and kill innocent people (Awad 2022: forthcoming).

Jarrar’s collection, *Him, Me, Muhammad Ali*, comprises thirteen short stories, some of which can be classified as political allegories. In particular, “Testimony of Malik, Prisoner #287690,” tells the story of a kestrel with an Israeli metal bracelet. It turns out that the kestrel is Palestinian and it flew once to Gaza where it was fatally injured by Israeli warplanes, rescued and nursed by children and released again. On its way back to its home village of Aqraba, it was captured by university students in Tel Aviv and taken to labs where a metal bracelet was clipped on its leg. On its second visit to Gaza, the kestrel witnesses a more destructive Israeli attack on Gaza:

It had been almost two years since my injury there. And again, as soon as I arrived, I knew I had come at the wrong time. The large warplanes dropped bombs on balconies, on bridges, and on beaches. I could not recognize the building of the children who had nursed me. It was rubble. I could not find the children. I could not find cicadas. There were no fishermen to accompany at the sea. (p.91)

Figuratively, the kestrel narrates the Palestinian people’s tale of victimization at the hands of Israeli military forces. In addition, the story depicts the magnitude of damage that Israeli attacks on Gaza have left, terrorizing, traumatizing and killing people, demolishing houses and destroying the infrastructure.

Employing a realistic representational mode, Jarrar's "The Story of Building" portrays the damage that Israeli tanks have caused in Gaza in the aftermath of a military incursion. The story borrows events, themes and tropes from Babel's "The Story of My Dovecote." Jarrar, like other Arab writers who "live between two cultures [and] often have contrapuntal perspectives," (Awad 2012: 19), draws on other canonical texts to relate the stories of Arab characters to an international readership. Significantly, Jarrar introduces Babel's story to the reader through Muhannad's father, the translator. As a translator, to use Awad's words on the representation of fictional translators in the works of Arab writers in diaspora, the narrator's father "live[s] between cultures and help[s] bridge the gap between them" (2016: 295). By virtue of his job as a translator, Muhannad's father is a mediator who "occupies a middle ground that connects people and brings them closer to each other. [. . .] The translator is a connoisseur of both the source and target languages and is aware of the historical and cultural contexts that bind the two languages" (p.297). Once Babel's "The Story of Dovecote" enters the fray, the reader can easily trace the similarities between the two texts. Just as the Jews had been persecuted in Tsarist Russia, Palestinians in Gaza have been incessantly attacked, humiliated and killed by Israeli troops.

The first-person narrator clearly depicts the miserable conditions in which his family lives. They live in a large compound which they share with poor people:

Card-game night was moved to our apartment in al-Zarqah, the poorest neighborhood in Gaza when I was ten years old. We lived in a sprawling compound which housed grocers, teachers, nurses, tailors, cooks, cobblers, and, on the top floor of the third building, a translator of Russian literature—my father. (p.163)

Words like "poorest" and "sprawling" make the reader conjure up images of a collapsing and overcrowded building in a congested neighbourhood. Hesse (2017) argues that "the sensory experience" that Gaza-based writers depict in their works is "key to moving the 'strange(r)' closer to the self, thus making 'precarious life' accessible to wider audiences and retrieving the 'vulnerability,' and the concomitant 'grievability,' of these lives" (pp.191-192). Jarrar's description of the building and the neighborhood at the onset of the story lucidly renders the tough conditions that Muhannad and his family endure like fellow Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. In fact, the narrator highlights these wretched conditions as he describes the apartment in which his family lives:

I ran to the small room which my sister wished was not lined with books but with posters and a canopy bed with white tulle. This bedroom was converted into the library when we moved in. Its windows were obstructed by the shelves, which towered within an inch of the ceiling. (p.164)

As Hesse puts it in her discussion of Gaza-based literary works, writers focus “on the poetic realism of everyday sensory experiences [. . .] to represent ordinary life in Gaza, while bringing life under siege, and the exposition to ‘slow violence’ and dromocolonialisation, into the realm of the familiar” (p.193). Thus, Jarrar gradually introduces several aspects of day-to-day life in the besieged Gaza Strip to her readers, creating a bond between the character and readers. Furthermore, this focus on Muhannad’s building, dilapidated as it is, draws the reader’s attention to the significance of the building itself as indeed the title of the story heralds. Thus, by the time the story ends with the bombing and destruction of the building, the reader realizes that Muhannad’s family is deprived even of the basic human rights of safely living under a house roof.

Having fully described the setting, the narrator relates his father’s dispute with his friends and cousins over the Holocaust and nineteenth century pogroms:

We heard men shouting. I ran downstairs, not wanting to miss the argument, and when I flung the front door open, I saw Uncle Fawzi, the cobbler, brandishing his walking stick at my father.

“Why are you defending them?” said Fawzi. “You son of a whore. You traitor.”

“I am simply telling you a historical fact,” my baba said, his hands and arms shielding his head as confidently as possible. (p.165)

However, when Muhannad’s father reads Babel’s story, Uncle Fawzi and others fall silent, and they even show sympathy to Babel’s protagonist. They appreciate Babel’s representation of his protagonist as a clever young boy who surpasses numerous social and cultural obstacles to achieve his goal.

This is best reflected in Uncle Fawzi’s shifting position as he listens to Babel’s story. Showing disapproval at first, Uncle Fawzi eventually commends Babel’s protagonist and serenades his studiousness:

Baba opened the book, which he had translated, and began to read. At first, Uncle Fawzi made spitting sounds whenever Baba said the word “Jew.” All was quiet while we listened to Baba read the story of Babel’s first dovecote, applauded when Babel got first in class [. . .] The men shifted in their seats and crooned, “Allah,” the way they do after they hear ladies sing beautiful songs on the radio. My baba, and Babel, were one beautiful lady singing. (p.166)

Uncle Fawzi and others admire Babel’s protagonist, and they begin to realise how the Jews in Tsarist Russia and present-day Palestinians share a legacy of victimization, extortion, and marginalization. Jarrar gradually links up the two stories. As Muhannad’s father is likened to Babel, it follows that there is an affinity between Muhannad and Babel’s protagonist. This connection is made even stronger as the two boys score high grades in their exams.

To celebrate Muhannad's success, it is decided that a dovecote is to be built. Just like the unnamed boy in Babel's story, Muhannad is excited at the prospect of building a dovecote. In Babel's story, eventually, the boy gets the dovecote he covets and desires:

I had gotten everything ready for them -the one and a half rubles and the dovecote made out of a box by Grandpa Shoyl. The dovecote was given a coat of brown paint. It had nests for twelve pairs of doves, a series of little slats on its roof, and special grating I had invented so that it would be easier for other doves to come in too. (p.333)

In contrast, in Jarrar's story, unfortunately, the boy does not get his dovecote since the essential materials to build a dovecote are unavailable in the besieged Gaza Strip:

Early the next evening, I set out in search of wood and paint for my dovecote. [. . .] At the hardware store, Abu Allam sat in a rickety chair and fanned himself with a white handkerchief. I told him the men were building me a dovecote and he said he would have wood and paint for them early next week. I asked him why it would take that long and he told me to look around me. "Things are terrible. Open your eyes." (pp.170-171)

Jarrar's story here highlights the plight of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip as they have been living under a relentless siege since the second Intifada of 2001. Hence, Jarrar employs intertextuality in order to shed light on the hardships that people in Gaza face daily. Thus, Abu Allam draws Muhannad's attention, and certainly that of the reader, to the fact that due to the siege on the Gaza Strip, the construction materials Muhannad is looking for are unavailable and can only be smuggled through the tunnels from Egypt.

Indeed, Israel has obstructed the import of vital construction materials, such as cement, iron, wood, plaster, and 'dual-use' items with a possible military application (Barakat, Milton, and Elkahlout 2020: 485). As Elias Akleh (2010) puts it:

The Israeli army acts as the prison guards of this concentration camp [Gaza Strip]. Controlling all sea and air borders, the Israeli army controls and restricts all vital materials going into Gaza. Life in Gaza is dependent on the whims of the Israeli army guarding all crossings into Gaza. They close these crossings whenever they want, for long periods of time, to starve Palestinians. (p.103)

Thus, the siege imposed by Israel on the Gaza Strip makes Muhannad's dreams of building a dovecote vanish into thin air. Yet, Muhannad is still unaware of this fact as he responds to Abu Allam's advice to open his eyes nonchalantly: "I did just as

he said, glanced up and down the street, but all appeared as it always did. I shrugged and walked around the block” (p.171). Just like the unnamed narrator in Babel’s story, Muhannad does not understand the gravity of the situation at this stage. He is, for instance, oblivious to the exchange of shots he heard in the street right before he embarked on his journey to buy the required materials (p.170). At this stage, the boy is obsessed with the idea of building a dovecote and does not foresee the tragic events that await him.

According to Ilan Pappé (2010), long before the signing of the Oslo Accord in 1993, Israel attempted “to construct the Strip as an enclave [. . .]. The Oslo agreement enabled the Israelis to reaffirm the Strip’s status as a separate geopolitical entity—not just outside of Palestine as a whole, but also cut off from the West Bank” (p.190). Elsewhere, Pappé (2015) succinctly argues that Israel’s “strategy [. . .] has been to ghettoize Gaza and somehow hope that people there [. . .] would be dropped into eternal oblivion” (150). Thus, the siege imposed on the Gaza Strip by Israel thwarts Muhannad’s dream of building a dovecote. In this context, Richard Falk (2021) argues that Israel’s policy of besieging the Gaza Strip “has imposed a subhuman existence on a people that have been repeatedly and systematically made the target of a variety of severe forms of collective punishment” (p.61). In Jarrar’s story, Muhannad is punished by being denied access to the materials he needs to build a dovecote since these same materials might have possible military applications. Moreover, Muhannad’s family and their neighbours are punished collectively as their building is shelled by Israeli tanks towards the end of the story. One may convincingly argue that collective punishment is a dominant theme that cements the relationship between anti-Jewish pogroms in Tsarist Russia and the Israeli assaults on Palestinians in the Gaza Strip a century later. As Jonathan Culler (1976) explains, intertextuality “leads one to think of a text as in dialogue with other texts, an act of absorption, parody, and criticism” (p.1383). In other words, Culler highlights the fact that intertextuality can be employed as a subversive technique. The calamity that befalls Muhannad’s family and the massacre he witnesses are far more tragic than the ones represented in Babel’s story.

Returning home, Muhannad spots “a small line of green tanks” at the mouth of Mansura Street, the neighbourhood’s main thoroughfare (p.171). Here, Jarrar’s story diverges from that of Babel. Jarrar’s “The Story of my Building” clearly shows how the violence that people in the Gaza Strip are subjected to is not a pogrom incited by angry and riotous mobs. Rather, it is violence masterminded and perpetuated by the Israeli army whose tanks and weaponry are used to destroy houses and kill innocent people. In other words, while in Babel’s story the unnamed narrator’s house is not demolished and there is only one casualty as a result of the pogrom, in Jarrar’s story the scene is far more appalling:

In the morning, I walked back toward my street. The tanks were gone now, but on the ground was Magic the pigeon, bleeding and motionless, his rainbow feathers spotted with red. [. . .] I saw, from a few yards away, that

my building was no longer there [. . .]. Chalky fabric and bits of shoes and curtains and beds and chairs and desks and tables and shards of mirrors and floors and walls and, then, *bodies*. I was standing in a *huge cemetery*, clutching Magic to my chest (p.172, emphasis added).

Through Muhannad's eyes, the reader sees the carnage inflicted by the Israeli tanks. At the heart of this horrendous scene is Magic the pigeon. The futility of the situation is rendered more obvious as the pigeon, a universal symbol of peace, is fatally wounded. Symbolically, the scene declares the death of the peace process and the resurrection of an endless cycle of violence. Jarrar paints a bleak image of Muhannad standing in the middle of a huge cemetery while vainly clutching to unattained hopes of peace. As Akleh (2010) puts it, "To make things worse Israel turned Gaza into a military exercise theatre for its snipers shooting children in the streets, for their special forces conducting offensive operations within civilian areas, for long range artillery practice, for tanks offensive exercises, for navy gun boats shooting exercises, and for air raid targeting" (p.103). Muhannad's vulnerability is underlined by his loneliness and isolation. Just like Magic's soft feathers which are spotted with blood (pp.172-173), Muhannad is a storm-swept feather.

Noam Chomsky (2010) cites eyewitnesses who visited areas in the Gaza Strip that had previously been inaccessible because of incessant heavy bombardment that they discovered "dozens of civilian corpses decomposing under the rubble of destroyed houses or rubble removed by Israeli bulldozers. Entire urban blocks had disappeared" (p.102). Hence, Jarrar's representation of the carnage inflicted by the Israeli tanks is not exaggerated nor overstated. It mimics reality and reflects the dreadful conditions that people in Gaza must cope with. Not only Muhannad's dream of building a dovecote has vanished into thin air, the very building on top of which the dovecote was planned to be built has been reduced to rubble. Overnight, Muhannad has become a displaced person with no home to sleep in. As a child, Muhannad is traumatized and broken down:

I dropped to my knees and as I lay on the rubble, Magic's guts trickled down into my lap, joining the body parts and pieces of home that sat beneath me. [...] Wires tangled underneath my feet. [...] I lay Magic on the mountain alongside everyone else from the building and stepped down through the rubble, like walking through the cemetery where my grandfather was buried. (pp.172-173)

This gruesome scene has excruciating effects on Muhannad's mental and psychological wellbeing. He is awed and shocked, and hence, he imagines himself in a cemetery as he is surrounded by death. The scene itself reeks of death and emits traumatizing vibes.

In a study by Manzanero et al. (2021) on war-related trauma and its effects on children living in the Gaza Strip, the traumatic symptomatology found in the

total sample fulfills the criteria for PTSD diagnosis in 26% to 30% of the cases and is related to the number of trauma events experienced (p.1581). The study suggests that children in the Gaza Strip were psychologically affected by the Israeli attacks as significant positive relationships were found between traumatic symptomatology and age, perhaps because of several factors such as the higher exposure to traumatic experiences and higher consciousness of the gravity of the situation, of the consequences of the events, and of the subsequent situation (p.1581). According to the study, most of the children were exposed to bombardments and residential area destruction, were confined to their homes, were witness to mosque desecration, were forced to flee, were witnesses to chemical attacks, lacked food or clean water, were forced to leave their hometown, had a relative who suffered physical harm, suffered from disease without being able to access medical care, or were witness to someone being physically harmed or murdered (p.1577). In Jarrar’s story, Muhannad’s situation nearly ticks all the boxes, and hence, he is the epitome of a traumatized child. This is clearly reflected in his own words: “I did not want to see the gray and pastel world that spread out around me” (p.172).

Thabet et al (2008) maintain that an earlier study had shown that “children whose houses had been demolished by shelling in the Gaza Strip significantly reported more PTSD and phobic symptoms, while children living in non-bombarded areas were more likely to report anticipatory anxiety symptoms” (p.197). In Jarrar’s story, Muhannad’s reaction to this mayhem is quite telling:

I pressed my body into the rubble, which did not resemble anything from real life [. . .] I sat there and wished the rubble would swallow me into its jagged and wiry mouth, wished I could belong to it. The ground beneath me reeked of smoke, and I began to weep. I opened my eyes and saw the mountain on which I sat. (173)

The nightmarish scene of destruction and damage that the Israeli tanks left pushes Muhannad into hallucination, confusion and misapprehension. He is unable to connect what he sees in front of his eyes to “anything from real life” (p.172). Traumatized, Muhannad is unable to express his feelings and begins to weep. He imagines he sees his friend Majduleen’s flute in this rubble (p.173). In this way, Jarrar implies that Muhannad’s traumatic experience is not unique but is shared by almost all the children in the Gaza Strip.

In real life, in 2006, Israel initiated a military offensive on the Gaza Strip code-named “Operation Summer Rains,” which commenced in June and ended in November. It was the most brutal attack on the Gaza Strip since 1967 as the Israeli army invaded the Strip on the ground and added “the firepower of its tanks to the overall bombardment of the most densely populated civilian center on the globe” (Pappé 2010: 202-203). According to Pappé: “In September an average of eight Palestinians died daily in the Israeli attacks on the Strip. Many of them were children. Hundreds were maimed, wounded, and paralyzed. [. . .] Israeli forces demolished almost three hundred houses and slew entire families” (pp.203-204).

Pappé concludes that the military operations “became a strategy - this was now clearly the way Israel intended to solve the problem of the Gaza Strip” (p.204). Indeed, Israeli military assaults on the Gaza Strip continued in 2008-2009, 2012, 2014 and 2021.

In “The Story of My Building,” Jarrar depicts the carnage left by the Israeli attack through the eyes of a ten-year-old boy whose dreams and hopes of building a dovecote, like his peer in Babel’s story, are blown away. At the same time, the wreckage and ruins that the reader sees through Muhannad’s eyes raise a series of questions on the im/possibility of the process of reconstruction. As Barakat, Milton, and Elkahlout (2020) argue, reconstruction under siege in the context of the Gaza Strip “cannot proceed fast enough to avert the economic, political, and social consequences that multiply in the siege environment” as added challenges emerge such as material and skill shortages and the psychological impediment of the perceived futility of rebuilding under bombardment (p.494). The story paints a gloomy image of “[d]ark bricks and piles of concrete litter[ing] the earth, which lay like pale coloring chalk under the brush of the blasted bricks and their powdery cast over the mountain” (p.172). It is a painting of brutality and violence in which a pigeon’s “guts trickl[e] down into” the protagonist’s lap (p.173). Even if people survive this attack, they are unlikely to receive adequate medical attention at hospitals due to the lack of medications and necessary equipment. In this way, the story draws the reader’s attention to the deteriorating medical situation in Gaza as “hospitals are paralyzed by power failures and the shortage of Fuel generators” (Karen Koning AbuZayed 2010: 48). Just as the health sector in the Gaza Strip is worsening due to the siege imposed since 2006, other sectors in the Gaza Strip are suffering, particularly housing and construction. War-related destruction in the besieged Gaza Strip outpaces reconstruction plans and projects.

Through strategic employment of intertextuality, Jarrar’s story has vividly portrayed how a child’s dream of building a dovecote has turned into a nightmare due to an Israeli military attack on Gaza. The form of the short story enables Jarrar to “slip through the totalizing narratives [. . .] through its reticence, its instinctive chariness of normative representation” by adapting Babel’s story to a contemporary Gaza-based setting (McDonald 2005: 251). As the story ends and Muhannad is reunited with his family, the reader is left to think about the challenging task of reconstruction. Uncle Fawzi takes Muhannad to his house where his parents, “escaping the bombing, had sought refuge” (p.174). Still, while in Babel’s story the narrator’s house remains intact, and hence, his family will return to it once this pogrom withers away, in Jarrar’s story, the boy’s family has become homeless and displaced. This is highlighted in Jarrar’s use of the phrase “escaping the bombing, had sought refuge” in contrast to Babel’s “had hidden from the pogrom” (p.336).

5. Conclusion

Jarrar’s story depicts, through the eyes of a 10-year-old child, the repercussions of an Israeli military incursion in the Gaza Strip that took place in 2006. Historically, the Gaza Strip was created as a separate entity in 1948. Since then, it saw the influx

of over two hundred thousand Palestinian refugees whose arrival increased the local population of eighty thousand by a factor of 2.5 (Filiu 2014: 52). Israeli attacks and acts of hostilities against the Gaza Strip have been ongoing as it launched major military operations in the 1950s, in 1967, between 1987 and 1993, between 2001 and 2005, in 2006, between 2008 and 2009, in 2012, in 2014, and most recently in May 2021. In each attack, thousands of innocent civilians are killed, injured and made homeless. The last six wars were waged while the Gaza Strip was under a blockade imposed since 2006, i.e. since Hamas won the legislative elections.

This paper has discussed how Jarrar’s “The Story of My Building” draws on Babel’s story “The Story of My Dovecote” to represent the appalling conditions of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip live under as their houses are destroyed by the Israeli army, and hence, their hopes of a decent life remain an elusive and unattainable dream. Jarrar borrows thematic and narrative tropes and motifs from Babel’s story. In the first place, the title of Jarrar’s story echoes that of Babel with a slight difference. Second, although a century separates the events of the two stories, the narratives depict violent events and assaults that claim the lives of innocent people. Third, the two boys are smart high-achievers in their schools and are rewarded by their parents with a dovecote. Seen from this perspective, “[a]uthors communicate to readers at the same moment as their words or texts communicate the existence of past texts within them” (Allen 2000: 39). While the unnamed boy in Babel’s story builds the desired dovecote and even buys several doves, the boy in Jarrar’s story is unable to build a dovecote because the required materials are unavailable due to the strangling Israeli siege on the Gaza Strip. Thus, Jarrar’s story re-writes Babel’s in order to comment on contemporaneous issues that shape the quotidian experiences of people in Gaza.

As Farag (2017) puts it, “the Palestinian short story rose to great prominence and exhibited a remarkable ability to respond and adapt to the upheavals taking place, all the while displaying originality, artistry and innovation in both its forms and content” (pp.8-9). By depicting the rise and fall of the protagonist’s fortunes in the besieged Gaza Strip, Jarrar, whose short story is pointedly written in English, reaches an international readership and audience. Jarrar focuses on “mundane, everyday experience of life in Palestine, which is more easily accessible and relatable to by a general audience” (Hesse 2017: 192). On the one hand, she writes back to the official Israeli narrative as many Palestinian works of art have done before. On the other hand, by focusing on “the sensory experience” (Hesse 2017: 200), Jarrar’s story vividly portrays the protagonist, Muhannad, as a traumatized figure whose house has been demolished in a blink of an eye. The story highlights the need to pay particular attention to the mental and psychological health of these children who have been exposed to war-related trauma (Manzanero et al 2021: 1583). As Thabet et al illustrate, children in the Gaza Strip have reported different reactions to traumatic events, the most common reactions being: insomnia, exaggerated startle, and trying to remove memories from their mind (p.195). Muhannad, in Jarrar’s story, is a case in point. He and his cousins, including

Majduleen, are traumatized and psychologically disturbed by the Israeli attack which destroys the residential compound in which they live.

Just as the unnamed narrator in Babel's story is reunited with his family at the end of the story, the boy in Jarrar's story eventually re-joins his parents and sister at the house of a family friend. However, while Babel's story suggests that the unnamed narrator will return to his house and live under its roof, in Jarrar's story the narrator's house is entirely destroyed and fragmented. Hence, Muhannad's family, like many families who live in the overcrowded residential compound, become homeless and displaced. Not only do the Israeli tanks destroy Muhannad's house, they also destroy his dreams of building a dovecote to celebrate his success at school, while shattering hope for peace and Muhannad's childhood. In addition, by demolishing the house, Muhannad's intimate memories of his small bedroom and his little adventures with his cousins in the house are completely shattered and replaced with traumatizing memories of loss, separation, and death.

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