

Noty

BARBARA MICHALAK-PIKULSKA

A Vision of Homeland on the Basis of Amīl Ḥabībī's Novel *Al-Waqā'i' al-ġarība fī ihtifā' Sa'īd Abī an-Naḥs al-Mutašā'il*

Abstract

People perceive the concept of homeland in various ways. This depends on the history, culture, mentality. A well-known Polish definition encapsulates the notion thus: *the country in which one was born*. In turn Władysław Kopaliński writes that homeland is *inheritance... patrimony... homeland, the land of one's fathers...* In turn the *Dictionary of Arabic* by *Al-Mu'tamid* defines it as *a place where a man lives. The place in which he was born*. I have attempted to find answers to the way in which the Arabs understand the term *homeland* in the work by Amīl Ḥabībī, entitled *Al-Waqā'i' al-ġarība fī ihtifā' Sa'īd Abī an-Naḥs al-Mutašā'il*. The events of the novel start in 1948 i.e. during the First Israeli-Arab War (May 1948 to July 1949) and ends many years later when a generation of Palestinians brought up outside their homeland has already emerged and grown up. The author concentrates on the fate of the civilian population, out of which the majority had already emigrated during the war to neighbouring Arab countries as well as showing by means of symbolic characters and events the diversity of attitudes that were held by Palestinians in relation to the tragic situation of the loss of their own homeland.

Keywords: Amīl Ḥabībī, Palestinian literature, Arabic literature, Israeli-Arab War, homeland

To write about the vision of the fatherland on the basis of contemporary Palestinian literature is an unusually difficult undertaking. A cursory acquaintance with the matter

in hand could result in doubt as to the possibility at all of realising the said, taking into consideration the fact that since the declaration of Israeli independence in 1948 Palestinians have been a nation without a state, and therefore without their own fatherland. It seems, however, that this case of a lack of statehood is neither a reason to neglect the above motif but in fact the reverse – it is something that constantly inspires creators to write about the question of a lost but with it most desired home of their own.

The action of Amīl Ḥabībī's novel begins with the year 1948, and therefore during the Arab-Israeli War (May 1948 to July 1949) and finishes many years later when there has already grown up a generation of Palestinians brought up in exile. The author in this way concentrates his attention on the fate of the civilian population, of whom the majority emigrated still during the course of the war to neighbouring Arab countries as well as drawing on symbolic figures and events to depict the various attitudes held by Palestinians in relation to the tragic situation of losing one's own country.

The motif of fatherland presented in the work is highly complicated and requires several introductory explanations and specifications. First and foremost one needs to remember what the concrete meaning of this word 'fatherland' is going to have in this case. We have become use to thinking of it first and foremost as a defined territorial area, one linked culturally with a given nation, even if it does not form within its territory a separate sovereign state. In the case of Palestine the formulating of the problem within these very categories does not appear possible. This occurs for two reasons. Firstly, the lack of their own country is here not a question purely administrative in nature – the Palestinian population after 1948 became in fact a minority within their own territories. Their land did not so much find itself under a state of occupation but was in a literal sense taken by the Israelis, inhabited and settled by them. Not only did the flag change but also the nation. Secondly, we are here dealing with a situation in which there are located within a single territory, in a historical and cultural sense, two fatherlands – a Palestinian and Jewish one. A hopeless task would be to decide which of these nations has the greatest right to considering it their own. One may find strong arguments on both sides.

It seems that in Ḥabībī's understanding fatherland is a broader concept. It concerns not only the irreversibly destroyed villages, lost towns, streets and homes, but also, and may first and foremost, the people, as equally those who remained as those who emigrated. Home land is exceptionally important but it often functions at the level of the ideas, thoughts or recollections of its hitherto inhabitants. Even the places which have ceased to exist still constitute a part of Palestine, for they live in the senses and memories of the individuals who were connected with them.

The next question which should be asked before one embarks on the analysis itself is what is the status of fatherland in Ḥabībī's work. Is there reference in it to the fatherland as a past form, one completely wasted and already non-existent, or rather about a future form, that constitutes the hope for all Palestinians? Or maybe it is a certain present-day being, existing in present-day time for the heroes? Formulating the problem another way: do we, in saying 'fatherland' have in mind something that exists in the present moment, something that existed and which is now no longer, or rather something potentially existing,

like a project for the future, a forecast, a dream? It seems that all three of these aspects intertwine with each other in the novel, although the closest to the truth is probably the concept seeing the continuing existence of the homeland. For Ḥabībī's protagonists the statement that their land has ceased to belong to them would be inconceivable. They all constantly and irreversibly are connected with it, treating it as their own home. In turn in talking about the future they are thinking of rather a dream of a regained freedom. The fatherland is, it exists, and for them this is an obvious fact.

The means of conveying the motif of the fatherland within the work is fairly characteristic. The author writes nothing in a straightforward, literal way. He makes use of rather fairly complex symbolism, a symbolism present both on the level of words (the significant first names, for example, Bāqiya – remaining, Walā' – loyalty), the selection of characters (the majority of them epitomise the characteristic attitudes of Palestinian towards captivity), metaphorical situations, and finally whole stories fulfilling the function in their own way of parables of hidden significance. All this results in many possible interpretations of individual fragments of the text. Given this level of ambiguity an awful lot depends on the imagination and astuteness of the reader.

The motif of the fatherland has been to some extent inscribed in to the main hero's fate. Individual thoughts are introduced as the presentation by Sa'īd of events from his life. These are not presented in a chronological way, though from the point of view of analysis it would be worth dealing with them as subsequent images of a symbolic character placing them on a timeline.

Hence the first question broached will be that of Sa'īd's childhood. Its inseparable background are Arab, Palestinian towns: Haifa, where the main hero was born and lived as well as Acre, where he went to junior high school. One may say that they constitute for Sa'īd a homeland in the widest possible meaning – these are places with which memories are linked, which were inhabited by those close to him, whom he knew perfectly and to whom he felt himself closely connected. Besides it is in Acre that he meets with extraterrestrials, the imaginary saviours from the hopelessness of a difficult fate. "There is a curious secret in these parts"¹, claims the hero himself, which finds to some extent confirmation in the subsequently cited words of Ibn Ğubayr.

Acre is significant also because of its past. It was once a powerful town with an important role in the history of the Arab empire. It was twice taken by the crusaders, each time running with copious quantities of blood. It found itself in the hands of invaders for one hundred years up until its liberation by the Mamluks, as Sa'īd is taught by his old teacher at the mosque, Al-Ġazzār. Acre, Haifa, Jerusalem – all these cities were witnesses to the terrible carnage of the local populations, constant wars, the passing from one set of hands to another. This is to some extent the eternal repeating of history. One of the

¹ *Al-Waqā'i' al-ġarība fī ihtifā' Sa'īd Abī an-Naḥs al-Mutašā'il*, first published 1974; cf. Polish translation by Hanna Jankowska, Emil Habibi, *Niezwykłe okoliczności zniknięcia niejakiego Saida Abu an-Nahsa z rodu Optysymistów*, PIW, Warszawa 1988, p. 78.

protagonists says “that (...) after every massacre there remained no one who could convey to new generations where they were descended from”.²

The narrator in a very clear way escapes, however, from an idealization of the places where he was brought up. He presents two stories from his own childhood, in which he was bitterly harmed, while in one he mentions very unflattering opinions about Acre, which he was acquainted with since he was a child; one takes the form of a family anecdote, according to which Sa‘īd’s great grandfather was to have justified the betrayal of his first wife by saying: “She was capable of this as she came from Acre”.³ The second is a testimony from the times of Saladin speaking of the place that “spread heresy and lawlessness; here full of dirt and muck”⁴.

The next stage of Sa‘īd’s life which we have any knowledge about is the escape from Haifa to Acre and from there in turn to Lebanon as well as the decision to return to Palestine. Thanks to knowing the right people and luck the main hero forces his way into territories gripped by war. There he observes how his country is being ruined, its inhabitants thrown out of their homes. Here the most indelibly etched is the image of people being torn from their homeland, forced to leave a place they have no desire to depart. One of the symbolic scenes is the discussion of the military governor with a woman who is attempting to return to a village destroyed by the Israelis. She presents the exceptional desperation of people who do not want to emigrate from their own parts. A similarly tragic overtone has Sa‘īd’s meeting with the refugees sheltering at the Al-Ġazzār mosque. They run off an entire litany of villages, “where besides graves there is not a single stone still standing”.⁵ The war destroyed their homes, their land.

Sa‘īd decides to stay in Israel. The next question which the reader of the novel observes is the difficult situation of those Arabs who decided to remain citizens of the newly created country. They were mistaken if they still had hope that they would discover here their homeland. The Israelis have a belief that their rule requires an iron hand. They do not entertain the idea that anyone besides themselves could also have the right to consider Palestine as theirs. “Don’t you understand discipline? You constantly think that this is your chaos?”⁶ – shouts the governor in the above mentioned meeting with the woman from Al-Barwa. The author unconditionally criticises the relationship of Israelis to the Palestinians, who were strictly speaking condemned to their total mercy and disfavour. Sa‘īd, having heard about the regulations in force in the penitentiary to which he is being taken, even claims: “There are no differences whatsoever between what they expect from us in prison and what they expect from us outside”⁷.

The Arabs are placed, consequently, before the task of creating their homeland regardless of the presence of Israel. The positions presented here are various. On the

² Ibid., p. 31

³ Ibid., p. 24.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., p. 27.

⁶ Ibid., p. 21.

⁷ Ibid., p. 132.

whole they are presented in the novel by means of symbolic figures embodying the various ways of maintaining national identity and the various opinions concerning the shape the struggle for one's own fatherland should take.

There are those who have given in immediately and who search for only personal happiness in the new country. For them the concept of fatherland has no meaning anymore, for they have found a new one, one removed from their national affiliation. They requalify, learn Hebrew, start a new life. To illustrate the situation the author quotes the signboard of a certain stonemason. His name is Mas'ūd Ibn Hāšim Ibn Abī Ṭālib al-'Abbāsī, and therefore contains the most possible Arabic elements: reference to the dynasties of the Hāšimite and 'Abbāsīd as well as to Abū Ṭālib, a relation of the Prophet. There is consciously introduced the contrast between this man's origins and his behaviour in the new situation.

Somewhat on the other hand the situation of Palestinians is presented by means of the figure of Sa'īd himself as well as the two women in his life – Yu'ād and Bāqiya.

Sa'īd is a man who decides to cooperate with the enemy, yet who at the same time attempts to preserve the hope for a return of his own country. He is an ordinary Arab, he is not a fighter, he is not a saint, he decided upon painful compromises. He is more of a victim than an independent subject of the events around him. It seems that in the author's design he was to personify an average Palestinian, who has found himself in a dead end situation. Sa'īd himself says about himself: "So many times you've seen my name in the papers. You must surely have read about those arrested by the police in Haifa (...)? They arrested then every Arab who strayed into lower Haifa, on foot and in cars. The papers listed the surnames of those detained by mistake into the notables and the rest. Those, 'the rest', are me".⁸

Two women appear at his side. The first of these is Yu'ād. Her name literally means 'that which will be restored'. She is Sa'īd's first love from his lower secondary school days, who unexpectedly returns as a saboteur with no legal right to reside within Israel. She is the symbol of emigrants who decided to leave or were forced to do so. Yu'ād's hiding place is very quickly uncovered. The girl is brutally treated and cast out beyond the borders of the country. She still manages to shout into the soldiers faces the words: *This is my country, my home and my husband!*⁹ After which she disappears for twenty long years.

It is the chance of her return that forces Sa'īd into subsequent concessions and compromises. Once he will say: "I have drunk this cup of sorrow alone myself. There is not a drop left for her. I have saved her from these twenty difficult years (...)".¹⁰ Paradoxically the uncompromising attitude of the girl means that those who remain decide on increasingly closer cooperation with the occupant. Yu'ād's return, consequently the return of those who had to leave, is the only hope for a restoration and regaining

⁸ Ibid., p. 13.

⁹ Ibid., p. 70.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 145.

of the fatherland. They constitute the majority of the nation without which it could in no sense exist.

A supplementing symbol will be the figure of Sa'īd's wife, Bāqiya (literally 'remaining'). She is a girl living in one of the villages lying close to Haifa. Her personage shields all the Palestinians who did not leave and who, regardless of circumstances, decided to remain in the homeland. Together with a dowry Bāqiya brings a personal secret to her husband – her father had left in a cave near the sea shore a hidden treasure. This is an iron chest containing gold. This is also a symbol – of something unusually valuable which had been left in the father's will but which de facto cannot be used. Sa'īd tries many times to obtain the treasure, it is, however, complicated by the need to hide everything from the authorities, who would for certain confiscate the valuables. Everyone lives in a state of agitation. In such an atmosphere their son, Walā' is brought up (the first name meaning, literally, 'loyalty'). At a certain moment something snaps within the boy. Together with his colleagues he sets up a secret anti-state organisation, retrieves the chest and with the gold it contained buys weapons. His hideaway, in one of the cellars in the village, a village the mother comes from, is discovered. Walā' wants to commit suicide. Bāqiya the mother tries to discourage him. There occurs a discussion that is the collision of the two visions of the fatherland, the two routes for the struggle for freedom. The boy represents a naive way of thinking. Having experienced fairly constant abjection he decides to resist and die like a true martyr. The cellar in which he is hiding is for him a surrogate home, in which there is no longer pretence, where he is able to shout out his long suppressed pain. Bāqiya meanwhile seeks a solution in a patient duration. She points to those who have not allowed themselves to be driven out of their homeland, have defended their homes, have not allowed themselves to be humiliated. This is the choice of a constant gritting of one's teeth and an awaiting for better times.

The mother with son finally slip out from the army's grip and escape, disappearing somewhere forever, not ever again giving Sa'īd any sign of life. Their fate remains a complete mystery: have they drowned in the sea? Survived? Found another home somewhere? No one knows.

After many years Yu'ād returns to Sa'īd. Admittedly not the same, but her daughter, bearing the same name and amazingly similar to her. This is the new generation of Palestinians constantly involved in national matters, treating the lost territories as their own home. The mother had explained to the girl already before her departure: "Because one day you'll return, Yu'ād, and you'll tell him that being abroad in no way has changed us".¹¹

Yu'ād returns but the story played out twenty years before repeats itself in an unchanged form. Sa'īd, on hearing the approaching soldiers, proposes hiding in the house of a neighbour and the starting of a normal life, although in hiding, which he had been unable to lead with the girl's mother. He wants to "return to the beginning".¹²

¹¹ Ibid., p. 158.

¹² Ibid., p. 161.

Yu'ād laughs not only at the idea: *it is impossible. You want to experience it all again, once more from the start?*¹³

Something has, however, changed. This time the soldiers walk around without tussling and shouts. They politely inform the woman that she must come with them, and then to leave Israeli territory. “This is my country, my home and my uncle!”¹⁴, Yu'ād replies this time in a calmer way. The author in this way shows metaphorically that the time for return has still not come, that it is still too early. Palestinian emigrants for certain would wish to find themselves back in their homeland, the Israeli authorities will not, however, permit this at any cost. It is still the same conflict, the passing of the years has changed nothing here. Constantly the repeated argument – “This is my home!” And constantly the same reaction, although both sides are somewhat calmer, emotions have lessened.

An extremely important figure is also Yu'ād's brother, the main hero of the novel's namesake. The two Sa'īds meet each other in solitary at a high security prison, where Abū an-Naḥs has ended up at for completely no reason whatsoever. At the same time the young man is an active partisan. He refers to his fellow prisoner as ‘brother’ and ‘father’ which is for Sa'īd a huge form of ennoblement and a most moving gesture. As a collaborator, a man who had been constantly despised by his compatriots he is now able to feel like a hero. The young Sa'īd symbolises the Palestinians fighting unwaveringly and without the slightest hesitation to reclaim their own country. He is presented in the novel as a king – proud, relentless, clothed in a reddish-purple coat (which could be a symbol of bloodied clothes). He is undoubtedly a source of hope for those who remain in hiding, in captivity. In the opinion of Sa'īd Abū an-Naḥs it is he who is the one who can fight for their freedom.

Enormous attachment to the homeland and its soil is also emphasised in the work, particularly in the context of the ordinary simple inhabitants of villages. There is not often seen here general national feelings, but for that a certainty as to the presence of love for the earth itself, which has provided for them so far and which as if by a law of nature has become their property, as if they belong totally to it. In the village As-Silka Sa'īd and Yu'ād hear: These were our fields. It was us who have sown them over and we will continue to till them. We have bent over them with care, and they have repaid us with a vengeance. These feelings cannot be confiscated”.¹⁵

Summing up, the motif of the fatherland, besides the themes and currents of a general human nature, is one of the most significant and widely discussed questions. The author's aim appears to be, first and foremost, a drawing of attention to the fact that Palestine was not a desert before the foundation of the state of Israel, a depopulated country. It was inhabited by a society that had and still has the right to call itself a separate nation. It was the homeland for an enormous number of people, who not only suddenly found

¹³ Ibid., p. 161.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 162

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 151

themselves under an alien power, but often were forced to leave the lands that had been inhabited by their ancestors for generations.

Zionist propaganda proclaimed Palestine to be ‘a land without a nation for a nation without land’. “If a Palestinian Arab nation had existed it would have left behind a cultural heritage. Where are the Palestinian books, literature, Palestinian poetry?”¹⁶ – asked the Israeli minister of culture Yigal Allon, whose words Ḥabībī cites in one of his press interviews. The author, in undertaking the writing of a novel depicting the fate of his countrymen, has for sure set himself the goal, among other things, of fighting this type of untrue and contorted claim. There is asked in the work the question: “For who raised in this country the high buildings, who dug the motorways, who tarmacked them, who built the supports and dug the shelters?”¹⁷. The hitherto presence of the Palestinians on those areas constituting the newly created state of Israel cannot be simply overlooked and forgotten. It was real and left traces both in the field of material culture as equally the spiritual sphere. Ḥabībī attempts to demonstrate to the reader that the Palestinians are a separate nation with their own culture, connected to their own land, desiring freedom and peace as well as having the right to fight for the said. He does so in a subtle way, without recourse to the aggressive language of propaganda.

For the Palestinians the concept of fatherland is not merely an important matter, it is an ‘open wound’ as the author himself entitles one of the chapters. This is one of those questions about which one cannot simply move on to, in a normal way as the order of the day, it is something which incessantly makes itself felt, causing painful feelings. The Arabs inhabiting the occupied land were, in their feeling of the matter, simply treated unjustly. They carry within themselves injustice and feel completely misunderstood by the external world. The strength of this book lies, in my opinion, in the fact that the author is not looking for those guilty, he does not moralise, and does not attempt to place rightness on his side. He merely, with an exceptional doggedness, repeats that a Palestinian is a Palestinian and will never stop being one. And if someone is surprised and asks as to the source of such an attitude he will with an ironic smile answer, hitting the very heart of the matter: “Did not the Great Man ask in passing why I had been born an Arab and why I have no other homeland than this country?”¹⁸

¹⁶ Hanna Jankowska, *Od tłumacza*, in: *ibid.*, p. 170.

¹⁷ E. Habibi, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 130.