

## The Evolution of Palestinian Narrative: 'Mo' as an Illustration

تطور السرد الفلسطيني: 'مو' كتوضيح

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### Abstract

The article aims to explore the present-day challenges facing the Palestinian narrative. It delves into the ways in which the narrative has been shaped by historical events namely the Nakba, the Naksa, and the Oslo Accords, and how these events have left a lasting impact on the Palestinian identity. The article then examines the potential for the development of a new form of cultural resistance utilizing personal stories; as demonstrated by the Netflix show 'Mo'. The show proffers a novel approach incorporating Palestinian political messages onto comedy and drama, and therefore has the potential to reach a wider audience. In view of the ongoing war in Ukraine, the article suggests four recommendations for advancing the Palestinian narrative in the global arena, in the face of the ongoing Israeli occupation, bitter national division, and heavy Western media censorship.

**Keywords:** Narrative, Identity, Story, Culture, Resistance.

**ملخص**

يهدف المقال إلى استعراض التحديات الحالية التي تواجه السرد الفلسطيني متناولاً طرق تشكيل القصة والخطاب الوطني بواسطة الأحداث التاريخية خصوصاً النكبة والنكسة واتفاقيات أوسلو، وكيف تركت هذه الأحداث أثراً دائماً على الهوية الفلسطينية. كما يبحث المقال امكانية تطوير نمط جديد من المقاومة الثقافية الذي يستخدم التجارب والقصص الشخصية في برامج ترفيهية مستدلاً بمسلسل 'مو' كما عرضته شبكة نيتفلكس. يقدم 'مو' منهجاً مبتكراً لتضمين رسائل سياسية في مشاهد درامية وترفيهية مكنته من الوصول إلى شريحة عامة واسعة عبر منصات البث. في ضوء ما يحدث في أوكرانيا، يقدم المقال اربع توصيات للنهوض وتعزيز الرواية الفلسطينية على الساحة العالمية، على الرغم من التحديات الجسيمة المتمثلة بالاحتلال الإسرائيلي والإنقسام الداخلي وخضوع المحتوى الفلسطيني للرقابة المجرفة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** السرد، الهوية، القصة، الثقافة، المقاومة.

**Introduction**

Scholars have extensively researched and examined the history and origins of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, delving deep into the intricacies and complexities of the issue. Works by authors such as Pappé (2006, 2015), Said (1984, 1992, 1999), Said and Mohr (1998), Badarin (2016), and Philo and Berry (2004, 2011) have made significant contributions to the literature; advancing the Palestinian narrative. However, amidst this comprehensive examination of the conflict's historical aspects, there has been comparatively less emphasis on how the Palestinian narrative should adapt and evolve to effectively engage with the rapidly changing digital landscape. Palestinian narrative, which encompasses the understanding and representation of the Palestinian people and their struggle for self-determination, ought to develop and align with the evolving modes of information exchange and dissemination.

The article endeavours to explore the historical and conceptual foundations of the Palestinian narrative while addressing the crucial question of how it can overcome the limitations imposed upon it and gain greater visibility in the digital era. The Palestinian narrative has faced significant challenges, both internal and external. Internally, the division between Fatah and Hamas presents a major obstacle (Brown, 2010), while externally, the Israeli occupation and suppression of Palestinian voices

hinder the potential of a digital Palestinian resistance movement (Tawil-Souri & Aouragh, 2014). Said (1984, p. 29) emphasizes the denial of Palestinians' ability to communicate their history and story through mainstream international media, which often fails to convey the essential facts and draw necessary connections. Despite ongoing marginalization, the advent of affordable technology and the rise of civic engagement through social media present an opportunity for the Palestinian narrative to be disseminated and revitalized within virtual spaces, necessitating new presentation and interaction practices (Hamamra, *et al.* 2022). The research problem at the core of this article examines the relationship between the narrative framework and the comedy/drama series *Mo* as a vehicle for consolidating the Palestinian story. Through the portrayal of Mohammed Mo Amer, a Palestinian refugee in the United States, the show sheds light on the personal experiences of Palestinian refugees who were forcibly displaced from their homeland in 1948, bringing their stories to the forefront of mainstream media. This article aims to achieve the following objectives:

- a. Analyse how *Mo* as a comedy/drama work can incorporate personal stories of suffering and the refugee experience into a broader political context, reconstructing resistance as an everyday subtle practice.
- b. Advance the Palestinian discourse, both in conceptual and national realms, within a period of political impasse.
- c. Examine the role of identity formation among Palestinians in the diaspora and their significance in shaping future Palestinian political aspirations.

The article is structured into four sections, each addressing a key aspect of the Palestinian narrative. The first section delves into significant historical events that have arguably shaped a collective Palestinian identity, particularly focusing on experiences of displacement. The second section examines practices of cultural resistance, asserting that narrative infused with cultural expression and themes of reconciliation are more likely to find a platform on subscription-based streaming services. This argument is exemplified through an analysis of the Netflix series *Mo*, demonstrating how a personal story can convey a broader national



legitimacy and self-determination. Thus, the Nakba<sup>(1)</sup>, the 1948 catastrophe, was not just a military defeat for a liberation movement, but a defeat for an entire society that resulted in the erosion of its existence as a social and cultural entity that thrives within a unified geographical space (Hilal, 2010; Dajani-Daoudi and Barakat, 2013). In fact, this event has left a profound impact on the Palestinian discourse, imbuing it with authentic anecdotes that resonate with nearly all Palestinians. Bresheeth (2006, p. 499) emphasizes that "the Nakba is not only a memory of the past but a continuity of pain and trauma reaching from the past into the heart of the present, as well as a continuity of struggle in which the losses of the Nakba fuel the resistance to Israeli occupation and subjugation." Rather than a collection of isolated stories Qabaha and Hamamra (2021) concur that the Nakba has woven the Palestinian suffering into a narrative that is inextricably linked to national heritage.

The Nakba makes a defining period for Palestinian diaspora that has spread to neighbouring Arab countries, Europe, North and Latin America. The events of 1948 emphasize the connection between the pain of loss and a discourse filled with heart-wrenching accounts of survival after the forced expulsion (Bresheeth, 2006). However, as Shlaim (1995, p. 287) states, "history, in a sense, is the propaganda of the victors." Therefore, despite its authenticity, the Palestinian narrative has not been able to garner significant attention or global public engagement with their national story. Toukan (2021, pp. 198-199) notes that "history has put Palestinians in the absurd situation of perpetually having to convince the rest of the world of their very existence. In response, scholars, artists, and filmmakers working in and on Palestine, interested in countering orientalist tropes representing the Palestinian as terrorist, victim, or romantic revolutionary, are slowly building a formidable visual archive of the historical fact and experience of ongoing dispossession and displacement, but also continued survival on the land."

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(1) In *Ma'na al-Nakba* [The Meaning of the Disaster], Constantine Zurayk, a philosopher of Arab history, was one of the first authors to label 1948 as the Nakba in his analysis of the socio-economic causes of the 1948 Arab defeat as well as the forced expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from historical Palestine.



harsh socioeconomic conditions, the PNA is often seen as a polarizing event. The narrative that developed after Oslo was marked by dichotomous perspectives; either supporting the agreement and the subsequent peace process as a way towards self-determination, or opposing it as "an instrument of Palestinian surrender, a Palestinian Versailles." (Said, 1993). The split between Fatah in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza has fragmented the Palestinian narrative even further (Carcasson, 2000). While the two camps seem to agree on the goal of the national struggle, they disagree on the means to achieve it, which has impeded the impact of the Palestinian discourse and made it vulnerable to criticism of being unrepresentative. Mi'ari (2009) writes that Palestinians are seen as unable to effectively propagate their cause to the outside world in a unified manner that can mobilize global support and re-legitimize their quest for liberation.

### **Breaking Stereotypes through Satire: An Analysis of the Netflix Series Mo**

The ability for a story to be widely accepted and shared is largely dependent on the means by which it is delivered. It is often argued that the strength of arguments presented in media are determined more by the quality of the language and presentation, rather than the evidence on which they are based (Oates, 2020; Saliu, 2023). Social media outlets and streaming platforms have the vehicles to reach and engage audiences worldwide. For profit streaming platforms, such as Netflix, are driven by ratings, subscriptions, and views (Rathi, Given, and Forcier, 2014). These profit-driven businesses tend to have less political constraints than publicly-funded news outlets and the decision to broadcast a programme is inherently based on its potential to generate revenue. Sanjek (2005, p. 117) expounds that since the global interest in popular arts continues to grow, the entertainment industry has turned into a "an impregnable industrial monolith," that champions revenue first and foremost. Streaming corporates aim to reach more viewers through targeting a varied spectrum of societies- to maximize benefit and maintain growth. While this capitalist-oriented approach may seem controversial, it creates an opportunity for a unique Palestinian TV experience to emanate.





Palestinians. Mo's use of food symbols serves to construct a national consciousness, which plays a fundamental role in the construction and maintenance of Palestinian national identity within the homeland and the global diaspora. According to Bascuñan-Wiley (2019, p. 100), food is a critical element in this construction, given the ongoing Israeli occupation and territorial contestation for a Palestinian state. Palestinian cuisine provides a space for developing ideas and practices, allowing for experimentation with new ways, tools, and resources for resistance against the occupation. In this context, unlike the pervasive Western media portrayal of Palestinian resistance against the Israeli occupation as violent acts of terrorism, Qumsiyah (2010) and Norman (2010) argue that creative and popular resistance is the predominant approach for the fight for freedom and self-determination, with armed resistance being the exception. Moreover, Jabali (2022) illustrates that Palestinian resistance is generally built around popular and novel acts of defence, such as general strikes, regular protests, and night-confusion tactics.

In advocating for the Palestinian struggle for self-determination, it is essential to recognize the power of personal stories alongside the collective narrative. While a collective narrative is vital, studies have indicated that personal stories have a significant impact in captivating audiences and fostering empathy. Freberg et al. (2011) demonstrate that visual and vocal representations of personal stories can amplify their impact and potential to connect with a global audience. Instead of presenting a single, unified narrative of dispossession, occupation, and exile, it is important to empower individual voices and allow them to share their unique experiences, as long as they align with the broader national principles. Additionally, the use of less-censored streaming platforms may provide new opportunities for the dissemination of personal stories, as profit-oriented businesses are more likely to accept and promote individual accounts over collective ones. This approach challenges the traditional notion of a single narrative and instead allows for a diversity of voices and perspectives to be heard.

Indeed, this strategy requires not only the mobilization of talented individuals with a strong sense of shared responsibility, but also the use of



Hamamra (2021, p. 30) point out “The 1948 exodus occurred when more than 700,000 Palestinian Arabs were uprooted from their homes and expelled outside Palestine and others were relocated inside it. The exodus has been a central element of the displacement and dispossession of Palestinians known as the Nakba, during which hundreds of Palestinian villages have been destroyed and others subjected to the ongoing process of ethnic cleansing. The bitter trauma of the Nakba remains raw and is a pivotal component in the shaping of Palestinian identity, collective memory, and resistance.” The series does not explore this magnitude leading to criticism from some viewers.

Furthermore, Mo can be criticized for neglecting a significant aspect of the Palestinian struggle, which is the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homeland, as outlined in the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 194. Turki (1977, p. 68) eloquently argues that. Turki (1977, p. 68) eloquently argues "to reject the Return is to rip up the tree on which his history and *raison d'être* grow. The Return is the rock on which our nation in exile is founded and the social homeostasis that had cemented our people together in their encapsulated world. The passion for the Return is an expression of our identity, an ecstatic embodiment of its inward movement and preoccupations. It is as if the ultimate Palestinian question were: I want to Return, therefore I am." Similarly, Qabaha and Hamamra (2022, p. 405) write that “exile is the antithesis of home and it marks Palestinians’ state of non-belonging,” accentuating the crucial role that returning home plays in reinforcing national identity and alleviating suffering. However, the series fails to mention or reassert this right, which is a major omission in the representation of the Palestinian narrative. Additionally, the excessive focus on Mo's family's pursuit of American citizenship detracts from the national narrative the series aims to promote and may be inconsistent with the broader struggle for self-determination and national identity of the Palestinian people.

### **Breaking the Silence: Palestinian Cultural Narrative in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

The contemporary production of Palestinian narratives in art, literature, and cinema can be seen through the lens of Sumud



loss experienced by Palestinians due to the occupation. Furthermore, when the farmer mistakenly refers to Mo's homeland as Israel, Mo assertively corrects him, revealing his steadfast commitment to the Palestinian narrative and his refusal to accept the erasure of Palestinian identity. This act of correction embodies the essence of Sumud, as Mo firmly asserts his connection to Palestine and challenges the dominant narratives that seek to marginalize and silence the Palestinian people. Furthermore, Mo exemplifies the concept of Sumud by presenting a nuanced portrayal of Arab and Palestinian heritage within the realm of popular culture. The inclusion of an Arab wedding, accompanied by traditional folkloric dance and music, underscores the richness and complexity of identity, transcending cultural and societal boundaries. This depiction highlights the resilience of the Palestinian people in preserving their cultural heritage in the face of adversity.

Aligned with the principle of Sumud, Mo eloquently portrays the multidimensional facets of Palestinian identity and the unwavering commitment to preserving cultural heritage in the face of adversity. It emphasizes the significance of cultural resistance, which dismantles barriers and challenges preconceived notions. In a notable display of resistance, Mo counters cultural appropriation by shedding light on the Palestinian origins of products like olive oil and hummus, which are often wrongfully branded as Israeli. This serves as an innovative means of resistance, amplifying the voices of Palestinians and reclaiming their cultural narrative.

The act of cultural resistance depicted in Mo is ingrained in the Palestinian struggle against the Israeli occupation, extending beyond the boundaries of the show itself. It resonates throughout Palestinian art, literature, and cinema, representing a collective response to the challenges faced by Palestinian exiles and their enduring suffering. Abu-Remaileh (2014) asserts that cultural resistance among Palestinians emerged from the experience of exile, becoming an integral component of their struggle against the Israeli occupation.

### **Aligning the Palestinian Narrative with Global Developments**



towards the Ukrainian cause can serve as a means to raise awareness about the Palestinian predicament.

**Secondly**, the Palestinian narrative should transcend a singular focus on suffering and adversity caused by the occupation, embracing the resilience and heroism of the Palestinian people. By shifting the narrative from victimhood to agency and determination, the Palestinian struggle can be portrayed as a courageous endeavour (Falk, 2002; Pappé, 2009). This entails highlighting the efforts of Palestinians to resist, preserve their culture, and maintain their identity, empowering them as active agents in shaping their own stories with their own voices. Collaborating with civil society organizations, grassroots movements, and cultural figures dedicated to preserving and promoting Palestinian culture and identity can increase this shift. In addition, highlighting the contributions of Palestinian artists, writers, and intellectuals in documenting and interpreting the Palestinian experience amplifies the legitimacy of the nonviolent approach to resistance. By showcasing the cultural and intellectual dimensions of the Palestinian struggle, the narrative gains depth and resonance, reinforcing the moral and ethical dimensions of the cause; enhancing global public engagement (Jabali, 2022).

**Thirdly**, the Palestinian diaspora should be utilized to revitalize and invigorate the national narrative. Harnessing the potential of the Palestinian diaspora can breathe new life into the national narrative, bringing fresh perspectives and invigorating the movement for self-determination. With the majority of Palestinians residing outside the occupied territories, the diaspora represents a significant portion of the Palestinian population (PCBS, 2022). Engaging with the diaspora community is crucial to ensure that the national discourse reflects the experiences, aspirations, and concerns of all Palestinians. By fostering regular communication and collaboration with the diaspora, the Palestinian narrative can benefit from a wealth of knowledge, skills, and resources that are often inaccessible within the occupied territories. Expatriates possess a deeper understanding of the dynamics of their host countries, allowing them to navigate global platforms and networks more effectively (Ho and McConnell, 2017). Their diverse experiences and perspectives enrich the





conveying the depth and complexity of the Palestinian experience. Instead, popular arts and social media platforms emerge as powerful tools to disseminate the Palestinian narrative to a broader audience. While traditional news outlets have often failed to adequately represent the Palestinian perspective, social media platforms have the potential to break through these limitations and create a virtual space that connects Palestinians in the occupied territories, the diaspora, and the global community. By leveraging social media, Palestinians can access greater resources, extend their reach, and exert influence in shaping their own narrative.

Moreover, the development of visual and digital programmes that appeal to the profit-driven side of social media platforms holds immense potential in reaching wider audiences and generating increased visibility for the Palestinian story. Adapting to the rapidly changing landscape of media and business models is essential to ensure the Palestinian narrative remains relatable and resonant. Therefore, the emergence of works like the Netflix series *Mo* exemplifies the evolving landscape of the Palestinian narrative. This series serves as a significant contribution to the progress of the Palestinian narrative by offering a Palestinian portrayal of the Palestinian experience, shedding light on the challenges faced by Palestinians in their struggle for self-determination and the preservation of their cultural heritage. *Mo* captures the essence of *Sumud* (steadfastness) as a central theme, showcasing the resilience and determination of the Palestinian people amidst adversity. The series highlights the multifaceted nature of Palestinian identity, drawing attention to the complexities and struggles faced by Palestinians living in various contexts, including the diaspora. By embracing new mediums and platforms, Palestinians can challenge dominant narratives, reclaim their agency, and assert their rightful place in the dialogue on the right of self-determination.

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