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Dickens in Palestine: our mutual tiny Tim in Bethlehem

ديكنز في فلسطين: تايني تيم المشترك في بيت لحم

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ملخص

يقدم هذا البحث قراءة جديدة لرواية الكاتب الإنجليزي تشارلز ديكنز كارول عيد الميلاد (1843) في سياق فلسطيني اجتماعي واقتصادي معاصر حيث أصبحت الهوّة بين الطبقات ومعضلة فقر الأطفال وتشردهم كبيرة جداً. في رواية ديكنز، تصبح ليلة عشيّة عيد الميلاد في لندن رمزاً إلى الخلاص والخير والمشاركة بينما يشكل هذا الوقت كذلك أزمة تتمثل في عوز الأطفال وتشردهم في منتصف العصر الفكتوري، مما يشكل دعوة للأثرياء الناجحين والبخلاء كذلك مثل سكروج في الرواية بأن يعيدوا النظر في قيمهم الدينية وحكمتهم ومفهوم الخير البشري. يعيد الكاتب في هذا المقال صياغة رواية ديكنز في فلسطين وخصوصاً في مدينة بيت لحم كمكان له أهمية تتمحور حوله أسئلة العصر الحديث كضياع الطفولة والتسول والعوز. يشكل تايني تيم، شخصية ديكنز الرئيسية، تجسيداً للطفل الفلسطيني الذي ينطوي وجوده كما في الرواية على تناقض كونه مواطناً بريئاً لمدينة بيت لحم التي تحمل معاني العدالة والتعايش وكونه منبوذاً فقيراً في شوارع المدينة. في المجمل، يسعى هذا المقال إلى استخدام نص ديكنز من أجل نقد واقع الأطفال وظروفهم الإجتماعية والإقتصادية في المجتمع الفلسطيني والذي ما زال يفشل في احتواء أزمة الأطفال المحتاجين والمشردين بسبب الصراع السياسي القائم

الكلمات المفتاحية: ديكنز، كارول عيد الميلاد، بيت لحم، الأطفال الفلسطينيون، الفقر.

Abstract

This article offers a cultural rereading of Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (1843) within a contemporary socio-economic Palestinian context where the rift between classes and the plight of child poverty and vagrancy, in particular, have become rampant. In Dickens's novella, Christmas Eve in London becomes a significant time of redemption, benevolence, and sharing. It is a time which provokes the dilemma of child destitution and displacement in the mid-Victorian society, inviting successful yet penny-pinching businessmen like Scrooge to reconsider their religious values, wisdom and, overall, human benignity. This article re-imagines and re-contextualizes the setting of *A Christmas Carol* in Palestine, especially in the city of Bethlehem, a place which also brings to the fore questions about present-day child loss, beggary and pauperism. Here, Dickens's Tiny Tim also epitomizes the Palestinian child whose existence hinges on the paradox of being an innocent citizen of Bethlehem, the city which ostensibly carries meanings of justice and communal living, as well as becoming an impoverished street outcast. Overall, this article seeks to employ Dickens's text in order to criticize the current socio-economic conditions of children in the Palestinian society which fundamentally continues to fail to contain the crisis of displaced, needy children due to political strife.

Keywords: Dickens; *A Christmas Carol*; Bethlehem; Palestinian children; poverty

In *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens describes Tiny Tim as a little boy who "bore a little crutch, and has his limbs supported by an iron frame!" (53). This description incurs the sympathy and compassion of the Victorian public that has to bear moral and social responsibility and is, thus, spurred into action toward the abysmal conditions of invalid children. The deformity of Tiny Tim, in other words, creates a pathological form of melodramatic sensationwithin which the relations between able-bodied and well-to-do Victorians and those "little," crutched children are framed. Martha Holmes writes that Tiny Tim's

affliction "reminds us how often we get to engage in serial weeping about disability through the particular catalyst of crippled children" (95). The desire for weeping emanates from the melodramatic effect of othering, romanticizing or silencing the "little" child and the physical conventions of its time. The fact that Tim is portrayed as "Tiny", as suggested by Amberyl Malkovich, shows how "Victorian ideologies are important in the construction of the imperfect child who not only possesses a small physical form, which might often struggle with an illness, but also is thought of, and labeled, as being little" (61). Tiny Tim's suffering body, thus, turns into a direct source of Victorian definitions of physical identity and productive labour. In other words, Tim's body allows us to see realities from the vantage point of the vulnerable and exposed children of the low classes. The description of Tim's hands and voice, for example, as "little", "withered" and "plaintive" (69, 71) implies that he embodies negative medical discursive practices and undesired failures of production in the Victorian physical culture. Within this culture, masculinity is ideologically defined as a centre of social authority, power and health. Here, James Adams writes that the healthy male body is celebrated in nineteenth-century societies "as an object of aesthetic delight" (153). The emphasis on the image of the Victorian body as fit and robust, according to Sean Purchase, "was widely considered to fortify the mind and purify the soul". To Purchase, the notion of the robust and athletic male body was closely associated with the "productive physique" (13). The non-fulfillment of the child's significant socio-medical condition implies an immediate withdrawal to the sickroom which was "as threatening as an indeterminate identity with its equally undesirable uncertainties and insecurities – perhaps more so" (Bailin 82). Miriam Bailin's discussion of Victorian sickrooms shows how these places transform into unwelcoming cultural sites of incarceration that enforce a certain physical identity on dysfluent or vulnerable individuals for the sake of demarcating the continued importance of healthy, productive bodies. In this sense, Tiny Tim's body has defined his social identity as *other*, "with the term "Tiny" having long since migrated from simple adjective to form half of one of the world's most famous nominal alliterations" (Norden 190). Despite the

fact that he is portrayed as physically small in size, he embodies the most essential meaning(s) of Dickens's narrative. To know or realize *Tiny* Tim is, indeed, to know and understand the universe that surrounds him. The language of belittlement that is associated with the name and physical infirmity of "Tiny" Tim, to put it simply, unfolds Dickens's grave perception of London as a social space of marginalization and exclusion.

Dickens's London is a city of contradictions where one can note "glittering wealth and dismal poverty", a place that stands for "daytime delights" yet also typifies "a landscape of despair" (Warren 8). In the urban day-to-day life of Dickens's characters, London emerges as a persistent labyrinth and a dialectical scene of mobile contradictions. Murray Baumgarten points out that Dickens's London "is not only a conflicted city in transition, but one whose explosive urban vitality depends upon the yoking together of its contradictions" (112). Dickens's London, in other words, is a space that welcomes constant change in terms of its commercial humdrums, its citizens, their professions, mobilities, classes as well as the uncharted view of its streets and industries. Through the portrayal of London as an economically thriving space, Dickens points to the dark side of its industrial system that produced what Michel Foucault terms "the space of exclusion" (199). To Foucault, the positioning of the Victorian muscular body as a significant political-economic power of productivity resulted in the rise of socio-spatial meanings of incapability, invalidity, and incarceration, which are embodied in the increasing proliferation of hospitals, lunatic asylums and orphanages. The new institutional system of Dickens's London, its industrial forces of production and the consuming demands of the labour market operated "notions of corporeal normalcy/deviancy around impaired/non-impaired dichotomy", which served to reinforce a certain discourse of "physical deviancy" (Gleeson 108). Here, the streets of London functioned as a kind of mobile, pedestrian sites of exhibitionism where characters such as Tiny Tim become a common subject of social commentaries which, as suggested by Brendan Gleeson, stem from invalid characters' stark "inscriptions of difference arising from their apparent disablement" (110). In *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens, for

instance, fashions streets that allow readers to perceive and compare between different physical categories and social statuses. The final journey of Scrooge with the last ghost of the future to the heart of London, to put it differently, underpins the principal morality of the narrative as it puts wealthy able-bodied Victorians face to face with haggard, naked and impaired men, women and children. Dickens slows down the scene in order to give the gazing readers enough time to note the eventual parade of socio-economic difference:

They left the busy scene, and went into an obscure part of the town, where Scrooge had never penetrated before, although he recognised its situation, and its bad repute. The ways were foul and narrow; the shops and houses wretched; the people half-naked, drunken, slipshod, ugly. Alleys and archways, like so many cesspools, disgorged their offences of smell, and dirt, and life, upon the straggling streets; and the whole quarter reeked with crime, with filth, and misery. (Dickens 72)

Here, the description of the streets produces London as a "visual spectacle" for the consumption of the metropolitan public (Nead 57). The "straggling", dirty and smelly streets of London contribute to the conceptualization of urban places as scenes that do not invite direct public intervention; the behavior of the ordinary passersby remains "a matter of observation, of passive participation, of a certain kind of voyeurism" (Sennett 27). The street spectacle only cultivates what Walter Benjamin calls "the fruits of idleness" (453), meaning that it allows spectators to observe human behavior, to note the mixing of different social classes and to contemplate the sharply delineated contrasts and the multiple juxtapositions they provoke without direct interposition. Dickens's idea of allowing passersby to peep into the interior class design of city life, nonetheless, can be regarded as an indirect call for necessary change and enactment of social and economic justice. Moreover, Dickens's call can be treated as a universal appeal for socio-economic and political transformation that is rooted in the temporal and religious context of *A Christmas Carol*. The meetings and travels of Scrooge take place at Christmas Eve, a time which also brings to mind the value of Bethlehem as a Christian city that is universally "revered in

the human heart as "the purest and the most innocent place on God's earth"" (Johnson III, Troiano xv). Bethlehem, a Palestinian city located in the south of West Bank, gains an implicit moral weight in Dickens's literary scripture due to its symbolic global value as a spiritual place where social discrimination and economic differences meet their end. The significance of Bethlehem, thus, becomes tied with the multiple possibilities of cross-cultural readings of contemporary material, socio-spatial realities in the world's urban centers.

Indeed, *A Christmas Carol* can be re-imagined and experienced as a contemporary socio-political text that sheds light on the escalating economic and national crisis in the Palestinian Occupied Territories, especially since 2000. Even though the temporal and cultural differences between Dickens's text and the current economic and socio-political context of Palestine are distinct, it is still viable to bring the tragic story of Tiny Tim into full conversation with the cataclysmic failures of Palestinian children who also appear as little Tims in the face of today's political ghost of violence and economic conundrum in the West Bank. Indeed, one has to be wary of comparing Dickens's Victorian cultural and social idiosyncrasies with the modern-day conditions in the Palestinian Occupied Territories. However, parallelism can be established between Dickens's children and their Palestinian counterparts in terms of working-class ideology, restricted financial resources and the emphasis on physical masculinity in urban labour markets. In her commentary on the status of Dickens's children in the urban labour market, Selina Schuster suggests that working-class children "had to contribute to their family's financial situation as early as possible, mostly because of the father's low wages or for the many hungry mouths to feed" (13). The close correlation between financial demands and the need for physical capability implied that children had to embrace a masculine identity in public spaces of labour. This adoption of masculinity meant that they were able to perform manual work and earn a living. In this regards, contemporary Palestinian children bespeak the need to masculinize in carrying out public jobs in order to ensure a financial stability. Here, it is important to take into account the continued political

and military tension that governs the lives of Palestinians since 1948. This tension has always necessitated the movement of Palestinian children to the labour market and their working-class roles as essential financial supporters of their families. Jane Humphries argues that working-class children could not afford the pleasures of "'non-work' and its long attendance at school or extensive leisure time" in the nineteenth century (26). Not dissimilar to Victorian children in working-class families, Palestinian children in low classes are forced out to work from an early age, which means that they are deprived of education and leisure time. Because these children work constantly, they feel responsible and independent in a way that suppresses their understanding of the meaning and place of their childhood in the social environments where they live. More importantly, the failure of these children to perform physical labour means that they become categorized as invalid members of the society, a fact that Tiny Tim epitomises by a means of his alienation within the industrial landscape of London.

The rising culture of materialism in the Palestinian Occupied Territories, to be exact, can be paralleled with the ugly materialistic face of Dickens's London. Both cultural contexts produce forms of material dysfunctions and social deviancies that culminate in the exclusion and destitution of certain groups in the society, especially children of the working class. More importantly, Dickens's novella, which recounts the story of a Victorian miser who is transformed into a good and generous gentleman after he is visited by the spirits of Christmas Past, Present and Yet to Come, invites readers to rethink and re-evaluate their religious values and moral traditions during the time of Christmas, a fact which alludes to the powerful symbolic presence of the Holy Land and Bethlehem, in particular, as sites of love, peace and brotherly existence. One of these religious values that Dickens highlights in his text is the human ability to treat the poor on the basis of selflessness, communal living and compassion. Grace Moore believes that Dickens's novella is replete with references to Christian spiritual meanings that all Victorians should embrace in their everyday life and experience. Grace considers that *A Christmas Carol* emphasizes the allegory of the Christian concept

of redemption by which Scrooge is delivered from sin and saved from his moral captivity (57). Along the same lines, Claire Tomalin notes that Scrooge's human conversion in the narrative is the pivotal Christian message; that is, "even the worst of sinners may repent and become a good man" (149-150). The fact that Dickens employs the most compassionate religious meaning and allegories at Christmas brings to light the significance of Bethlehem as a symbolically rich place that carries meanings of human redemption, a place that signifies a persistent reminder of necessary socio-economic reformation.

David Jeffrey believes that Bethlehem is usually considered and employed as a point of reference to the Christmas story, especially in early English literature (85). However, the literary use of Bethlehem and "Bedlam" also became associated with other meanings such as lunacy in nineteenth-century medical discourses. Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*, for instance, refers to "Bedlam" as a mad-house that would help him restore his mental capabilities: ""my clerk, with fifteen shillings a-week, and a wife and family, talking about a merry Christmas. I'll retire to Bedlam"" (15). Similarly, in Dickens's *Uncommercial Traveller* (1860-1861), which is a series of semi-autobiographical sketches and essays about an English traveller wandering through the streets of London and recalling his childhood and past, Bethlehem or "Bedlam", as it normally appears in early and nineteenth-century fiction, refers to the lunatic asylum (Jeffrey 86). In chapter thirteen, entitled "Night Walks", the narrating traveller decides to "wander by Bethlehem Hospital", a decision which provokes a set of questions in his mind: "Are not the sane and the insane equal at night as the sane lie a dreaming?" (Dickens 130). The designation of Bethlehem as a name of a public hospital for the treatment of insanity in London has deep historical associations with the city of Bethlehem in Palestine. Nicholas Vincent argues thatthe "long-standing connections between England and the church of Bethlehem and the fact that the new bishop-elect of Bethlehem, Goffredo de Prefetti, had long been beneficed in England" formed the most solid links between the Palestinian Christian city and the rest of Europe (221). On 23 October, 1247, de Prefetti was elected as the Bishop of Bethlehem and was

granted Simon fitz Mary's "lands and tenements in the parish of St Botolph's, Bishopsgate Ward, in the north-eastern suburbs in London" (Andrews et al. 26). In fact, the establishment of the Bethlehem hospital as a principal London mad-house for the paupers was closely tied with the name Simon fitz Mary, the founder, who had been motivated by a desire "to provide prayers for the sake of his own soul and the souls of his ancestors and benefactors" (Vincent 224). Vincent holds that de Prefetti later contributed to a significant cultural and religious affiliation between England and the Holy Land following his exile from Bethlehem after 1187. With exile, de Prefetti was "personally responsible for the introduction of the Bethlehemites to England" (213). De Prefetti, in other words, became an integral part of cross-cultural movement in which the church of the Nativity at Bethlehem and its main religious figures sought power, influence and hospitality in the West. The introduction of the word "Bedlam" into the English language would never have been possible without de Prefetti whose knowledge of the Bethlehemites produced a discursive culture of London's Bedlam. It is important to mention here that the words Bedlam and Bethlehem have different meanings and uses in nineteenth-century texts. Whereas the former epitomises the chaotic state of insanity or the metaphor describing madness and the irrationality of the world, the latter simply refers to the name of a Hospital, as mentioned in Dickens's *Uncommercial Traveller*.

Yet, the historical employment of Bethlehem as a name for London's mad-house does not sever the word from its original sense; that is, Christ's birth. The symbolic status of Bethlehem as the heart of the Christian world carries within it rich religious significations that place particular emphasis on the necessity of physical return and spiritual reunion at the holy city of God, Jesus and Mary. In other words, Bethlehem does not only denote a religious place of worship but also signifies a highly rich and symbolic Christian concept that invokes meanings of redemption, morality and spiritual health in the social life of Londoners inside and outside English institutions as well as in nineteenth-century literary imagination. Andrew Marvell's "Tom May's Death" (1650), William Wordsworth's "The Council of Clermont"

(1822), Ruskin's *The Queen of the Air* (1869) and William Blake's *Jerusalem* (1804-20), to mention but a few, exploit the image of Bethlehem as the ecclesiastical site of God's word that has to be revisited and reclaimed. Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, for the sake of this paper, also fashions a sincere religious discourse of yearning to Bethlehem that brings with it an urgent call for social and economic transformation.

In contemporary Palestinian literature and culture, the city of Bethlehem also invokes a similar Dickensian incorporation of Victorian sets of moral values and concerns about the urban ethos of the middle class and the prevalence of children's beggary and hardships. However, in discussing the current economic and social affairs of children in Palestinian literature and culture, one has to identify the political situation in the Palestinian Occupied Territories nowadays. It is true that the lives of Palestinians have been affected by the persistence of Israeli occupation and the escalating presence of settlements and checkpoints since the 1967 War between Israel and Arab states, the first Intifada in 1987 and the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993. Yet, the year 2007 marked the peak of frustration in the West Bank and Gaza due to the unresolved political dissension and military confrontation between the main factions in the West Bank, i.e. Fatah and Hamas, a fact which has also led to geographical separation and continuous economic downfall. One of the major consequences of this conflict is the rapid rise of poverty and destitution among Palestinian children who epitomize Dickens's Tiny Tim, albeit in a present-day political context.

The analogy between Palestinian children and Dickens's Tim is possible in different ways, yet this similitude becomes more fundamentally valid if thought of in terms of social labour, class conflict as well as poverty and destitution. A close reading of the lives of Palestinian children, either in real-life social experiences or in various literary representations, shows that their contemporary suffering in the Occupied Territories where social differences are becoming too obvious can be aligned with the class-based suppression and misery of Dickens's Tim. This comparison becomes more recognizable if we consider the significant moral and religious implications of the setting in both real and

fictional narratives. The weight of Bethlehem and the image of the Holy Land, in general, yield public concerns about the place of children in the modern world which is gradually drifting away from its old social ideals and responsibility. Within the contemporary Palestinian context, continuing national conflicts andfrail home politics have left many traumatic effects on Palestinian children, many of whom live on the margins of social and moral recognition and are denied access to various economic benefits in their Palestinian society which is becoming increasingly capitalist. In fact, economic pressures have resulted in the decetering or fragmentation of the Palestinian family, which is an indispensable "protective shield and secure base" for raising children and sustaining national steadfastness (qtd. in Merriman 201). The rising danger of non-unification of the Palestinian family is tied to the depletion of its income and savings which, in return, affects the emotional, physical and intellectual resilience of children.

If the impoverished Cratchits in Dickens's narrative set a great example of the fractured family unit whose members can hardly secure enough food to eat, many Palestinian families, nowadays, are turned into consumptive working individuals who live on the brink of starvation. These families, therefore, tend to push their children to the labor market in order to improve their income and alleviate their economic suffering. Not unlike Tiny Tim "who did NOT die" (Dickens 91), a statement which represents the extremity of his poverty, malnutrition and hunger, many working-class Palestinian children are driven on to the streets in order to beg, loiter or wander aimlessly. Adnan Abdul-Rahim and Hala Salem Abuateya write that many Palestinian children who drop out of school because of unresolved economic hardships end up as "street boys". The life these boys lead outside the walls of schools is not only characterized by the lack of food resources, but it also encourages "certain antisocial patterns of behavior such as smoking, aggression, robbery, street fights, and drug abuse" (79). Mohammad Fahmi suggests that the availability of food in urban areas is a genuine factor that contributes to the prevalence of the common phenomenon of street children (63). This, indeed, reflects negatively on the psychological

behavior and social attitude of children in Palestinian urban places where they live. The very possibility of Palestinian children turning into robbers and aggressive members of the supposedly pure society of Bethlehem and other Palestinian cities that has fashioned their hunger and desire is echoed in Dickens's warning not to let want and ignorance take control of humanity. By showing Scrooge that the lost values of humanity produce meager and hungry children as "monsters half so horrible and dread" (Dickens 66), the Ghost of Christmas Present delivers a message that children can be turned into vicious beasts if robbed of their innocence and basic rights of existence. Robert Newsom points out that Dickens was nevertheless "as adept at imagining wicked children as spotless ones" such as the Artful Dodger in *Oliver Twist*, Tom Scott in *The Old Curiosity Shop* and Tom Gradgrind in *Hard Times* (93). Likewise, Palestinian Tiny Tims are spotless, yet their violent behavior is a reflection of political chaos, social injustice and economic greed.

The message invoked by the Ghost of Christmas Present has its political resonances in the Palestinian literary voices that bespeak the social and economic fears of children living in the humdrum of political chaos in the West Bank. Not unlike Tiny Tim's social incarceration due to the constant dilemma of physical and discursive belittlement, Palestinian children are also portrayed as little subjects in the face of present ghosts of political powers and economic fears. Mahmud Ghanayim writes that children in Arab fiction, generally speaking, "are often portrayed as politically committed individuals" (141). However, in a Palestinian context, which is the main focus of this article, the dilemma of children's poverty and loss due to political tensions and humdrums of their socio-economic life is specifically different or unique if compared with other Arab contexts. In "*Liqa' Khatif*" [A Brief Meeting], which is a Palestinian short story written in 1988, Riyad Baydas describes Ibrahim as a lost and concerned child as he becomes always busy with searching for his father who travelled to the West Bank in order to attend the funeral of a cousin killed by the Israeli army. The story of Ibrahim as well as his companion, a Jewish child named Uri, sheds light on the constant fear of loss, abandonment and human ethos in a society where

children live under the polarized conditions of devastating wars. If Dickens's Tiny Tim signifies the material polarization of the Victorian society that seeks to categorize its subjects on the basis of health and wealth, Palestinian children are controlled by a national discourse that persists to alienate and reproduce them as dependent members in their places both socially and economically. Ghada Karmi's *In Search of Fatima: A Palestinian Story* (2002) is written from the pure perspective of a little child despite the heavy shadow of political history that surrounds and controls Fatima's narrative. In Fatima's narration, the introduction of Bethlehem as a city of colors, beautiful art, history and faith is thwarted by the language of rockets that creates a polity of fear from the very beginning of the narrative:

The little girl could feel it right inside her head. She put her hands to her ears and automatically got down onto the cold tiled floor of their *liwan* with the rest, as they had learned to do. Shootings, the bullets whistling around the windows and ricocheting against the walls of the empty houses opposite, followed immediately. (Karmi 1)

Fatima's story offers a dynamic picture of her family's escape from the violent danger of death during the 1948 War which eventually leads to dislocation. The fact that Fatima's family is suddenly lost and geographically dislocated outside Palestine, its beautiful natural scenery and all encompassing cities such as Ramallah, Gaza and Bethlehem, becomes excessively embodied in the tragic experience and suppression of Fatima, who gradually develops as a recurring symbol of the dispossession of the Holy land. Fatima's victimization by military violence and political tension is doubled with her suffering inside her Palestinian community. Her father, for example, "had little awareness of the psychological damage this attitude might have on vulnerable youngsters like us, striving to establish a new identity" (Karmi 208). In fact, the fragmentation of Fatima's identity as a strong and independent female subject by political, social and economic forces inscribes her as a little metaphor of insufficiency at the beginning of the narrative. Her place, however, recalls the society's defeatism to account for her physical needs and personal identity. Not unlike Dickens's Tiny Tim, she

nonetheless manifests the overall significant image of the novel despite her apparent weakness and suppression. Fatima's dislocation and trauma, thus, provoke the image of the fall of faith, grace and innocence in the Holy Land. The tragedy of Fatima is a personal and political tragedy that deflates the image of Palestine as a land of peace where people are subdued by harsh socio-economic conditions and political strife. Despite the obvious difference between the Palestinian and Victorian contexts here, i.e. Fatima's and Tiny Tim's, both stories highlight the centrality of the moral virtue of coexistence and communal sharing. While Fatima is subjected to a local national discourse that propels the dilemma of military conflict and the consequent financial burdens, Tiny Tim experiences a class-based failure due to his emotional and physical detachment from Victorian capitalist system that seeks to increase and monopolize its economic welfare at the expense of others' poverty. The apparent and symbolic presence of Bethlehem and the Holy Land of Palestine in both narratives functions as an invitation to reconsider the loss of ideals that are necessary to sustain the moral and communal wealth of social contexts in both narratives. However, the negative representation of both Fatima's and Tim's childhoods generates a gloomy symbolic atmosphere of disability at the levels of memory and reality. The Holy Land of Palestine, which must embody innocence and peace in the eyes of its abandoned children, turns into a space of political denial and social alienation.

Despite the sparse references to Palestine in Dickens's fiction, it is still possible to identify points of contact that are relevant to post-war or post-colonial Palestinian readership. Dickens's reformist politics in his fiction proves to advocate socio-economic changes in post-colonial societies – here the Palestinian society (see Johae 330). In a post-colonial context, the Holy Land of Palestine, and for the sake of this paper the religious city of Bethlehem, is a place where social distortions and hardships meet. Dickens's city, arguably, speaks to the contemporary Palestinian city in which citizens are faced by poverty, lack of education and unemployment. Dickens's industrial city, in other words, allows us to see the terrible consequences of science and technology in the modern

world. In the Palestinian context, however, the rising discrepancies between classes are not only caused by modern material culture but also by the continuous political unrest that also participates in pushing many children to the streets. Not unlike Dickens's children in the landscape of London where the exotic, the unfamiliar and the different *Other* abound, the Palestinian city of Bethlehem functions as a site of attraction to local people and tourists who come from different religious, cultural and social backgrounds. This human hotpot of urban relations and interactions offers the opportunity to realize huge affluence next to dreadful poverty amid the hustle of political violence. The appropriation of Dickens's emphasis on the moral and socio-economic reformation of his Victorian society through the implicit significant resonances of Bethlehem is evident in the Palestinian popular culture. In 2014, the British street artist Banksy established the Walled-off Hotel in the city of Bethlehem, a hotel where tourists also have full access to a museum and gallery packed with the artworks that display the angry protest of its owner against the apartheid Israeli regime that cuts Bethlehem in two halves. The hotel, which has become an important hallmark in current Palestinian popular culture of resistance, functions as "reminder of the conflict and restrictions that looms over all the people living in Bethlehem" (Graham-Harrison, *The Guardian*). On the wall outside the hotel, one of Banksy's artworks shows baby Jesus lying in a trough with parents next to him and animals in the background. Above this scene, light shines through a hole in the wall, once made by an Israeli mortar shell, to form the star that guided three wise men to the place as mentioned in the Christian tradition. Banksy's artwork symbolically points to the suffocating laws of the Israeli authorities that act as Dickens's Scrooge and Grinches to English tourists. In the process, Palestinian Christians as well as Muslims are depicted as Tiny Tims, who are severely restricted from travelling to the city by Israeli roadblocks, barriers and soldiers, especially if compared to the dominant and huge presence of Israeli military power. The lack of the freedom of movement for Palestinians, either for work, family visits or work, symbolically represents Tiny Tim's spatial limitation as he is disallowed entry into the Victorian system of economic communal living due to his poverty, invalidity and low social status. Tim

is, however, finally reconciled with Scrooge through the latter's moral awakening that happens during Christmas times. Likewise, Palestinians are prevented from full integration into the heart of Bethlehem, where huge Christmas celebrations happen every year, mainly because of their political protest as well as their religious and ethnic difference. Banksy's artwork, nonetheless, acts as an unrelenting reminder of the necessity of inclusion and termination of the Israeli apartheid system that undermines the moral value or symbolism of the city. In *Mornings in Jenin* (2010), Susan Abulhawa depicts the city of Bethlehem, in particular, as a ghostly presence of contemporary space. The main character in Abulhawa's text is Amal, a Palestinian girl whose family is uprooted from a small village Ein Hod, East of Haifa. She draws a tragic image of Bethlehem which

looked just like Jenin, crumbled, torched, and strewn with death. The church where Master Esa was born had been shelled and still smelled of fire. Inside, hundreds of children, most of them orphaned by the war, sat on the floor. No one spoke much, as if to speak was to affirm reality. (Abulhawa 63)

The description of Bethlehem as a city of ashes reflects the instability of the lives of Palestinian children who have experienced emotional traumas and intense loneliness. Here, the city departs from the meanings of Christian compassion and universal peace it originally embodies. It, instead, turns into a terrifying place that is emptied of its Christian ethos due to military violence and political strife. Abulhawa reminds us that not only does Bethlehem become a fragmented space that signifies defeat and withdrawal but also a site that pushes children to the margins of social and economic representation. The city of Bethlehem, not unlike its Dickensian counterpart, signifies an urban space of material desire. Accordingly, working-class citizens including children are incorporated into its masculine system of power and physical labor. Alongside the traumatic political experiences of Palestinian children like Amal, the experience and image of Bethlehem as "crumbled, torched, and strewn with death" points to the terrible cost of living in such places in a post-war era. Speaking of Bethlehem as a reality affirms nothing but social and economic drawbacks in a setting in which Palestinian children like

Amal, who is portrayed as an invalid member due to her marginalization from the masculine labor market, continue to exist as subordinate characters who can rarely fulfill their dreams and identities. If Victorian writers such as Dickens show children at Christmas as vulnerable to the wicked desire of food, contemporary Palestinian writers draw an image of the Palestinian child as a postponed project of identity in extreme places of violence. Despite the class-based and politically charged atmospheres in both narratives, i.e. Victorian and Palestinian, it is logical to argue that Bethlehem fashions a necessity for sentimental redemption and return to Christian and romantic devotion that banishes class differences, hierarchies and political tension for the sake of building an environment of innocence, peaceful existence and moral health.

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