# Major Themes and Literary Techniques in Mosab Abu Toha's Poetry Collection *Things You May Find Hidden in My Ear*: A Formalist Approach

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**Abstract:** This paper examines some major themes in Mosab Abu Toha's debut poetry collection *Things You May Find Hidden in My Ear* (2022) and the literary and technical devices used to convey them. Applying the formalist approach, the paper investigates the integration of content, form, language, and technical/stylistic devices in the selected poems. While the main themes explored include siege, resilience, home, and identity, the examined figurative tropes include metaphor, imagery, symbol, paradox, and irony. Aiming at an in-depth study, the paper argues that there is a close correlation between the identified themes and the employed techniques and literary forms such as prose poem, free verse, autobiography, litany, photopoem, allusion, enjambment, and free punctuation. The paper illustrates how all these constituents ultimately work together to create the internal unity and true meaning of the poems.

**Keywords**: Abu Toha, formalist approach, techniques, themes, *Things You May Find Hidden in My Ear*

## 1. Introduction and theoretical background

Mosab Abu Toha (1992) is a Palestinian poet born in Gaza Strip, an enclave that was part of historical Palestine before the eruption of the Arab-Israeli war in 1948, but has been under Israeli occupation since 1967. Abu Toha is the author of a few poetry collections, including his first volume of poems *Things You May Find Hidden in My Ear* (2022). Following Israel's genocidal war on Gaza in 2023 after Hamas (the Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement) launched a surprise onslaught on Israel on October 7, 2023, Abu Toha was detained by Israeli forces and later released before he and his family fled Gaza to Egypt and ultimately traveled to the United States (Borger 21 Nov 2023: n.p.).

This study is primarily grounded in the Anglo-American formalist critical approach (often referred to as New Criticism) and, to a lesser extent, in Russian formalism. New criticism examines the relationships between the themes/ideas in a literary work (content) and its "form" (medium/structure) by focusing on exploring the way/s in which the meaning is reinforced and conveyed in the text's language,

style, literary tropes, structure, and form. Originally, the formalist approach was introduced roughly in the early twentieth century, and continued until the late 1960s, as the most dominant critical approach. New criticism emphasizes a close reading of literary texts, treating them as autonomous and self-contained artistic objects, and concentrating on the interplay of the work's verbal features. New criticism disregards external factors such as biography, history, the reader's emotional response (the "the affective fallacy") and authorial intent (the intentional fallacy", and instead focuses on the text's imagery, paradox, irony, ambiguity, and tension, viewing them as contributing to the text's overall unity and significance.

The original foundations of the Anglo-American formalist criticism were first laid by the English critic I. A. Richards in his two pioneering works *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924) and *Practical Criticism* (1929) in which he emphasizes an "empirical" focus on the text itself, free from outside factors. Richard's *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924/1928) was a seminal work of formalist criticism, advocating for close textual analysis over historical or biographical approaches. It emphasized an objective approach to literature, analyzing the text's intrinsic elements such as language, structure, and form to understand its meaning and its effect on the reader (1924/1928).

Later on, the formalist movement garnered widespread popularity among key American critics, chief among whom were John Crowe Ransom, whose book *The New Criticism* (1941) gave the movement its name, Cleanth Brooks, W. K. Wimsatt, and Allan Tate. Seminal works by these prominent critics like Brooks's *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947) and Wimsatt's *The Verbal Icon* (1954) became central to the formalist approach, introducing new refinements to the new critical approach.

Cleanth Brooks is considered one of the prominent practitioners and promoters of new criticism; his book *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947) represents one of the main pillars of new criticism. In his influential book, Brooks highlights the great significance of figurative language (metaphors, images, paradox and irony, and other tropes). He argues that figurative language is not mere ornamentation but is the essential way a poem can communicate its often complex and paradoxical truths about life and the human experience (1947: 148). He specifically values the way figurative language allows for the contradictory ideas in the text, creating initial tension and ambiguity to be finally resolved, producing the text's unity and the work's ideas and true meaning (1947: 24). Thus, paradox, irony, tension, and ambiguity characterize the language of literary works, as opposed to what Brooks and other new critics consider the denotative language of scientific (referential) writing.

Similar to Brooks's denouncement of paraphrase (1947: 196-197) is Wimsatt and Beardsley's denunciation of what they call "the intentional fallacy" and "the affective fallacy". Whereas the first refers to the erroneous practice of judging a literary work by the intention of its author, the second signifies the wrong tendency to evaluate a literary work on the basis of the emotional response it evokes in the reader, rather than on its objective textual features. In their co-authored essay in *The Verbal Icon*, Wimsatt and Beardsley maintain that as the intentional fallacy is

"confusion between the poem and its origins" (1954: 3), the affective fallacy is "confusion between the poem and its *results* (what it *is* and what it *does*" (1954:21). The meaning of a text, therefore, is determined by the work itself (its language, structure, and content) rather than by external factors like the author's intentions or the readers' responses.

Western formalism has its parallel in Russian formalism, which emerged in early twentieth-century Russia. Like the Anglo-American formalist approach, Russian formalism analyzes a literary work as a self-contained object, focusing on the internal features of the text over its external factors. Similar to their western formalists, Russian formalists stress the importance of figurative language, particularly metaphor (or image). Highlighting the importance of imagery in poetry, Shklovsky (1925/1990: 1) writes: "Poetry is a special mode of thinking-- to be precise, a mode of thinking in images". For Shklovsky, the "poetic image" is not a way of thinking but a poetic technique used to make the familiar seem new through the principle of "defamiliarization": "By 'estranging' objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and 'laborious'" (Shklovsky 1925/1990: 6). In Shklovsky's definition of the term, defamiliarization aims at making the familiar seem strange, and in this way helps draw greater attention to its importance in the text: "The purpose of the image is not to draw our understanding closer to that which this image stands for, but rather to allow us to perceive the object in a special way" (Shklovsky 1925/1990: 10).However, the two traditions differ in their focus of emphasis. While Russian formalism aims at establishing a "science of literary criticism" by stressing its "literariness" and its linguistic properties, western formalism treats literary texts as organic wholes possessing moral and cultural significance (Selden et al 2005: 29).

## 2. Review of related literature

Mir (2013) examines the historical development of Palestinian poetry and fiction from the early twentieth century well into the second half of the twentieth century. The paper explores the historical, political, and cultural forces that informed the development of Palestinian poets and novelists, identifying some of the themes of their works. The study also examines the characteristic features of a good number of Palestinian poets from the early pioneers like Ibrahim Toukan to the more recent poets such as Mahmoud Darwish, who has left a clear impact on Abu Toha. Similarly, Masood (2022) traces the development of Palestinian literature from the mid-twentieth century until now. The author views it as evidence of the resilience and steadfastness of the Palestinian people living under occupation.

Abolfotoh (2024) describes the resistance poetry of three Palestinian poets among whom is Abu Toha. The section dealing with Abu Toha's poetry focuses on one of his poems written in 2023 and, therefore, does not relate directly to this paper. Nevertheless, the paper sheds light on Abu Toha's frequent use of certain techniques such as the free verse poem, repetition, and use of poetic images. In their survey of Palestinian literature since the beginning of the twentieth century, Riaz et al. (2024) observe that "Abu Toha being conscious of his cultural tradition not only strives to emulate the stylistic variations of his predecessors but also follows their

emotional appeal to the readers" (201). Furthermore, they explore the themes of trauma and resistance in one of Abu Toha's poems.

In addition to these literary sources, a large amount of psychological, societal, and political research has been done on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Farajallah (2022), for instance, concentrates on war trauma to determine the psychological impact of near-constant war on Palestinian children. Grinberg (2013) utilizes the Israeli-Palestinian case to analyze violence within the framework power relations and social conflict. The paper urges for putting international intervention to put pressure on the dominant group (Israel). In his presentation for the American Library Association conference, Philadelphia, January 25, 2020, Abu Toha (2021b) focuses on the deadly consequences of the Israeli occupation in Gaza and the West Bank, including the large number of traumatized Palestinian children (2021b:54).

Obviously, the surveyed related literature about Abu Toha's first poetry volume appears to have been focused on exploring a limited number of recurrent themes and technical devices in some poems in the book. Most of the reviews and studies tend to concentrate on breadth rather than depth. Leaving the identified themes and techniques in need of further exploration. This paper attempt to continue the previous work and go beyond it, aiming at an in-depth study of how the major themes, the literary techniques, and the employed literary forms converge in informing Abu Toha's poetic experience.

## 3. Method

This is qualitative research, exploring *how* and *why* questions and focusing on analyzing a number of selected poems from a whole collection of poems. The paper comes in four interrelated subsections encompassing the themes of siege, resilience, home, and identity, with a brief analysis of the midway poem "Interlude". The argument is inductive, trying to exploring the depth of the poems and putting forward broader generalizations related to the poems of the volume and, to a certain extent, to the views and poems of a few leading or influential Palestinian poets. The methodology adopted concentrates on the textual analysis of the selected poems seen against the backdrop of the formalist approach and the critical views of some of its major proponents from British, American, and Russian formalist traditions.

## 4. Discussion

Traditional studies of Palestinian poetry have focused on examining it within Arabic and postcolonial literary studies. However, Palestinian poetic output marks an exceptional case within the realm of Arabic literary tradition. Johnson and Stanton (2024: 1) rightly maintain that Palestinian literature "is a national literature with no nation-state". It is both diasporic and at the same time rooted in historic and geographic Palestine. The collection of poems we are going to examine has been written by a Palestinian poet who was born and brought up in Israeli-occupied Gaza Strip and has, therefore, written almost his whole volume while living in an area of Palestine currently under occupation. This particular situation (a refugee in his own homeland) makes Abu Toha different from many other prominent Palestinian poets of resistance in diaspora such as the reputed Mahmoud Darwish, who has written

the bulk of his poems outside his homeland. Abu Toha's volume epitomizes the physical destruction of hones and people of Gaza and his response to occupation, devastation, identity erasure, and voice silencing as will be illustrated in the various subsections of the discussion below.

**4.1 Siege**

In several of the poems of the volume, Abu Toha explores the issue of living in Gaza Strip, an area besieged from all sides: land, sea, and air. In "Palestine A-Z", for instance, he depicts the difficult reality of life under siege, where the idea of a free and sovereign nation is tragically absent. A painful irony is set in motion when the speaker expresses the idea that Palestine is "A country that exists only in my mind. / Palestinian flag has no room to fly freely, but there is space on the coffins of my countrymen" (1). This statement is ironic, implying a sharp contrast between the symbolic freedom that a flag supposedly endows and the constrained and grim reality of death that many people face in Gaza.

It is also noticeable that the excerpt does not directly express its main idea of a stifling siege that negates the essential rights of freedom; instead, it resorts to metaphorical language to reflect its intended purpose. The metaphor of a flag that cannot fly freely but can be used to cover a coffin creates a visual image suggesting a sharp contrast between a flag symbolizing freedom and another one representing death and stagnation. The above excerpt, then, contains two seemingly contradictory or conflicting elements: a state of freedom and sovereignty against a state of confinement and violence. Thus, the work makes use of the techniques of contrasting images, a literary technique characteristic of formalist critics. Emphasizing close reading, Brooks (1947) maintains that the true meaning of a literary work derives from the interplay of its formal structural components and its figurative devices: "The apparent irrelevancies which metrical pattern and metaphor introduce do become relevant when we realize that they function in a good poem to modify, qualify, and develop the total attitude which we are to take in coming to terms with the total situation" (Brooks 1947:209). This paradoxical statement explains why it is possible to accept the general truths literary works embody even though they revolve about widely conflicting concepts.

In another section of the poem "Palestine A-Z" Abu Toha writes: "My name and that of my country have an extra zero in front, like when you call overseas. But we have been pulled down beneath the seas" (10). As phone numbers in the Palestinian territories (Gaza and West Bank) often use area codes within the local numbering plan, an extra zero is often added to the international calling code for Palestine. In spite of adding an extra zero, Gazans are still pictured as being "beneath the seas", a metaphorical expression that is meant to describe an ironic feeling of being minimized or overlooked in a global context, due to the state of siege imposed on the tiny strip. The use of the metaphor or image of a place that exists "beneath the seas", together with the ironic twist is an effective way of picturing the impact of the stifling siege imposed on Gaza, suggesting nuances of meaning that cannot be expressed through ordinary or "referential" language.

In the concluding section of the same poem, Gaza is pictured as a caged place, blockaded from all directions. The speaker says that when he once went to the zoo, he noticed that the caged animals "were bored, gave me their back. They lived in cages in a caged place" (10). A picture of a twofold confinement is given here: the caged animals and the caged city, thus providing a greater sense of confinement. Caged city is a visual metaphor used for depicting a place where local residents live under constant, suffocating blockade and ongoing violence and terror.

The idea of siege reverberates in the poems of some Palestinian poets such as Mahmoud Darwish (1941-2008) who passed away before writing any poem about the ongoing siege which started in 2007 but wrote about the siege of Beirut (1982) and the general siege of the West Bank (2002). In fact, Abu Toha's poems on Gaza siege recall Darwish's collection of poems titled *Under Siege* (2002) (sometimes translated as *A State of Siege*), which he wrote while he was under siege in Ramallah city, The West Bank, showing similarities between Abu Toha's poetry and that of his predecessor.

Likewise, the poem "My City after What Happened Some Time Ago" (38) describes the poet's surrounded city as a place around which the occupation forces are tightening the screws. He states: "The noose is tightening around the city's neck" (38). The noose metaphor reflects the picture of an enclosed city constantly threatened with destruction, after it has been turned into a large open-air prison camp. Additionally, the concluding two lines of the poem capture the poet searching for his vanishing city as in a nightmare, but without finding it: "The city no longer exists but in the holes in the earth. / Nowhere I have to go but to a new, untrodden road" (38). As the city seems to have been metaphorically submerged under the sea waters, the poet has to look for a new location, a "new, untrodden road", signifying that the speaker has now to follow an unfamiliar path of life, with a slim chance of ever returning to the past situation. Written in free verse form that has not strict metrical patterns, the informal structure reflects the chaotic life under siege.

As a reaction to this state of siege, the poet often turns his attention to the sea where he finds relief from the chaos that has engulfed all aspects of life in Gaza. Quite often, scenes of death and destruction are found juxtaposed with optimistic celebrations of life and pictures of beautiful sea and landscapes. The intermixing of natural beauty and homely life with scenes of bombardment and explosions is echoed in the interview with Abu Toha, dovetailed to the last section of the book. The poet notes: "It is a fact that we live under siege, and we live under an unceasing war of attrition. But there are some beautiful things around me: there is the sea, there are the clouds, there are flowers and trees" (Abu Toha 2022: 108). Human-made destruction is here contrasted with nature's beauty and resilience; in spite of adverse circumstances, there is strong determination to enjoy life.

### 4. 2 Trauma

As a result of a series of wars, repeated displacements, and living under prolonged military occupation and siege, Palestinians, particularly those living in the Occupied Territories, have experienced ongoing collective punishment, physical and psychological suffering, and political, cultural, and economic oppression. To

identify and elucidate the consequences of war-related trauma experiences among the Palestinian populace in Gaza, particularly children, two poems will be analyzed to illustrate this theme: "The Wounds" (73-83) and "Things you May Find in My Ear" (92-93).

Grounding their definition in several sources dealing with trauma, Riaz et al. (2024: 202) define trauma a "the distressing experiences resulting in helplessness, fear or confusion influencing drastically the person's, behavior, attitudes and overall functioning". Caruth (1995: 5) views trauma as the "repetition of a traumatic event, which remains unavailable to consciousness but repeatedly intrudes on sight, suggesting a larger relation to the event that extends beyond what can simply be seen or what can be known". Caruth's definition means that the response of the experiencers to the traumatic events is often delayed until later time in the future before they begin to surface again in their dreams and perceived as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening.

Abu Toha sees writing about his traumatic experiences as a kind of relief from great emotional troubles not only for himself but also for so many of the Palestinians living under occupation and who have not been able to tell their own stories: "Writing about these things helps me to relieve some of the pain that I'm feeling for myself and for others" (Abu Toha 2025: 2). Critics point out that Abu Toha wrote "The Wounds" around 2021, nearly 11-12 years after the experiences (2008-2009 massacres) it describes, a clear indication that he was recollecting a latent incident surfacing in a way similar to that explained by Caruth (1995) above. This act of writing a poem after the lapse of so many years following the occurrence of its events helps the speaker recover from some of his traumatic experiences. In the interview with René Kladzyk, Abu Toha (2025: 1) says: "I'm the kind of person who…reflects on his experiences. Because these experiences are not superficial". Indeed, "The Wounds", like most of the other autobiographical poems of the volume, recounts events drawn from the writer's own life and in which he was directly involved. In the interview with René Kladzyk, Abu Toha (2025: 2) states: "I myself am traumatized. I still have nightmares. And also my children have nightmares", showing how he was deeply affected by the Israeli war on Gaza.

The opening lines begin with a description of a peaceful and serene setting, picturing the speaker and his father standing on their house roof, watching the pigeons, the open skies, and the sailing clouds (73). A sudden change occurs when the sound of an airstrike disrupts the tranquil and peaceful atmosphere, leading to the trembling and scattering of the pigeons and the birds, and to total chaos: "A series of explosions shook the house, the neighborhood, / shook the earth. … Birds from nowhere flew aimlessly in the open sky" (73). The sudden change from a state of calm to a state of havoc creates a sharp contrast between the two dominant modes of normality and devastation that dominate the poem.

However, the poem ultimately focuses on the poet's personal experience of a bomb explosion near him in a Gaza Street and the physical and emotional injuries he sustained. As he later narrates, he was seriously injured during that Israeli airstrike while he was on his way to a grocery shop: "Blood drips into my eyelashes and hoodie. / …. It's not only my cheeks and forehead. / The shrapnel has also

blown holes in my neck and shoulder (80-81). Subsequently, he was loaded into an ambulance next to a burnt corpse. In the midst of headless bodies and limbless children, he gets frantic and badly affected by this traumatic experience: "Like a madman, I begin to turn round. / I get inside. Someone throws a corpse in next to me. / The body burnt, maybe no head" (81). This scene of human dismemberment and serious injuries all around is truly horrific for the sixteen-year-old boy.

Consequently, the narrator's whole family and close relatives suffered a traumatic experience, watching the serious injury of a young member of the family: "I look around me, relatives circled my bed. / I watch them as they chat. I imagine them praying round my coffin" (83). In these concluding words, the poet goes beyond recounting a traditional narrative into an exploration of an agonizing ordeal for himself, his whole family, and the local community at large.

In their online article discussing the long-term effects of trauma among Palestinian children, Altawil et al. (2008: 2) point out that "trauma occurs when human beings are exposed to sudden and unexpected events. The resulting shock may be the trigger for various psychological, physical, emotional, and social problems". Their study found that more than 40 percent "of [Gazan] children suffered from Post Traumatic Stress Disorders (PTSD)" (Altawil et al. 2008: 2), stressing thereby the long-term traumatic effects of war and occupation on Palestinian children.

Structurally, "The wounds" is developed through the artistic co-ordination of the text's internal elements: metrical patterns, metaphors, images, symbols, and language. The whole work is written in free verse, without adhering to any specific meter or rhyme scheme, perhaps with a view to conveying the notions of chaos, fragmentation, and disorder that characterize life in the war-torn sector. This poem also makes ample use of a variety of metaphors and images. Memorable images include visual: "Like a madman, I begin to run around" (81); auditory: "the buzzing drones" (76), "death was hovering on us" (76); olfactory: "fresh bread baked with hot red blood" (77), "The smell of gunpowder crawls into my lungs" (81). These violent images also contrast with the more peaceful ones used at the beginning of the poem such as "ships of clouds sailing slowly in windless skies" (73). The employment of such contrasting images heightens the emotional effect of the events on the reader.

Yet another internal constituent of the poem's structure worth mentioning is "symbol". Quite significantly, the title "The Wounds" is symbolic. As Farajallah (2022: 112) observes: "By definition, trauma is a psychological wound". This precise description of traumatic injuries is telling; it sheds light on the title and content of the poem, where the psychological impact of the traumatic events is conceived as "wounds". Indeed, the symbolic title and the references to wounds within the poem underscore not only the physical injuries suffered by the Gaza populace but also the long-lasting psychological and emotional trauma experienced by the Palestinian people there. Commenting on Milton's use of symbolism in one of his poems, Brooks (1947: 59) argues that the symbolism he uses is important because "in the use of it Milton brings all the oppositions of the poem together, and orders and unifies them", a description that also applies to Abu Toha's poem.

Likewise, the poem "Things You May Find in My Ear (92-93) principally delineates the traumatic effect of war on the poet-speaker within the context of life in Gaza under siege and frequent shelling. Using a flexible free-verse form as opposed to formal verse, the poet employs several images/metaphors to depict the physical and psychological impact of war on Gaza, creating a clear sense of immediacy and urgency. The primary literary trope that underlies the whole poem is the extended auditory image signifying different and sharply contrasting sounds. Through this metaphor, the physical ear of the speaker becomes the repository of conflicting sounds and ideas.

In the first section of the poem, the speaker asks the doctor to take utmost care with some of the happy/positive sounds he may find such as his "mother's voice" lingering somewhere inside, "songs in Arabic", or "poems in English" (92). By contrast, the second half of the poem presents the intrusive and traumatic sounds of war. These hateful/negative sounds represent those of a variety of war machinery such as: "The drone's buzzing sound", "the roar of an F-16", "the screams of bombs falling on houses, on fields and on bodies", and "of rockets flying away" (92). These sounds reflect the haunting and ever-disturbing memories inside the speaker's ear. They stand for the constant presence of Israeli drones, rockets and warplanes surveilling, attacking, and deeply disturbing all aspects of life in Gaza. The jarring sounds pose a real danger of having permanent traumatic effect on the populace. Such sounds are real and deeply lodged in the people's psyche, and so indicative of a collective human traumatic experience (Altawil et al. 2008: 4; Farajallah 2022: 112).

However, the poem ends on a note of hope, highlighting a sense of trusts in the future. The speaker asks the doctor to "[I]nject the songs of life into my veins to wake me up. / Gently beat the drum so my mind may dance, / with yours" (93). In spite of unbearable maladies, the havoc and the widespread traumatic symptoms, the poem expresses a strong determination to endure and stand firm in front of all hardships. Framing resilience and steadfastness within Arab culture, Marie, Hannigan, and Jones (2018: 30) observe: "Within Arabic and specifically Palestinian culture, resilience can be conceptualized as a prerequisite to understanding and achieving 'Sumud' [Arabic word for "steadfastness"], meaning that the individual has to be resilient in order to remain steadfast in the face of daily challenges and not to leave their place or position", thus highlighting the need for resilience and steadfastness in the face of hardships and traumatic troubles, especially within a Palestinian context.

### 4. 3 Home

Abu Toha's volume explores "home" as a physical structure under constant threat of destruction, a place of childhood memories and a profound connection to homeland (Palestine). Several poems of the volume reflect the impact of the Israeli F16 bombardment of Palestinians' homes and the destruction of their property. In these poems, home is not just a physical house but also a place that has been bombed, captured, or under constant threat. In "Palestinian Streets" (19), for instance, Abu Toha satirizes a common practice resulting from the impact of the

raging war on Gaza, describing how Palestinian children strangely learn their arithmetic by counting how many homes or schools have been demolished and by how many people of their inhabitants have been wounded or jailed:

> If a Palestinian gets killed by a sniper or drone,
> we name the street after them.
> Children learn their numbers best
> when they can count how many homes or schools
> were destroyed, how many mothers and fathers
> were wounded or thrown into jail (19).

The excerpt above shows how the destruction of Palestinian neighborhoods, the constant imprisonment and wounding of mothers and fathers have grotesquely impacted the normality of everyday life in Gaza, making the landscape a constant reminder of violence and destruction. This representation is further enhanced by the use of the run-on lines (enjambment) as a technical device in the whole poem so as to evoke a sense of continuous violence and devastation of Palestinian homes.

By the same token, "On a Starless Night" (15) uses a series of multifaceted images to depict the state of destruction in the aftermath of the wrecking of the poet's neighbor's house by Israeli missiles. To capture the reality of the situation, the poem juxtaposes vivid and jarring images. The poem reveals the dismemberment of the poet's neighbor's legs and feet and the ruining of his home by the missile attack. Capturing the aftermath of the explosion, the poet depicts the traces of the neighbor's devastated house which no longer exists:

> It's lying like an old carpet
> on the floor of the earth,
> trampled by missiles, fat slippers
> flying off legless feet (15).

Stylistically, the poem pictures small details from the neighbor's house instead of concentrating on the explosion itself. The sight of the neighbor's shattered "small TV"; the picture of the remnants of an "old painting still hung on their walls"; and the remains of a simple house flattened by missiles (15) (reminiscent of the scenes of the ongoing genocidal war of 2023-) provide ample evidence of a heavy loss of both human lives and property. The excerpt also contains some unsettling images such as the house "lying like an old carpet", the "legless feet" and "fat slippers flying off" so as to creates an absurd picture of violence and devastation.

In the poem "What is Home?" (12), Abu Toha defines home not just as a physical structure where one lives, but as an inclusive space that can hold a collection of memories and a sense of belonging to the national homeland:

> What is home:
> it is the shade of trees on my way to school before they were uprooted.
> It is my grandparents' black-and-white wedding photo before the walls crumbled.
> It is my uncle's prayer rug. …
> It is the oven my mother used to bake bread and roast chicken before a bomb reduced our house to ashes.
> It is the café where I watched the football matches and played -- (12).

By giving these homely details, the speaker helps the reader infer the meaning and significance of the word from the poet's perspective. The question the child raises in the closing line of the poem – "can a four-letter word hold all of these?" (12) -- draws the reader's attention to the poet's extraordinarily interpretive and explanatory definition of home, suggesting that the concept cannot be defined in a few words. The diversity of the emblematic objects associated with home as defined by the poet emphasizes the multifaceted nature of home that includes individuals, family, community, land, physical objects, and memories.

In the interview by Kristyn Garza with Abu Toha (2021a: n.p.), the poet further elucidates his understanding of home:

> A *home* can be your memory of your home garden, of the hen coop, of the road to school, or of the shade of a tree on your street corner. A home is your family and your tiny footsteps that you can still gaze at. … It's everything you take with you when you travel—in your mind.

Abu Toha is here giving more explanatory thoughts on what constitutes home. For him, a home is an all-inclusive term that cannot be easily defined and cannot be forgotten because it will remain inscribed in one's mind, no matter where one goes or travels.

Theories of home recognize that home is more than just a physical structure. Rather it is a multifaceted concept that comprises various aspects including belonging, memory, and identity. Beeckmans et al. (2022: 12) observe: "Although home may for many typically invoke ideas of stability and comfort, there seems to be no basic definition, nor any systematic way of defining home or the homeplace that would appeal to or appease everyone". They add that "home has been defined as a socio-spatial unit, a psycho-spatial condition and something of a 'warehouse' of emotions and sentimental attachments" (Beeckmans et al. 2022: 13-14). Accordingly, "homemaking" is a spatial practice where social and material elements converge, closely linked to both spatial and temporal factors. Hence, homemaking is a universal, and at the same time, a context-specific process that is continuously negotiated.

The poem "My Grandfather and Home" (17-18) focuses on the displacement of Palestinians as a result of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War and their resultant homelessness. Early in the poem, the poet describes the typical daily count which his grandfather kept of how long he had been exiled from his home until he died

thirty-six years later: "my grandfather used to count the days for return with his fingers /…. absence turned out to be too long/thirty-six years until he died" (17). Subsequently, the poet's grandfather forgot the numbers, together with the home to which he was hoping to return one day with his family: "my grandpa lost his memory/he forgot the numbers the people/he forgot home" (17). As an entirely unpunctuated poem, "My Grandfather and Home" invites its readers to actively take part in the emotional flow of the text while mirroring the loss of the physical home and the grandfather's memory, foreboding thereby a serious erosion of identity and the connection to the home and the past. After his grandfather's death, the poet begins to figure in his imagination the home he would reconstruct for his family, from words. Addressing his late grandfather, he states: "i can continue to write poems until you are satisfied /… for this home i shall not draw boundaries / no punctuation marks" (18).Using unpunctuated verses as a stylistic device, the poet seems to be challenging traditional poetic forms as well as rhythmical and rhymed poetry so as to create a relaxed and easy-flowing rhythm that could reflect his wandering mind and profound feelings, without any restrictions.

In the poem "Palestine A-Z" (1-10) Abu Toha makes a specific reference to the renowned Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish's conception of "home". Darwish, who is often seen as one of Abu Toha's most important precursors, wanted to establish a home for the homeless through words. As he states in an interview: "Poems can't establish a state, but can establish a metaphorical homeland in the minds of the people" (qtd. in Rahman 2008: 3). The quote signifies that while poetry lacks the power to create political and physical states, it can have a profound power in forging a collective identity and national consciousness. Alluding to Darwish, Abu Toha writes: "A poem is not just words placed on a line. It's a cloth. Mahmoud Darwish wanted to build his home, his exile, from all the words in the world. I weave my poems with my veins" ("Palestine A-Z": 6). The literary allusion suggests that Abu Toha has embraced and assimilated Darwish's belief in the importance of poetry for constructing an imaginary home made from words as a means of creating a space of resistance and belonging against displacement and homelessness.

Building on Darwish's conception of home, Abu Toha wants to employ the poems he "weaves" as an imaginary home where he can feel free and independent. Metaphorically, Abu Toha compares a poem to a piece of cloth woven to provide shelter or a portable home to be entered whenever and wherever needed, thus providing a consolatory sense of freedom and independence. In the same poem, Abu Toha makes a specific reference to the expulsion of his grandparents from their home in *Yaffa* (Jaffa) in 1948, taking their house key with them. Till now, a rusted key has remained as the only reminder of the poet's grandfather's home in Palestine: "My grandfather kept the key to his house in Yaffa in 1948. He thought they would return in a few days. … The key has rusted but still exists somewhere, longing for the old wooden door" ("Palestine A-Z": 4). Actually, the reference to the poet's grandfather's house key marks an allusion to a common tradition in Palestinian culture and history, particularly in the 1948 epoch, during which many Palestinians who were displaced, took their house keys with them as a symbol of

their catastrophe, hoping they would return home (Feldman 2008: 503). Hence, the Palestinian house key has become a traditional emblem of Palestinian culture and identity.

**4. 4 Identity**

According to the cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1990: 223), cultural identity is "a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past". This means that cultural identity is not a fixed state of being defined solely by one's past ancestry or history, but a continuously evolving process affected by one's ever-changing experiences and cultural engagements. The theme of cultural identity as represented in *Things You May Find in My* Ear is problematic as it is very hard, if at all, to consider Abu Toha's volume as a form of diasporic literature since its author was born in Gaza and has lived most of his life there under Israeli blockade and bombardment.

Language is a basic means of preserving cultural identity and an important way for values and traditions to be passed down from one generation to another. Language is also interconnected with voice, the writer's expression of their identity in their works. Having a distinct voice and speaking out are basic means enabling a writer to have a distinct personality. Highlighting the indispensable significance of voice, Ragnerstam (2016:2) argues that "the subject gains its subjectivity from its voice because one is not a subject if one has no voice. The voice is a sign of cognition, interiority, and of identity". Consequently, voice is central in analyzing texts, including poetic texts.

Formalists treat "voice" as an internal structural element of the text rather than an expression of the external, real-life author or his intent. They focus on how the text's language is arranged and the way it produces the "voice" or "tone" within the work to create a unified aesthetic effect and the text's true meaning. Although formalist criticism focuses essentially on the craft and internal logic of the work itself, it does not necessarily exclude the analysis of social, political, religious, cultural, and human issues. Distinguishing between Russian formalism and new criticism, Selden et al (2005: 29) observe that unlike the critics of the first approach, who were primarily interested in "method/technique", "The New Critics combined attention to the specific verbal ordering of texts with an emphasis on the *non-conceptual* nature of literary meaning: a poem's complexity embodied a subtle response to life, which could not be reduced to logical statements or paraphrases". Despite the new critics' emphasis on close reading of texts, "their approach …remained fundamentally humanistic" (ibid).

As clearly evidenced by the selected poems, Abu Toha's conception of identity is an expression of the speculations, feelings, and experiences of an individual and a poet who has been living, almost all his life, under Israeli occupation, struggling against siege, violence, and devastation. However, his understanding of a collective Palestinian identity has been forged not only through his living in Gaza but also by his own personal experiences of having a family living in Gaza and traces its roots in historic Yafa, Palestine. Indeed, his perception of a national Palestinian identity is closely linked to the views of a good number of

Palestinian nationalist poets and scholars like Mahmoud Darwish and Eddard Said. While deeply personal and national, his poems also speak to the human experience of being under occupation and deprived of national and human rights.

One of the poems in which Abu Toha explores the theme of identity is "A Litany for 'One Land'" (50-51). To capture the poem's true meaning, a definition of "litany" form is in place. Sadowski et al. (2020:1) define litany as a term "used to refer to an utterance based on a long, repetitive enumeration". They also identify two distinct usages of the term in religious and literary contexts. As a critical term, the litanic form involves repeated phrases and sections and sometimes a written call-and-response form. Ultimately, the literary litany is a transformation of the traditional religious litany into a new form devised for political and emotional expression, using the power of words and repetition to produce strong effects on the audience (ibid 2).

Like many other poets in modern times, Abu Toha's "Litany" (50-51), appropriates the literary litany for several purposes. By employing the structure of a litany, Abu Toha creates in the reader a persistent call/voice or appeal urging to be heard, with specific reference to the Palestinian cause: "We have been speaking but you / never cared to listen"(51) so to evoke social and political justice. With this in mind, we can easily understand the repetitive nature and emphatic tone of the poem so as to resist the constantly threatening attempts to erase the Palestinian identify and to silence the Palestinian voice: "We have been here …/we have been speaking" (51), thereby emphasizing the speaker's point besides captivating the audience's attention. The litanic format also allows the poet to give a long list of basic grievances waiting for answers, albeit the fact that there has been no just response from the opposite side. The ultimate objectives of the poem are asserting the Palestinian identity and making the Palestinian narrative heard, particularly on a global scale.

Drawing upon an effective employment of vivid imagery and sharp contrast, "A Litany for 'One Land'" creates a contrastive picture between the hardships of the life of the Palestinians in Gaza and the different life of the Israeli occupiers in the usurped homeland of the Palestinians. In the opening lines of the poem, we see instances of water, blood, and rose metaphors used to depict the suffering of the Palestinians and the visible effects of occupation and violence:

> The trees you see have been watered with our tears.
> They bear no fruit.
> The red roses take color from our blood.
> They smell of death (50).

In the excerpt above, the poem uses symbolic metaphors to express the suffering and loss experienced by Palestinians. The natural world mirrors the harsh realities of the Palestinians' life under occupation, suggesting that the land is watered with the tears of its people and that even the red roses (traditional symbols of love), are tinged with the color of their blood and the smell of death. As emblems of Palestinian culture and identity, "the trees" stand for olive and lemon trees,

traditionally used to represent the natural connection between the Palestinian land and its people besides the deep suffering that the Palestinians have been undergoing for a long time. The trees that were metaphorically irrigated with the tears and toil of the Palestinians are now barren, temporarily suggesting a bleak future for the Palestinian populace. Even the red roses, symbols of love and beauty, have now become associated with decay and death.

In the next section of the poem, the complaint about the loss and the consequential aridity of the land is transformed into a bold challenge and a strong demand for justice. Challenging the actions of those standing on the other side, the speaker voices several rhetorical questions about how long the Israelis who have been "standing on the other side / shooting at us, spitting on us," will continue dominating the land and its people: "How long can you stand there, fenced by hate?/ Are you going to keep your glasses on until / you're unable to put them down?" (50). In the concluding part of the poem, a prayer in the form of the traditional litany is invoked through a somewhat repetitive chant for a unified territory, reinforcing the Palestinian identity and the just claim of the Palestinians to the whole land of historic Palestine: "One day, we'll be born again when you aren't there. / Because the land knows us. She is our mother" (51).

In selecting the title for his poem, Abu Toha is making a direct reference to the American human rights activist Audre Lorde's famous poem "A Litany for Survival" (published 1978). In her poem, Lorde (2012: 6) encourages oppressed people to resist their oppressors and assert their own identities, maintaining: "It is better to speak". Although there is no work by Lorde titled "One Land", the concept of a unified "one land" can be found in Lorde's poem, which envisions a shared existence for all people, particularly the oppressed. Inspired by Lorde, as the subtitle indicates, Abu Toha re-stresses the crucial role of speech and voice as essential means of asserting identity in defiance of subjugation and occupation. By making an explicit allusion to Audre Lorde, whose name and work are directly or indirectly contained within the text itself, Abu Toha is placing the Palestinian cause within a larger political and human context.

In his interview with Kristyn Garza, Abu Toha imparts that he writes directly in English rather than Arabic (his mother tongue) because it has become an important means of global communication: "When I speak and write English, my words travel farther than they do when I do in Arabic. …However, there are many things that the whole world needs to hear about which are put best in English" (Abu Toha 2021a: n.p). He adds that although "Arabic is a beautiful language and I write in it, too", he uses English because it is the most accessible means to the language of science, technology, and communication, just as it was "the language Balfour used to promise Palestine to the Jews of the world" (ibid). In using English as the language of his works, Abu Toha underscores the role of poetry as an important means of resistance and making his voice heard among the international community and the people who want "to listen or read" (ibid.). In this regard, it is rather significant to mention the role of the media in depicting the conflict. Alnwihe and Al-Abbas argue that throughout the Gaza War that took place in 2021, each opposing side utilized language in ways that align with its own interests; official

speeches were used to convey specific notions to the general populace (2023:3317). Thus, it can be argued that poetry can be deemed as a tool through which the voices of Palestinian individuals can be heard worldwide.

The question of speaking out in defiance of repression is further explored primarily in the poem "Notebooks" (86-89), where silence is pervasive, Abu Toha challenges the traditional concept that "silence is a sign of consent", arguing that in the first place, he lives in a situation where he cannot speak or express himself in a clear and affirmative consent. His tongue, he protests, has been "severed", which metaphorically means that he has been forcibly deprived of his right to speak: "People say silence is a sign of consent. / What if I'm not allowed to speak, / my tongue severed, / my mouth sewn shut?" (88). For Abu Toha, the Palestinians have been compelled to keep quiet, due to different forms of suppression, threats, and physical punishment. To speak out against oppression and to create a dramatic effect, he uses a plain, direct language that allows the enforced silence to resonate strongly with the listener or reader in order to provoke deep reflection on the idea/s he is trying to convey: a deep longing for a peaceful homeland that is now physically inaccessible or has been destroyed.

Finally, it is worth noting that the main themes underlying Abu Toha's poems appear to be reflected in the pivotal poem titled "Interlude" (39-48), situated nearly midway through the collection. Commenting on the volume's thematic structure, Manaster (2024: n.p) asserts: "The twenty-eight poems in the second half… add to the first part and convey more what it means to live on and Toha's unpacking of what it means for him to have a voice in Gaza". While the first half of the volume focuses on themes of destruction, siege, loss, suffering and the like, the second one stresses the importance of resilience and steadfastness as well as hope and perseverance. In contrast with the occasional references to "voice" in some of the poems of the first section, the second half contains a great number of poems resonating with the poet's voice, like the title poem itself.

"Interlude" is written in the form of photopoem, a literary subgenre where photography and poetry are intermixed in a collaborative, dependent, and interdependent manner. Nott (2022: 3) defines photopoetry as "a form of photo-text that takes, for its primary components, poetry and photography". The main function of the captions, he maintains, is "to describe photographs and provide a source of information" (Nott 2022:5). As a photopoem, "Interlude" (39-48) comprises nine color photographs, presented with accompanying prose captions or prose verses. Taken together, the nine photos in the poem and their accompanying captions represent ideas ranging from destructive bombardment, siege, violence, resilience, optimism, and so forth. For instance, the first photo is the image of a noose with the poetic caption "Everything gets tied in Gaza's noose" (41), representing the siege imposed on Gaza. The caption phrase is a poetic expression reflecting the idea that all aspects of life in Gaza are inextricably constrained by the harsh reality of living under siege and conflict. Likewise, the fourth photo shows a shattered building in the aftermath of an airstrike, with the poetic caption, "The scent of coffee still hangs in the air. But where is the kitchen?" (43), thus emphasizing the impact of the genocidal war on Gaza. In fact, the combined photo and caption reiterate a similar

idea in the poem "Everyday Meals during Wars", where the rituals of family gathering are dramatically reversed by heavy bombardment (53).

A third example is the fifth photograph featuring a large gas cylinder with a bullet-hole in the middle appearing near a tea-pot, with the caption "I wanted to make tea for our guests, but a person from Porlock ruined the party" (44), indicating a home devastated by an unwanted guest. Here, we encounter a literary allusion to Coleridge's interruption while writing "Kubla Khan" by "a person … from Porlock" (Coleridge 2000: 439). Significantly, the ninth and last photograph represents a bowl of red strawberries placed on the sand, with lush grass and blue sky in the background, with the caption "Through it all, the strawberries have never stopped growing" (48). In this example, the photo and the caption garner special symbolic significance. Together, they recall the concluding poem of the volume "A Rose Shoulders up" (99), symbolizing sustainable resistance and an ever-present hope:

Don't ever be surprised
to see a rose shoulder up
among the ruins of the house:
This is how we survived.

Generally, "Interlude" serves both structural and thematic purposes, which extend well beyond mere breaks in the text, adding depth to the poems and enhancing the reader's immersion in the action. It marks a diligent attempt to use unconventional and unfamiliar poetic forms as a literary technique that can function as an effective means for drawing attention to the life of Gazans under siege. In this respect, it recalls the famous Russian formalist's Shklovsky's concept of "defamiliarization". In his famous article "Art as Device" (also known as "Art as Technique"), Shklovsky (1925: 6) observes: "By 'estranging' objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and 'laborious.'". Through using the photopoem form, which requires a relatively longer duration of perception, reflection and speculation, the poem "Interlude" draws special attention to itself, providing a pause where the reader can spend more time speculating on the significance of several preceding or following poems. In this way, this pivotal poem highlights the thematic and technical unity of Things You May Find in My Ear.

## 5. Conclusion

The preceding discussion of the selected poems from Abu Toha's debut poetry collection *Things You May Find Hidden in My Ear* (2022) has revealed several significant results. It has found that the poems explore a wide array of closely related themes, most important of which are: siege, trauma, home, and identity. These themes have been represented through utilizing a variety of technical devices and literary forms so as to convey the poems' messages in an effective manner. The techniques perceived range from using direct and homely expressions to figurative language, unpunctuated verses, enjambment, and literary allusions. The literary

forms identified vary from formal poetry to prose poem, free verse, autobiography, litany, and photopoem.

The research has also found that although the majority of the poems are largely autobiographical, they represent a collective viewpoint centering on perspectives, values, and memories shared by the Palestinians, particularly those living under occupation in Gaza. Furthermore, the poems and the interviews implicitly or explicitly touch on some universal themes such as conflict, hope, love, and suffering that unite people worldwide, regardless of their cultural, political, or national backgrounds. Overall, the poet tends to favor objective, accurate, realistic descriptions and an honest imaginative treatment of his subjects. All these features and characteristics come to the fore following their examination in light of the formalist approach, against which the discussion of the poems has been carried out.

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