

# Baba's Death: Nour's Nostalgic Voice in Zeyn Joukhadar's *The Map of Salt and Stars*

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**Abstract**—This article discusses how nostalgia functions as a successful tool of resistance in *The Map of Salt and Stars* (2018). The article examines the representation of nostalgia of a displaced character called Nour emphasizing how weather and place shape her homesickness. It also investigates how the character copes with her nostalgic experience in an attempt to construct her shattered personality. We contend that there is a link between nostalgia, memories, weather, and place using the concept nostalgia as outlined by Tim Wildschut, Constantine Sedikides, and Clay Routledge. This reading helps us better understand the narratives under discussion and comprehend the psychological development of diasporic individuals. Overall, the paper concludes that Nour's nostalgia is powered by her memories and weather, which enables her to resist the impact of the death of her father.

**Index Terms**—diaspora, nostalgia, displacement, weather, *The Map of Salt and Stars*

## I. INTRODUCTION

In *The Map of Salt and Stars* (2018), Jennifer Zeynab Joukhadar reported the story of a Syrian family longing to return to America, after experiencing the catastrophes of the Syrian Civil War and moving between so many countries, namely Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Morocco, and Spanish Ceuta. The girl suffers so many hardships among which outstands recalling the memory of her dead father. Interestingly, whenever she goes to a place, she mentions her father saying: “Mama once said the city was a map of all the people who’d lived and died in it, and Baba every map was really a story. That’s how Baba was” (TMSS, 2018, p. 10). Nour recalls the day when her father was taken to the hospital emphasizing that he never came back. She says: “The whole hospital smells like bleach. It reminds me of the time after Baba died, when I had to go with Mama to the funeral home” (TMSS, 2018, p. 92). The speaker points to the association between the memory of her father and uncertain conditions of weather as well as certain objects. Accordingly, this paper discusses the association of Nour’s longing to her father and her longing to return America.

Noteworthy here is that the author is American Syrian who has already published two novels, namely *The Map of Salt and Stars* (2018) and *The Thirty Names of Night: A Novel* (2020). Her first novel talks about nostalgia and how weather shapes the personality of the character. The story reports the life and the history of Nour who is a Syrian migrant moving between American and Syria without enough knowledge about her home country or any expertise to adapt to life there (Louati & Amrieh, 2022). Nour is a young Syrian American who returns to Homs, Syria to join a family gathering. Suddenly, she is thrown into a world of violence due to the Syrian Civil War, and her home gets destroyed by war. Bogdonoff (2020) confirms that the characters in the novel are described as going through a vivid world of horror due to their displacement in many countries, which causes the family to try to return to America, a plot that takes the reader into a deep meaning of emotional realities.

This article sheds light on the representation of nostalgia as a successful tool of resistance. Trying to theorize the term nostalgia, Wildschut et al. (2006) suggest nostalgia’s function fall into two categories identifying two types. The former shows “the feasibility of manipulating in-the-moment feelings of nostalgia”. The later “offers vital preliminary support for the idea that nostalgia boosts social bonds, increases self-regard, and generates positive effect” (pp. 986-987). Commenting on Wildschut et al. words in relation to the novel, both ideas are relevant in the narrative, where Nour manipulates her nostalgic feeling toward the loss of her father and the protagonist’s statue of remembering memories increases her self-regard.

As it is argued, nostalgia is thickly attached to the past and that creates the restoration of that particular past through memories and so on. In his unique book titled as *Nostalgia a Psychological Resource*, Routledge (2016) asserts that nostalgia is an operation that expresses belongingness which allows people to reshape their personal fulfilment experiences from the past. Thus, it is a restoration process. Nostalgia helps one’s persona to ensure having an interpersonal success in which one thinks they are valued and loved by others. Nostalgia then has a vivid relation with the past and has a function as well. Also, Routledge maintains on Zhou’s argument, considering nostalgia serves a social function. They propose that the statue of being lonely leads to feel nostalgic, which promotes social support and this feeling fixes loneliness. Thus, nostalgia indirectly emphasizes the function of belongingness.

Besides, Boym (2001) suggests that nostalgia is a feeling of loss and displacement, however it is a romance with each one's own fantasy. Therefore, each one has a nostalgic feeling, and it differs on to the other people depends on people's fantasies. These fantasies according to Boym are sentiments in the present concerning an unreachable past. In this context, the novel is about a present displacement while the character keeps thinking of the irreplaceable past. Thus, it is interesting to study the character's sentiments toward the past. Thus, this study is to confirm Routledge's words of belongingness and Boym's saying on nostalgia in association to novel's character. In the narrative, Nour feels alienated since she lost her father, she thinks of memories with him during her displacement. Also, Joukhadar's depiction of the weather throughout the narrative illustrates the consequences of the war. Thus, the study adopts a postmodern theoretical proposition found on nostalgia and its function in the character. Relying on reflection of Tim Wildschut, Constantine Sedikides, and Clay Routledge in the representation of nostalgia through interdisciplinary studies. The study additionally reflects on Willis H. McCann, Xinyue Zhou and Svetlana Boym thoughts in order to explain nostalgia.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In this regard, not much has been written about *The Map of Salt and Stars*. In the first study where Bogdonoff (2020) reviews the novel as refugee experience and fantasy adventure. He focuses on Nour's displacement with Rawiya he says: "In this way, Rawiya's adventure is subordinate to Nour's forced migration; it functions most obviously as a metaphor and a coping mechanism" (p. 274). On the other hand, Louati and Amrieh (2022) contend in their study that 'Things' in the novel are means to recovery process as they point: "Consequently, the person's journey towards coping with, and recovery from trauma can be achieved with the help of Things" (p. 179). The difference of this study from the previous ones is to fill the gap between nostalgia and weather, as it has never been done before in the novel. Additionally, it puts the research from a different angle, as nostalgia can be easily done in any critical study. Overall, the researchers will scrutinize the representation of nostalgia, especially from Svetlana Boym's thoughts.

The relationship of the present, past and future is apparent in contemporary novels. Su (2005) in his book affirms that every single author has struggled to the longing in association with the lost or imagined homeland. Therefore, the author's texts represent a 'strand' of contemporary Anglophone literature which increases lately in the century. Hence, the authors are living all cultures imbued by nostalgia. Relying on Su's quote, Joukhadar's protagonist feels nostalgic is apparent throughout the narrative. Again, Nour's goal is to return to home, but she is facing certain difficulties of war and displacement.

Also, in *Home Matters Longing and Belonging, Nostalgia and Mourning in Women's Fiction*, Rubenstein (2001) claims that plenty of authors conjure nostalgia or longing for home to allow their characters to confront, mourn, and revise themselves to things they lose in the world in novels. Rubenstein's claim is apparent in the novel, where Nour's displacement to make a return to home evokes her feeling of mourning and her relation to things. Consequently, Joukhadar's novel is suitable to this discussion where the character's displays a deep feeling of longing to home while confronting difficulties.

## III. DISCUSSION

Joukhadar's *The Map of Salt and Stars* reports the return journey of Nour and her family. Retrospectively, Nour recounts the events while in their journey to mirror her feelings toward the death of her father. She starts her journey with her friend Rawiya and her mother, and whenever they are in a country, she remembers her father, who passed away not long ago. As the novel continues, the family is shattered after the death of their father and their home is destroyed in Homs, Syria. Nour's nostalgic personality and her search and longing for a lost past, she says: "The winter before Baba went into the earth, he never missed a bedtime story. Some of them were short, like the one about the fig tree that grew in Baba's backyard when he was a little boy in Syria..." (TMSS, 2018, p. 10). Actually, Nour starts missing her father once the winter beings, she misses his presence and his night talks. In this regard, Van Tilburg et al. (2018) contend that weather evokes nostalgia, as for windy weather resembles what is going on. Likewise, in the context of the novel, one may discern that the wind in the novel as a symbol to war and political system in Syria at that symbolizes Nour's nostalgia. Nour's endeavor to resist the present, bringing together the past and her father's memories. At that point she says: "I should have known better: nobody's said much about Baba since the funeral. Baba is the ghost we don't talk about" (TMSS, 2018, p. 28). Nour's yearning to the incidents of the death of her father stayed in her mind. At the same time, she is questioning why the rest of the family does not share the same feeling as she.

The setting of the apartment, in the wintertime, and pomegranates season. Things were shattered, and they started remembering the death their father, which caused Nour a trauma and a cultural shock later in the story (Louati et al., 2022). As the protagonist is having a trauma, however she embodies a feeling of a positive feeling especially while moving from Syria to New York. She quotes: "Before Baba died, we hardly ever got calls from Syria, just emails. But Mama said in an emergency; you've got to hear a person's voice" (TMSS, 2018, p. 9). Nour describes the terrible circumstances and the difficulties to socialize in Syria. Joukhadar utilizes the image of terror and war and projects it on Nour and her family when their past overcomes their present. Nour notes, "It's been three months since we moved to

Syria, and Mama doesn't leave her tears on the pomegranates anymore. She doesn't leave them anywhere'' (TMSS, 2018, p. 11). Any story of Nour includes remembering the past to return to their home (Louati et al., 2022).

#### IV. NOUR'S NOSTALGIC VOICE

Van Tilburg's article 'Adverse Weather Evokes Nostalgia' studies the link between weather and its reflection on nostalgia. Also, viewing the weather that can shape human life depends on the time spent on sunny days or days of war and how they can increase positive mood. Contrastively, when one gets wet, catches a cold, and lives in windy climates can also boost negative mood (Van Tilburg, 2018). Nour's nostalgia accompanied with weather where the author repetitively mentions the weather, such as "thunder" (TMSS, 2018, p. 36), "fog" (TMSS, 2018, p. 48), "rain", "thunderstorms", "dust", and "clouds" (TMSS, 2018, p. 50), and "wind south" (TMSS, 2018, p. 54). Consequently, the weather in the novel shapes the personality of Nour, as well depicts the atmosphere of Syria during the war. In this regard, Nour is feeling nostalgic for her home and father, meanwhile she is resisting to return to New York. The absence of her father comes into account with the Anglophone narrative where the father is metaphorically related to roots and origins. In *Season of Migration to the North*, Salih (2009) discusses this particular issue where Mustafa Sa'eed is living like someone who is taking revenge, because he is fatherless.

Nour's relationship with her father differs from her relationship with her family members. Their journey of displacements fosters a sense of resistance. Throughout the narrative, Nour recurrently mentions 'Baba' to show the past and her connection with him. Nour says:

Sometimes I wonder if Mama and Huda and Zahra want to pretend his sickness never happened, that the cancer never rotted out of his liver and his heart. I guess it's like the spinning game: sometimes you'd rather be on any magic level but your own. But I don't want to forget him. I don't want it to be like he was never here at all' (TMSS, 2018, p. 27).

Commenting on Nour's saying, she is comparing herself to other family members. Also, she thinks of the moment when her father gets sick and her expectation of death as if never come to her mind. Therefore, the author sheds light on the father as he is important since he is missing in the whole trip, so the author puts their work in the context of the Arab Diaspora. By the end of the quote, Nour affirms her nostalgic voice that she won't forget him. This brings Boym's saying on nostalgia and how it differs from one to another where she points that every person has his own fantasy toward sentiments of the past.

In the history of the Middle East, particularly in Syria, the war affected the Syrian people around the globe. Since Nour is affected by the war, she keeps thinking positively of her father at the time they travel together, she says: "I think back to the time Baba crouched next to me on a wrinkled sheet of rock in Central Park and told me what a glacier was, and I imagine Abu Sayeed telling Baba the same thing" (TMSS, 2018, p. 46). Nour remembers their displacements with her father, as well talks that makes her yearning for the unreachable past. Nour dreams of her father's shadow many times. She tells how her social life revolves around her father "But I can't imagine living between worlds like that. I've gone so far from New York that sometimes I can't imagine there are so many places out the world and tiny me and Baba on the other side of it" (TMSS, 2018, p. 52). This relationship fuels the nostalgic moments of Nour's experience every time she commemorates her father, it seems that she has plenty of journeys with him. All in all, Nour's story demonstrates the strong relationship she has with her father.

Between Jordan and Egypt, Nour's journey continues with her father remembering. In 'Nostalgia: The Gift That Keeps on Giving', Zhou et al. (2011) affirm the function of nostalgia stays as a shield versus the existential defies. In the novel, Nour yearns for her father's death. Also, she resists during her displacement, she points: "Is there a level I could reach if I ran fast enough, a level where Baba is waiting on the island of Manhattan with his arms open, calling to me from between the coin-operated spyglasses?" (TMSS, 2018, p. 136). Consequently, Nour's nostalgia is a shield to her resisting to the past. In the same way, Zhou et al. (2011) maintain that nostalgic recollections do not center only on family, friends, or partners; instead, it centers on life events such as vacations and reunions. In the narrative, the father, however, does not surrender to Nour on her voyage; rather, she travels with her family where she will not forget her vacations in Syria. As Nour notes: "I try not to think too much about the things we have lost-soft rugs...stuffed animals and photo albums with pictures of Baba we couldn't find in the rubble" (TMSS, 2018, p. 140). Evidently, Nour is touched by the things she loses, but in a positive way she is not overthinking of them. Zhou et al. (2011) in this context, affirm that nostalgia centralizes around life events and reunions. Similar to Boym's words where she maintains, nostalgia in the context of narratives is important where characters defeat. All in all, Nour is not able to stop overthinking of her father, because of plenty of memories and things in association to her father.

At the heart of all painful and nostalgic events, Nour speaks of her father very frequently on her way to Jordan. While in Amman, Nour pens: "My thoughts on Baba like a stray nail in a picnic table' this was on a day when she finally saw the sky" (TMSS, 2018, p. 155). Thus, the protagonist presents places and memories that keep herself yearning for the past. Additionally, Nour remembers few things remind her of father, such as a game. At that point she mentions: "There was a time when I was small and first played the magic spinning game that Baba taught me, that nothing I laid eyes on was less than extraordinary" (TMSS, 2018, p. 156). Here, Nour mourns for the time when she used to play with him. Therefore, Batcho (1998) in this context says that nostalgia is essential in developing maintaining or to restore a self-identity by weaving the threads of one's life past. Nour restores her sense of self-identity by remembering the

memories. And that is why she keeps thinking positively to achieve her return. Also, Nour is wearing a bracelet as to remind herself of her died father as Batcho states. Huda says: “The bracelet was from Baba’ lowering her eyes. It was her seventeenth birthday present” (TMSS, 2018, p. 201). Hence, Nour’s nostalgic journey will not end, that fact she thinks of the occasions, the little things, which helps her resist the nostalgic experience.

Thereafter, in Libya, Nour again highlights the bracelet and her memories with her father. She notes:

And whose room was Baba in every night, Zahra snaps, ‘telling stories? Would you trade that for a bracelet? Then she rubs the side of her head. ‘I shouldn’t say that,’ she says. ‘These past few months, I haven’t really been there. Baba’s dying ... it was like I crossed a bridge and couldn’t come back’ (TMSS, 2018, p. 219).

McCann (1941) states that nostalgic behavior is represented as the frustration of returning home. It is interesting to observe Nour’s past nostalgic memories with her father in connection with a bracelet. At the same time, Nour’s frustration always with returning to New York is apparent in the novel. On the way back, the character’s feelings are down because of their displacement between countries. Moreover, the protagonist feels the sadness inside, it also shows the uncertain condition of herself while the atmosphere is “dark” (TMSS, 2018, p. 227). The darkness brings Nour a sense of grief. At this point she says:

Can sadness be too heavy for God? Maybe God can bear it all, but I don’t know if I can. The world is a stone in me, heavy with Baba’s voice and the old clock tower and the man selling tea in the street. I want to believe things are supposed to be better, but I don’t have the words to say how (TMSS, 2018, p. 228).

In part four, Algeria and Morocco, Nour’s journey continues with her father’s memories in a “sunny” day (TMSS, 2018, p. 283). Nour’s nostalgia is deeply represented throughout the lines in the novel within people surrounding her. In this sense, Nour pins: “What’s the point? I shout. ‘Mama and Huda and Yusuf and Sitt Shadid and Umm Yusuf and Rahila are gone. They’re drowned, or shot, or dead, just like Abu Sayeed. Just like Esmat. Just like Baba’” (TMSS, 2018, p. 288). Similarly, as Routledge (2016) argues about the fact that being lonely and how nostalgia functions as a social supporter, Nour feels loneliness. The dialogue between Nour and Zahra revolves around the bracelet, Zahra says, “You sold it, Nour replies: Baba’s bracelet” (TMSS, 2018, p. 288). In here the things plays significant role specifically in this part, where the bracelet was given to Nour by her father which becomes a symbol reminding her of father.

In Ceuta, Nour describes a man in the sea; the image of the man reminds her of her father where she pens: “A tall man with a round potbelly comes out. His hair is thinning around his ears, just like Baba’s, and his eyes are wide and brown with long lashes” (TMSS, 2018, p. 340). To cope with this, a chapter entitled ‘Dangerous memories Nostalgia and the historical sublime’, Jacobsen et al. (2020) argue nostalgia is a form of memory, and it is a feeling which comes when affected by the past. Arguably, Jacobsen’s words are very applicable to Nour’s presence in Ceuta. She is a foreigner there; she does not even know their language. However, her father stays in her memory. Additionally, the moment she sees the water and says: “I lean over the water, and my face appears. Ripples stretch my eyes and nose. By a trick of the light, I see Baba’s face instead. ‘Ourselves?’” (TMSS, 2018, p. 349). This later shows Nour’s strong defeat of remembering memories boosts her self-regard in the present situations as Wildschut et al. (2006) note on nostalgia. Overall, the author skillfully, created a parallel between the setting and the weather to shape Nour’s nostalgic character.

## V. CONCLUSION

Nour’s journey across countries while mourning her father's death shows resistance and fighting, which are represented as a form of nostalgia. Therefore, Nour’s nostalgia is powered by her memories and weather. In *The Map of Salt and Stars* (2018), the protagonist resists the displacement while she uses to think of memories she has with her father. To explain this issue, Joukhadar employs an array of detailed memories and things to enable the central character to make her way of return. Hence, Nour’s yearning for the past made her successfully resistant to her irreplaceable past. All in all, the nature of this study affirms that Joukhadar’s character journey of nostalgia and displacement empowers her. Moreover, this study highlights the importance of weather in affecting the character’s mood and memories.

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