Cross the Boundary: Analysis of *Mornings in Jenin* from the Perspective of Rooted Cosmopolitanism

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**Abstract**

Rooted Cosmopolitanism proposed by Appiah challenges the idea of universal norms in classical cosmopolitanism. The theoretical foundation of this concept emphasizes the importance of acknowledging and preserving regional cultures. This article argues that achieving the concept of rooted cosmopolitanism necessitates leveraging the collective aspirations of human communities for peace and progress. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has had a significant impact on culture, as demonstrated in the postcolonial novel *Mornings in Jenin* by Palestinian-American writer Susan Abulhawa, who effectively portrays the restoration of national identity and utilizes diverse narrative techniques to describe the modern history of the region and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from the perspective of Palestinians. This approach successfully challenges the prevailing Western discourse and contributes to the global recognition and reconstruction of Palestine’s national identity. However, the novel additionally expresses a desire for peaceful coexistence with the Jewish. This dual emphasis corresponds to the core principles of rooted cosmopolitanism articulated by Appiah and symbolizes the collective global aspiration for survival, progress, and harmonious coexistence.

**Keywords**

Appiah, rooted cosmopolitanism, identity, Israeli-Palestinian conflict

**1. Introduction**

Due to its significant geographical location and abundant natural resources, the Middle East region has historically served as a contested arena for dominant global powers. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict stands out as one of the most acute conflicts not only politically but also culturally both on the Middle East and global scale. This historical context is a source of inspiration for *Mornings in Jenin*. The novel functions as a narrative lens through which the complex and multifaceted nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is explored and understood, shedding light on the cultural dimensions intertwined with the political turmoil in the Middle East.

*Mornings in Jenin*, originally written in English, has been translated into over 20 languages and has received significant attention from academic researchers. The majority of these studies have approached the novel through the perspectives of post-colonialism, trauma, and diaspora. Additionally, feminist analyses and comparative studies with other literary works sharing similar themes have also been conducted. Most of these researches has been carried out by scholars from the Middle East, focusing on the displaced Palestinian identity, trauma, and memory within the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These studies offer a thorough analysis of the Palestinian identity in the field of literature, providing excellent initial resources for this paper. Nevertheless, there is a conspicuous dearth of study regarding the constructive engagements between the Palestinian community and other global communities, including the Jewish people, which is what this article aims to address.

In etymology, the word cosmopolitanism consists of two parts: “cosmos” and “polis”, both of which originated
from Greek. The former part “cosmos” means the universe and world, and the latter refers to city states. In Greek, cosmos also means “universe” or “universal order” (Online Greek Dictionary). Cosmopolitanism advocates an ideal of universal human unity that transcends class, race, and even national boundaries, with its theoretical roots tracing back to ancient Greece. The Cynic philosopher Diogenes and later the Stoic school successively put forth cosmopolitan ideas to pursue universal principles. The emergence of globalization in the late 20th century led to the development of a global discourse system. Driven by the need to study and analyze literary works in the context of globalization, cosmopolitan theory has gained much attention in the field of literary criticism. Consequently, the use of cosmopolitanism as a conceptual framework for examining themes of identity in contemporary novels, encompassing aspects such as race, gender, religion, power, love, and survival, has gradually evolved as a new paradigm for academia.

Kwame Anthony Appiah (1954-) presented the idea of “rooted cosmopolitanism”. According to Appiah, “rooted cosmopolitanism” believes that one can interact with other cultures while preserving his own cultural identity. People from different places In Appiah’s cosmopolitan community, “people from different places and with different beliefs appreciate and promote each other, thus gradually entering into a relationship of mutual respect and dialogic exchange.” (Sheng, 2023, p. 79). This theory is fundamentally centered on the defense of diversity and the recognition of regional cultures. In his work The Ethics of Identity, Appiah focused on recognizing the value of different ways of life and promoting intercultural dialogue: “Localism is an instrument to achieve universal ideals, universal goals” (Appiah, 2005, p. 241). His understanding of cosmopolitanism involves defending differences and resisting universal standards. Under a single standard of measurement, cultures may be perceived as advanced or backward, rational or ignorant, crude or refined, giving rise to cultural hegemony and cultural colonization. “There is no Archimedean point outside the world of contesting localities from which to adjudicate” (Appiah, 2005, p. 247). He also emphasizes the intercultural interaction based on the empirical universal value: “The cosmopolitan patriot can entertain the possibility of a world in which everyone is a rooted cosmopolitan, attached to a home of one’s own, with its own cultural particularities, but taking pleasure from the presence of other, different places that are home to other, different people” (Appiah, 1997, p. 618). Therefore, Appiah’s cosmopolitanism is trying to reconcile the binary opposition between nationalism and universalism. I believe that rooted cosmopolitanism refers to respecting the fundamental common pursuits of human society, including survival, development, and the need for respect while acknowledging regional cultural differences. In contrast to egalitarianism in traditional cosmopolitanism and the nationalism that has been the power of anti-globalization, rooted cosmopolitanism dismantles the binary opposition between the global and the local while emphasizing engagement with others in the plurality of modes of life and culture. It advocates for thinking about the world in a national context while also considering nations from a global perspective. Therefore, rooted cosmopolitanism is decentralized, with no hierarchical distinction of value or advancement between different cultures.

_Mornings in Jenin_, written by Susan Abulhawa and published in 2010, is a powerful and poignant novel that explores the Palestinian experience through the lens of a family’s history during a tumultuous period of conflict and displacement. Abulhawa delves into the intertwined themes of loss, memory, identity, and the enduring human spirit amidst the backdrop of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and construes these themes through the life experience of four generations of a Palestinian family between the years 1940 and 2002. She chronicles the sequence of multiple tragedies and catastrophes of Abuilheja family who originated in a small Palestinian village Ein Hod. As registered in the modern history of Palestine, the year 1948 witnessed two converse affairs: the proclamation of Israel as a state for people without land, and the expulsion of the native Palestinians who are dispersed all over the globe. Like most other families, Abuilheja family was displaced into a refugee camp near Jenin in the West Bank, a place of a sort of living that witnessed their dispersion and tragic fate. During their escape, the family lost their youngest child Ismael who was snatched by an Israeli soldier. As a compensation for their loss in the Holocaust, Moshe, the Israeli soldier, gifted the child to his infertile wife Jolanta who named him David. This paper argues that _Mornings in Jenin_ employs various narrative perspectives and techniques such as a new historicism collage to retell the modern (1948-2011) history of Palestine, reinterpreting the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from the perspective of the Palestinian people. The novel consistently emphasizes Palestinian national identity while expressing a desire for harmonious coexistence with the Jewish people. In this process, it reflects the author’s new cosmopolitanism sentiment within the context of globalization, specifically rooted cosmopolitanism.

2. Memory and Land: Reconstruction of Palestinian Identity

According to Appiah, “Collective identities, in short, provide what we might call scripts: narratives that people can
use in shaping their projects and in telling their life stories” (Appiah, 2005, p. 22). Collective identity weaves individual lives into a collective narrative, connecting the past, present, and future through stories— an essential aspect for everyone in society. Individuals express their identity through self-shaping, addressing the question of who we are, often drawing materials for this construction from a series of collective narratives. In the case of Palestinians portrayed in novels, exemplified by the four generations of the Yihya family in the village of Ein Hod, their collective narratives undergo constant evolution in response to changing times. To be more specific, their collective identity transitions from a tangible, closely linked connection to the land to the promotion of national identity through oral histories and collective memories passed down through generations. Such changes result from the influence of geopolitical dynamics, compelling Palestinians to integrate into the broader historical processes of the modern world.

In the novel, Palestinians residing on this territory originally establish their identity via their profound attachment to the land. “In May 1948, the British left Palestine, and Jewish refugees who had been pouring in proclaimed themselves a Jewish state, changing the name of the land from Palestine to Israel. But Ein Hod was adjacent to three villages that formed an unconquered triangle inside the new state, so the fate of Ein Hod’s people was joined with that of some twenty thousand other Palestinians who still clung to their homes. They repulsed attacks and called for a truce, wanting only to live on their land as they always had. For they had endured many masters—Romans, Byzantines, Crusaders, Ottomans, British—and nationalism was inconsequential. Attachment to God, land, and family was the core of their being and that is what they defended and sought to keep” (Abulhawa, 2010, p. 28).

The connection to the land determines their identity, which is not directly related to who is nominally the owner of this land. The concept of the nation-state, born out of the Western modernization process, did not deeply resonate with the local residents in the Palestinian area. They still possessed a premodern concept of territory. For the first generation of Palestinians, represented by the Yihya family, the land is an embodiment of life. When Yihya realized the permanence of the exile, he suffered a spiritual breakdown. This value was transmitted from one generation to the next, as Amal’s father further explained the connection: “No one can own a tree, it can belong to you, as you can belong to it. We come from the land, give our love and labor to her, and she nurtures us in return. When we die, we return to the land. In a way, she owns us. Palestine owns us and we belong to her” (Abulhawa, 2010, p. 5). This connection between the land and its residents was so tight that Yihya died just for the olive that grew in their former land.

Rooted cosmopolitanism according to Appiah is not a concerning about abstract humanity but the specific individual who was shaped by his own culture. This concern of the human combined with the national background is represented by Amal. As an underage girl, Amal is placed in a Jerusalem orphanage that looks after her schooling. Later, she wins a scholarship to pursue studies in Philadelphia. Arriving there, she marvels at how peaceful, materially affluent, and organized US society can be. The pressure to accommodate and integrate forces Amal to take the American-friendly name, Amy—a past-less being allegedly open to the newly-sensed experience of freedom in America. She recalls how she felt the new air of freedom, taking pleasure in mundane facts such as the absence of soldiers and martial law that used to dominate her refugee life back in Jenin. Reporting on the experience, she says “Snuggled in luxury on the threshold of a world that brimmed with as much promise as uncertainty, I was starting a new life. But like the scar beneath my hand, the past was still with me” (Abulhawa, 2010, p. 171). Aware of the precariousness and even the potential harm lurking behind ontological preoccupation, Amal adds:

“I dampened my senses to the world, tucking myself into an American niche with no past. For the first time, I lived without threats and the sediments of war. I lived free of soldiers, free of inherited dreams and martyrs tugging at my hand…I fell in love with Americans and even felt that love reciprocated. I lived in the present, keeping the past hidden away. I did not write to Huda, nor to Muna or the Colombian Sisters. Nor to Ammo Darweesh, Lamya, Khalto Bahiya, or Haj Salem. But sometimes the blink of my eye was a twitch of my contrition that brought me face to face with the past” (Abulhawa, 2010, p. 173). Through self-observation and self-objectification, Amal is caught in an ambivalent state between reconciliation and dismantling: between the homely self-asserting its coherence and stability (as it is made meaningful by those to whom it belongs), and the unhomely self as it is always changing, and is always being made meaningful by others. Bhabha contends that “Culture has a dual identity, as it is never quite coherent and self-sufficient. Its narratives seem stable and confident, but they always get drawn into strange displaced relationships with other cultures, or texts, or disciplines” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 194). Therefore, he states ahead that “the migrants can exemplify the dual nature of culture, always situated in relation to both an original culture and a new location” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 194). Eventually, Amal realized that she couldn’t get rid of the traumatic experience of her nation, which is seared into her memory and identity: “I remained on solid academic ground throughout college,
but the Palestinian girl of pitiable beginnings was trampled in my rush to belong and find relevance in the West” (Abulhawa, 2010, p. 138). Decades later, under the help of her father’s friend Ari, she still managed to go back to look for her roots.

Amal didn’t reveal the experience of her whole family in Palestine to her daughter Sara until David came to the US. Because of this, Sara who was raised in the US couldn’t relate to her mother before she knew the truth. As Hirsch argues, “in certain extreme circumstances, memory can be transferred to those who were not actually there to live an event” (Hirsch, 3) She regained the intimacy with her mother after she inherited the past of her family.

From Yihya to Sara, the collective narrative for Palestinians varies from land to memory, throughout this transformative process, individuals suffer a sense of detachment and alienation from their own identity. Amal’s denial and return of her own identity serve as a classic archetypal path for those who have a similar experience: to some extent, one’s own national or racial identity can only be regained within a heterogeneous cultural context, which is typical and common for diasporic people in the era of globalization.

3. History Rewriting: Palestinian Nation Identity in the World

In Appiah’s view, the individual person is a specific, race-based living being, so only a return to their national identity can truly realize the actual concern of humanity. From this perspective, Abulhawa views the history of her people from the perspective of a Palestinian writer, sees the return of national identity as the starting point for the return of humanity, and expresses her concern for the moral standard of humans as a Palestinian, which shows the humanistic aspiration of a rooted cosmopolitan writer. Abulhawa collates and juxtaposes various reports, official documents, and other historical materials, applying New Historicist narrative techniques such as the combination of fiction and reality to form a dialogue and contrast with the so-called mainstream values in the West, in this way she put two or more views of history in parallel according to the current needs of the nation to reconstruct the collective memory. Palestine remains a marginalized state due to oppression from various parts of the world. By rewriting history, a contemporary Palestinian national identity can be forged, and the right to freedom of speech can be partially restored.

In the novel, Abulhawa arranges several historical events, as documented by Newsweek, in chronological order:

“A week after the massacre at Sabra and Shatila, Newsweek magazine determined that the most important story of the previous seven days had been the death of Princess Grace.

The following week, the cover story was ‘Israel in Torment.’” (Abulhawa, 2010, p. 181)

In addition to the language itself, the seemingly rigorous and impartial report has been infiltrated with the Western perspective, which is shaped by its own historical context. Consequently, the interpretation of the text is inevitably altered by the subjective opinions of future readers. The new historicist narrative technique magnifies the ambiguity inherent in historical writings. History is not alone documented, but also recounted, encompassing distinct ideological attributes. This contrast highlighted the contrasting viewpoints on the observation of history between Palestine and Western countries in a nuanced manner, resulting in a stark comparison that amplifies the national rights and voice of Palestine.

Another distinctive technique Abulhawa applied in her novel is the combination of the fate of fictional characters with authentic historical material. Abulhawa quoted the memoir of British correspondent Robert Fisk to present the Sabra and Shatila massacre that happened in Beirut in 1982:

“On the other side of the main road, up a track through the debris, we found the bodies of five women and several children. The women were middle-aged and their corpses lay draped over a pile of rubble. One lay on her back, her dress torn open, and the head of a little girl emerging from behind her. The girl had short, dark curly hair, her eyes were staring at us and there was a frown on her face. She was dead. Someone had slit open the woman’s stomach, cutting sideways and then upwards, perhaps trying to kill her unborn child. Her eyes were wide open, her dark face frozen in horror.

An Associated Press photographer pressed his finger and sent the scarlet darkness of that scene around the world. I saw the photo in the Arab press and first recognized the woman’s pale blue dress. Fatima’s favorite dishdashe, worn thin in nearly two decades of use. The curly-haired little girl behind her was my niece. Falasteen” (Abulhawa, 2010, p. 178).

The hybridity of fiction and reality puts the work between fictional and real, creatively increasing the authenticity and substitution of the novel, therefore the author re-emphasizes the Palestinian point of view of this period of history, which reflects the author’s consciousness of history from a Palestinian standpoint. Besides these, Abulhawa also inserted a number of other historical materials that can support her narrative framework, thus, her narration contained
both her own creativity and the materials selectively chosen from her previous generation. From this point of view, she challenged the dichotomy between history and literature by arguing that both can be artificially manufactured, and readers can contemplate the truth of history within the realm of imagination.

As Orwell stated in his novel 1984: “Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past” (Orwell, 2013, p. 37). History, being a component of collective memory, is closely connected to national identity, as Jan Assmann argues: “National identity does not arise spontaneously, but rather requires a process of transformation from mere classification to a sense of unity” (Assmann, 2005, p. 138). Abulhawa retells the history from a Palestinian perspective, which contributes to the reconstruction and strengthening of the Palestinian national identity on a global level. The primary objective of the novel is not to accurately depict historical events through storytelling. Instead, its main purpose is to engage the reader’s thoughts and prompt a reevaluation of the entire history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

4. Oxymoron of Purity: The Blur of Boundary between Nations

According to Appiah’s cosmopolitanism, individuals acquire their racial identity from their national history, then reshape their cultural identity upon joining different society, and finally form their full identity by engaging in conversations with others. To attain genuine cosmopolitanism, one must first cultivate a profound admiration and fondness for the historical and cultural heritage of their own country. This manifestation of “rooted” cosmopolitanism is to some extent in accordance with the Chinese Confucian ideals of “differentiating love” and “expanding one’s self to include others”. Rooted cosmopolitanism emphasizes dialogue and understanding between the individual and others, that is, cosmopolitanism is seen in Appiah as an ideal only realized through “others”. Appiah believes that human existence is fundamentally tied to one’s cultural heritage and proposes the idea of redefining one’s cultural identity within a multicultural society. Nevertheless, this form of intercultural communication relies on empirical and widely accepted principles: Appiah contends that universal values are derived from the innate volition of humans, and there exist certain things that are universally seen as desirable, such as the values of benevolence, humility, and magnanimity. “I want to hold on to at least one important aspect of the objectivity of values: that there are some values that are, and should be, universal, just as there are lots of values that are, and must be, local” (Appiah, 2007, p. 16). These universal values open the possibility for intercultural dialogue and offer the basis of mutual understanding and learning. Universal values serve as the basis for effective communication and dialogue, enabling the potential for mutual comprehension and knowledge acquisition. The interaction between Palestinians and Jewish on an individual level based on these universal values can be seen in the novel.

While Mornings in Jenin portrays the Palestinians’ suffering under the Israeli military and authorities during the Israeli-Palestinian conflicts, it also explores various relationships that demonstrate the potential for harmony and mutual understanding among individuals from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. An example of such a friendship exists between Hasan Abulheja, a Palestinian, and Ari Perlstein, an immigrant of Jewish descent. Their relationship began throughout their early childhood, as they are united by a shared passion for reading and poetry. Their relationship embodies innocence— it originated before the first Zionist attacks on Palestine, and they were young and clueless to politics and nationalistic passion - which underscores how racism and intercultural conflicts are acquired through education rather than being inherent. Despite the prevailing atmosphere of violence and hostility, Hasan’s unwavering friendship with Ari persists, ultimately leading to Hasan rescuing Ari and his family from danger, and Ari reciprocated by assisting Amal, the daughter of Hassan, who returned in search of her ancestral origins. This link conveys the notion that there are no substantial disparities among individuals, but divisions that people perceive are formed by politics and indoctrination.

Although Appiah emphasizes the significance of racial identity in shaping one’s cultural identity, he acknowledges that identity is also constructible. He holds the belief that human personality is consistently in a state of dynamic equilibrium, allowing individuals to possess multiple identities simultaneously. In this sense, “cultural purity is an oxymoron” (Appiah, 2007, p. 80). In the era of globalization, individuals possess multiple identities by choice or by circumstance. The character David in the novel serves as a prime example of this phenomenon. With his Arab lineage and Jewish background, he personifies the contemporary interaction between Arab and Jewish and blurs the distinction between Arab and Jewish cultural identities.

In Mornings in Jenin, Ismael, whose name alludes to Abraham’s exiled first-born, the son of Hagar and ancestor of Prophet Muhammad, the founder of Islam, becomes David—an allusion to the ruler of the Jewish kingdom. The religious overtones ultimately suggest an Arab Islamic infiltration of Jewish biblical themes. History has triggered
processes of national intertextuality whose ongoing outcomes appear incomprehensible within the contesting national discourses, just as Darwish has observed: “The Israelis changed the Palestinians and vice versa. The Israelis are not the same as they were when they came, and the Palestinians are not the same people that once were.” (Yeshurun, 2012, 63) These allusions to ancient Jewish texts serve as conceptual frameworks for creating new versions of identity that are neither Palestinian nor Israeli as such: in one instance the longed-for Jewish son is Arab; in the other, an Arab, whether willingly or unwillingly, abandons his heritage in order to fulfill the symbolic desire of Jewish motherhood.

Ismael/David in Mornings in Jenin represents the authors’ respective attempts to intertwine contesting national narratives in order to work out the implications of Palestinians’ and Israeli’ intersecting histories. As a result, the character David/Ismael transcends contemporary discourses, and his existence calls for the creation of new frameworks that may help allay the anxieties caused by the widening gap erected between who Palestinians historically think they are and who they have variedly become since 1948. That is, the characters Ismael/David do not represent colonization of Israeli-Jewish identities with the aim of planting the Palestinian flag in the texts of the adversarial other. Rather, he variedly manifests the inevitable changes taking place in Palestinian modes of identification as a result of the conflict with the Israelis.

Ismael/David is a symbol of complicated identity recognition in the current era, but the kind interaction between him and Amal is cosmopolitan: Appiah’s cosmopolitanism advocates the multi-loyalties of humans, “There is a need to protect the various cultures to which an individual belongs, while at the same time accepting that the individual has multiple memberships and different loyalties, and to coexist with individuals belonging to different cultures within and outside the state who likewise have different loyalties and multiple identities” (Liu, 2024, p. 14). What’s more, in Appiah’s rooted cosmopolitanism, the primary responsibility towards others such as mutual respect is not based on rational knowledge, but rather personal will, which is demonstrated via their interactions. According to Appiah, cosmopolitanism is primarily a manifestation of one’s will and imagination, and secondarily a sense of obligation. The novel addresses the interactions between Ari and Hassan as well as Hassan’s descendants to express their longing for peaceful coexistence on a non-political basis, from which it can be observed that cosmopolitanism and nationalism share the same internal value orientation, and the relationship between the two concepts does not reflect the conflict between universality and particularity. “Cosmopolitanism and nationalism can be mutually inclusive” (Wang, 2018, p. 77). Additionally, David’s intricate identity serves to exemplify the inseparable cultural connections between Arabs and Jews, highlighting the unattainability of complete cultural homogeneity and the consequent blurring of racial distinctions.

5. Conclusion

As a descendant of Palestinian refugees, Abulhawa who was burdened with national catastrophe ponders the question of the individuals, nation, and interaction between different cultures, trying to provide her own perspective on how the history of a nation and another culture should be approached, which demonstrates her concern for individual existence and the common fate of all human beings, and also reflects the aspect of rooted cosmopolitanism in Abulhawa’s writing. It is evident that despite shared values, conflicts can still arise. The Palestinians and Israelis have been in conflict for a long time on the importance of Jerusalem in their respective history and cultural memories. Arabic and Jewish people do not necessarily hold contradictory values in terms of Jerusalem, but because the same-origin beliefs they hold are characteristically exclusive, leading to sharp contradictions and, consequently, causing suffering for both sides. This novel extensively chronicles the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict and delves into the identity and rights of the Palestinians, but this does not change the expectations underlying the novel for peaceful coexistence between the Palestinians and the Israelis. In October 2023, the Al-Aqsa Flood brought the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to a new climax. Although Appiah’s concept of cosmopolitanism may appear overly optimistic and ideal, as the conflict has intensified, it cannot be ignored that interactions between different cultures based on the universal values shared by all human beings have never truly left the world.

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