
Education as Liberation in Once Upon a Country: A Palestinian Life

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine how Nusseibeh uses Education to fight oppression, advocate for peace and make sure that the struggles and history of Palestinians are not forgotten. Education acts as a powerful symbol that represents coexistence, survival, defiance and hope in traumatic conditions in Sari Nusseibeh's memoir *Once Upon a Country: A Palestinian Life* (2007). This paper delves into Nusseibeh's seminal work to explore how education transcends its conventional role as a mere transmission of facts, emerging as a dynamic force for societal transformation and individual empowerment within the Palestinian context. It focuses on how education acts as a tool of liberation for the Palestinian people. Nusseibeh believes that complete freedom comes through educating the people and that it can be a powerful tool for change. Nusseibeh uses education both as a means of challenging the structural injustices brought about by occupation and as a vital way of affirming the basic human rights of the Palestinian people.

Keywords: Trauma, peace, justice, defiance, liberation

Introduction

This study argues that *Once Upon a Country* plays an integral part in the Palestinian struggle as Nusseibeh's view on education is transformative. Acquiring knowledge enables people to reclaim their self-worth as a means of enduring hard circumstances. By highlighting the importance of education in promoting critical consciousness and the appeal of collective action, this article attempts to emphasize its vital role in the continual pursuit of self-determination and a liberated future for Palestine. *Once Upon a Country*, Sari Nusseibeh shows that Education can be a powerful medium to fight for one's freedom. As an educator and peace activist, Nusseibeh believes that learning helps people think lucidly, nobly spend their lives and envision a hopeful future. His story reveals how education can help Palestinians deal with loss and trauma, defy occupation, help in surviving in the worst conditions and liberate their lives. Knowledge can be the foundation of change in society, creating strength and resilience, enabling people to defy oppressive systems providing people with the means to survive, and encouraging hope for a better and fairer future.

Literature Review

The concept of education as a liberatory force is not a novel idea. This idea is resonant in the works of thinkers like Paulo Freire. Freire, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972), argues that education is crucial for individuals to comprehend their world and subsequently transform it according to their convictions. He emphasizes that learning should equip people to dismantle unjust systems that impede their growth and suppress their voices. The paper highlights Freire's assertion that "oppressed people all over the world identified with Paulo Freire's denunciation of the oppressive conditions that were choking millions of poor people" (Freire 12), a sentiment that deeply mirrors the contemporary Palestinian experience of hardship despite rich cultural and natural resources. This connection to Freire's work provides a robust theoretical framework for understanding the profound impact of education in the Palestinian context, where the struggle for basic human rights and dignity is ongoing.

Paulo Freire's conception of education as a practice of freedom provides a foundational framework for analysing *Once Upon a Country: A Palestinian Life*, but it can be significantly enriched by integrating complementary critical educational ideologies that resonate with the Palestinian experience under occupation. Theoretical frameworks on Bell Hooks' Engaged Pedagogy, Ivan Illich's Deschooling theory and Frantz Fanon's decolonial pedagogy offer a unique lens through which the analysis of education as liberation can be deepened without having to reproduce Eurocentric epistemological hierarchies in Nusseibeh's narrative.

The engaged pedagogy of Bell Hooks is built on the practice of love and mutual respect and sees the classroom as a space for collective healing and subjection to forces that out-govern us. This framework builds on Freirean praxis by emphasizing affect and emotional connection as central elements of liberatory education. Al-Quds University, established amidst the constraints of oppressive occupation, is among the most significant educational institutions globally. The founder established the university due to his fascination with the way authentic engagement occurs between students and teachers. The vision involves "education as the practice of freedom" (Hooks 14), and the mutual recognition of the community reflects Nusseibeh's idea of the connection between hope and dignity. A resilient educational framework contains various elements of pedagogy, such as care and intellectual community, as well as the principles, for instance, emotional labour and systemic endurance.

The Deschooling theory, developed by Ivan Illich, is among the most radical critiques worldwide. Illich developed the theory due to his fascination with the way learning is rooted in community and autonomy. The concept involves a radical critique of institutionalized education, and the lived experience of Nusseibeh reflects the author's idea of the connection between institutional structures and reproduced dependency. The profound and challenging Deschooling theory contains various elements of critique, such as surveillance and normalization, as well as the principles, for instance, "learning webs" (Illich 32) and self-directed inquiry over bureaucratic certification. This framework helps analyse how Palestinians reclaim educational initiatives outside state-sanctioned structures that may serve colonial interests.

Education, when seen through Frantz Fanon's lens becomes less about facts and more about breaking mental chains shaped by colonial rule. Colonial classrooms often erase native ways of knowing, replacing them with distant ideals. This erasure matters deeply in Nusseibeh's story, where education pulls one way while heritage tugs another. Nusseibeh's journey reflects a split, European ideas on one side, ancestral wisdom on the other and both cannot be resolved by choosing one over the other. Fanon helps explain why blindly copying Western models fails, just as total refusal might limit growth. While Freire opened doors to critical teaching, others widened the path in different directions. Hooks leans into emotion, connection and care, the unseen threads holding learning together. Illich questions whether schools themselves can ever be fair when systems shape their core. Then comes Fanon again, dissecting how power lives inside minds long after borders shift. Together, they form a quiet chorus - one voice on feeling, another on structure, a third on identity, all circling the same truth without saying. These ideas build a fuller picture of how schooling works, not just as resistance but also as rebuilding in Nusseibeh's novel of living under occupation. Though shaped by different concerns, every framework still holds to the belief that education can set people free. What stands out is how each one tackles a distinct piece of life under colonial rule.

Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative textual analysis approach, focusing on Sari Nusseibeh's *Once Upon a Country: A Palestinian Life* as its primary source. The methodological approach consists of a close examination of Nusseibeh's self-understanding and his ways of engaging with the Palestinians and the Israelis at the Hebrew University and Al-Quds University. This paper focuses on stories and comments in the text that illustrate Nusseibeh's philosophy regarding the role education plays in achieving peace, resisting oppression and maintaining Palestinian memory and identity. For example, Nusseibeh's parents' determination that their children would receive the best schooling available in Palestine, sending them to various schools, while his mother opened a school for girls who could not afford to go is an example of this.

Other literary and academic works such as Michelle Cohen Corasanti, Tara Westover, and Malala Yousafzai contribute to the overall discussion of education as a tool that can be used to create a sense of defiance, survival, and hope within the Palestinian nation. The historical context and background of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will also be discussed as it relates to the role (or lack of role) of education within Palestinian society and how that conflict has continued to impact that society.

Discussion

The novel depicts that education can prove to be a crucial tool of defiance and liberation, specifically through Nusseibeh's personal experience at Hebrew University and Al Quds University, where he worked with both Palestinians and Israelis. Being a philosopher, academic, and former representative of the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organisation) and President at the Al Quds University, it is a confirmation that Nusseibeh believes in the power

of Knowledge (education) and understanding to attain peace and freedom even in times of dispute and occupation. In the opinion of Freire, education helps individuals to understand their world and change it according to their beliefs. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972), learning (education) helps people escape from unjust systems that hinder their growth and development and hamper the opinions of individuals. Freire deeply relates with Palestinian's condition as they live in a region rich in natural resources, history and culture yet they face severe famine, malnutrition, mass starvation, poverty and extreme violence by oppressive occupation especially in the West Bank.

Poor people always suffer since they are impoverished and unheard as poverty stops them from living freely. People seldom believe that it is just how life is meant to be, and they don't even try to change it, either because they have been told it is their fate, or they feel powerless, as stated, "They may even fear freedom because it carries risk and the potential for conflict" (Garavan 2). Freire's book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* can be understood as providing a method to enable the poor to understand the root cause of their poverty so that they can begin to liberate themselves and become autonomous human beings. By doing so, they liberate the oppressors as Garavan states "Freire contrasts oppression and liberation. These are the two polarities of the human existential condition" (Garavan 2). This means that Nusseibeh, like Freire, understands the human experience to be that of being oppressed and freeing oneself from that oppression. For Nusseibeh, the oppression that the Palestinians face includes the occupation of their land, as well as the efforts to suppress their education, culture, and aspirations. Thus, the Palestinians become powerless and voiceless. Nusseibeh believes that the best means of liberation from these oppressive forces is achieved through the overcoming of these forces with the help of education.

In Palestine, school children are forced to quit their education because of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or closure. The tool that can build the future of the Palestinian children is being hindered in the face of conflict so that a bright future and better lives for the Palestinians become unattainable. Even though Palestinians are willing to learn, they are forced to quit their education. As Nusseibeh describes in his novel, his parents provided him and his siblings with the best education possible as he asserts, "My parents had ecumenical tastes in education. My sisters went to a French school run by nuns, then to the Schmidt Girls' College, run by the Germans. My elder brother, Zaki, and I attended the Anglican St. George's, down the street" (Nusseibeh 82). Nusseibeh's mother, Nuzha Al-Ghusein, started a school for girls who could not afford education, as she believed not only boys, but girls also deserve to be educated and gain knowledge, "as always a person.... she started a school for girls whose families couldn't afford their education, society" (Nusseibeh 161).

This act, undertaken by Nusseibeh's mother, transcends simple philanthropy; it represents a direct and tangible challenge to systemic barriers that perpetuate oppression. Nuzha Ghusein believed that education for her daughters is not only a privilege, but also their birthright. Nusseibeh's mother illustrated the economic aspect of oppression that has been going on in Palestine till now. She did what needed to be done to ensure her daughters could get an education and find opportunities so that they could live a better life. She founded a school

for girls since she recognized the different layers of oppression. In many societies, girls face maltreatment and brutality that goes beyond the limit. By establishing a school particularly for girls, Nusseibeh's mother was also helping to resist and oppose those extra forms of oppression like targeted violence, restricted mobility, limited access to healthcare, psychological stress, marginalization and so on.

Malala Yousafzai believes that everyone regardless of their gender has the right to get education as she asserts, "... Education is education. We should learn everything and then choose which path to follow. Education is neither eastern nor western, it is human... education is our basic right" (Lamb and Yousafzai 83-154). These lines beautifully express that education is for everyone. Countries like Afghanistan, Central Africa, Pakistan and Sudan do not encourage girls' education. Political leaders assume that keeping the people ignorant makes it easier for oppressive powers to mislead and suppress them. Ziauddin states, "ignorance allowed politicians to fool people and bad administrators to be re-elected. He believed school should be available for all, rich and poor, boys and girls" (Lamb and Yousafzai 26). Since Ziauddin Yousafzai was an academic and former political leader, his statement helps us understand Nusseibeh's struggles. Ziauddin was involved in politics and thought about education since it helps people understand their leaders. This connects to Freire's idea that education can free people from repressive control. For the Palestinians, who have faced oppression throughout their homeland, education is necessary to counter ignorance. These quotes highlight education as an important means of liberation for the Palestinian people and that they all must gain their freedom.

The oppressive authorities have faced difficulties in realizing their aim of keeping Palestinian people uneducated and voiceless due to awareness of Palestinians for maintaining their identity as stated, "... the attitude of one of Israel's chief consultants for Arab education, who is quoted as saying, 'It is good for us if the Arabs are hewers of wood and carriers of water'" (Nusseibeh 163). These lines show how the oppressive occupation wants Palestinians especially the young minds not to study, stay in low-paying jobs and stay unaware of their right to get good education. These lines starkly reveal the deliberate strategy of the oppressive occupation to suppress Palestinian intellectual and societal development, "from the first day in the classroom...., Palestinian educational system...." (Nusseibeh 169). The discussion of the Palestinian educational system further emphasizes the intentional and systemic nature of the suppression of the Palestinians. The oppression of the Palestinians in this way is explicitly expressed in the idea that the occupying forces desired to create a population of Palestinians that was unenlightened and unheeding of their demands for reform within the region. However, the tyrannical authorities faced challenges in fulfilling such a goal due to the awareness of the Palestinians regarding the value of education. Their dedication to education is itself a form of resistance against the oppression that is placed upon them.

In his novel *Once Upon a Country*, Nusseibeh presents education as one of the critical paths for people to follow either the path of violence or resignation to their fate. Nusseibeh understands the frustration that the people of the region felt due to the occupation of their land and asserts, "education is a tool to prevent people from passively stewing in their own

resentment, and either giving up by submitting or lashing out by tossing bombs” (Nusseibeh 188). Without a constructive outlet, these emotions can lead to either a debilitating sense of hopelessness and submission or to destructive acts of violence. Education, for Nusseibeh, offers a means to channel this resentment into productive avenues. It provides individuals with the critical thinking skills, knowledge, and agency to understand situation, articulate their grievances effectively, and pursue meaningful change through intellectual and peaceful means. The example of Ichmad Hamid from Corasanti's *The Almond Tree* further illustrates this point in *The Almond Tree* (2022) where Corasanti describes the character of Ichmad Hamid, a young Palestinian boy who idolizes Einstein (Goyal). Ichmad’s father motivates him to go for higher education. With his father’s support, Ichmad continues his studies and does not let societal oppression stop his education. He gets a scholarship and goes to America from where he continues his journey to Hebrew University which symbolizes the breaking of barriers imposed by conflict and prejudice. Ichmad's story, where he does not let societal oppression stop his education, directly reflects Nusseibeh's belief that education empowers individuals to defy the limitations imposed upon them. It demonstrates how intellectual pursuit can be a powerful form of personal and collective liberation, enabling individuals to transcend their immediate circumstances and contribute to a more just future, rather than succumbing to despair or resorting to destructive actions.

According to Corasanti, the tyrannical occupation forces Palestinians to be uneducated and impoverished. It is effortless for the oppressors to rule the Palestinians and keep them in their oppressive control as echoed in the lines, “you’d think they’d want an educated population, it is ignorance and superstition that promotes violence” (Corasanti 225). This powerful statement from Corasanti portrays the deliberate impoverishment and intellectual suppression of Palestinians by the occupation provide a stark reality which Sari Nusseibeh advocates. The idea of the oppressors to rule the Palestinians and keep them in their oppressive control by keeping them uneducated highlights the strategic importance of intellectual disempowerment as a tool of control. This directly contrasts with Nusseibeh's belief that an educated populace is essential for self-determination and resistance. The above lines show a cynical manipulation of societal conditions where maintaining ignorance is seen as beneficial for control rather than promoting enlightenment for peace. The plight of Palestinians is such that all of them are living on donations. The oppressive occupation has turned almost the whole nation of Palestine into beggars, not only by crushing their hopes and future but also by killing their dreams as depicted “they want to kill our hopes and dreams, destroy our humanity...the majority of us live on donations – they’ve turned us into a nation of beggars” (Corasanti 225). The Palestinians are indeed the most hard-working people in the world but there is no trade for men, no education for the children and no future for them. The worst thing is that their spirits and souls have been crushed by the oppressors.

Nusseibeh aims to convince the Palestinians to understand the prime importance of education, to make it foundation as depicted, “trying to convince students that they first needed a solid education before pursuing their revolution was no easy matter” (Nusseibeh 167). Nusseibeh faced challenges in convincing the students as they were quite politically active. Not

only the students, but the professors showed significant interest in politics. Though colonialism affects the minds of people being colonized adversely, yet Nusseibeh shows education as a way out. The novel *Nervous Conditions* authored by Tsitsi Dangarembga, shows that “It’s bad enough... when a country gets colonised, but when the people do as well! That’s the end, really, that’s the end” (Dangarembga 408). Nyasa, a character in the novel is upset as she sees that not only her country, Zimbabwe is being colonised, but people are changing the way of life and thinking. The story shows how British colonisation in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) changed its native’s lives, just like how oppressive occupation has changed the lives of Palestinians and has turned it upside down. This text shows how British colonialism harmed not only the mental health of the colonised people of Zimbabwe but also changed their way of thinking like the Palestinians in Nusseibeh’s novel started to accept the Israeli rules and regulations.

Nusseibeh shows that attaining education not only means gaining knowledge, but it also teaches us to stay strong in times of distress. *Educated* (2021) written by Tara Westover, shows how Tara is able to receive education and how it changed her life. The story shows that Tara chooses good over bad even when she was struck with misery, “I tried to imagine school but could not” (Westover 213). During her childhood, when she was mocked for not being educated, “a boy named Aaron had told all the girls that I could not read because I did not go to school, and now none of them would talk to me” (Westover 227). The collapse of Idaho’s schools mirrors what happens under Palestine’s worn-out education system, where learning barely reaches those who need it. This paper focuses on two ideas: teaching empowers individuals to look beyond imposed boundaries, while hardships cultivate resilience and the strength to endure. Schools and the overall education system face intense challenges especially when a crisis hits. Nusseibeh shows how gaining education does more than just filling your mind, i.e, it builds internal strength. From this perspective, education surpasses the mere accumulation of classroom facts; it becomes a means of sharpening thought, unraveling complexities, and cultivating principles that guide individuals through cruelty and chaos. Though often unnoticed, such growth quietly equips one for the challenges ahead.

Tara Westover’s story shows what happens when knowledge replaces silence. A girl once mocked for not being educated proves that growth hides inside books and hard lessons. She did not just escape harsh situations; she rebuilt herself through knowledge and learning and eventually demonstrated her inner strength shaped by contemplation and introspection by choosing wisdom above suffering when trouble knocked on her door. There are times in her history when ignorance was followed by shame like a shadow at noon. Others criticised her lack of education, revealing how status shifts based on degrees seen or unseen. Learning did not fix everything, but it gave her eyes to see beyond the wreckage. Nusseibeh reflects on how, “I was battling the effects of a badly constituted Palestinian educational system...” (169). Nusseibeh's idea connects this work of literature to the novel’s broader social context. While the failures of Idaho’s educational system contributed to the challenges Westover faced, Nusseibeh addresses the systemic issues surrounding the Palestinian education system which tends to be exacerbated by military occupation. This shows that while one may wish to be educated, there could be outside forces that will prevent someone from obtaining

education. Still facing hurdles inside and out, Nusseibeh keeps pushing for educational rights seeing that learning is a key that unlocks mental barriers, builds determination in people and strengthens Palestinian's self-reliance.

In *Once Upon a Country*, freedom finds hope through education and learning for Palestinians, not through skills. Sari Nusseibeh's life reveals education as a vital element for survival, dignity, and an important means to resist without weapons. His views turn old beliefs upside down, liberation and freedom do not need force alone, it needs thinking and understanding as well. Change grows where minds are nurtured. Nusseibeh's experiences mixed with thoughts of critical thinking show that education is not just about lessons; it becomes defiance.

Conclusion

Palestinians who have continued to pursue education despite systemic barriers is indicative of their potential for education to liberate individuals. This paper demonstrated that in the Palestinian context, sharing knowledge and developing intellect are not only passive processes but also an active way to resist. Education is an important means to deal with trauma, to assert human rights and maintain the spirit of people pursuing self-determination and hope for their future. Education provides a means of individual enlightenment as well as collective empowerment and ultimately to the full realization of freedom and offers a powerful counter-narrative to the forces of occupation. The ongoing struggle for educational access and quality in Palestine is not merely an academic concern but a vital front in the broader fight for justice and liberation.

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The authors declare **no conflict of interest** that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this manuscript.

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