



Childhood in Crisis: Semiotic Representations of Children in Arabic Literature on War and Displacement

Muhshimannur S

UIN Alauddin Makassar

muhshimannur.s@uin-alauddin.ac.id

Abstract. The contemporary Arab world has experienced numerous humanitarian crises caused by war, occupation, forced migration, and political instability, all of which have had profound impacts on the lives of children. In this context, Arabic literature serves as an important medium for representing experiences of trauma, loss, and hope among younger generations living amid conflict. This study aims to analyze the semiotic representations of children in Arabic literary works that address themes of war and displacement. The research employs a qualitative approach through library research, utilizing Roland Barthes' semiotic theory and Yuri Lotman's cultural semiotics. The data consist of contemporary Arabic novels, short stories, and literary narratives portraying children's experiences in situations of conflict and forced migration. The findings reveal four dominant semiotic constructions of children: as symbols of innocence violated by violence, symbols of resilience and resistance, carriers of collective memory, and representations of national future aspirations. In addition, refugee spaces such as camps, borders, and lost homes function as cultural signs that shape children's identities and experiences. These findings demonstrate that Arabic literature transforms childhood into a complex semiotic category through which humanitarian trauma is articulated, collective memory is preserved, and visions of the future are imagined amid prolonged socio-political crises.

Keywords: *Children; Semiotics; Arabic Literature; War; Displacement; Collective Memory.*

Abstrak: Dunia Arab kontemporer menghadapi berbagai krisis kemanusiaan yang disebabkan oleh perang, pendudukan, migrasi paksa, dan instabilitas politik yang berdampak serius terhadap kehidupan anak-anak. Dalam konteks tersebut, sastra Arab menjadi medium penting untuk merepresentasikan pengalaman trauma, kehilangan, dan harapan generasi muda yang hidup di tengah konflik. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis representasi semiotik anak-anak dalam karya sastra Arab yang mengangkat tema perang dan pengungsian. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif melalui studi kepustakaan dengan memanfaatkan teori semiotika Roland Barthes dan semiotika budaya Yuri Lotman. Data penelitian berupa novel, cerpen, dan narasi sastra Arab kontemporer yang merepresentasikan pengalaman anak-anak dalam situasi konflik dan perpindahan paksa. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa anak-anak direpresentasikan melalui empat konstruksi semiotik utama, yaitu sebagai simbol kepolosan yang dikorbankan oleh kekerasan, simbol ketahanan dan perlawanan, pembawa memori kolektif, serta representasi harapan masa depan bangsa. Selain itu, ruang-ruang pengungsian seperti kamp, perbatasan, dan rumah yang hilang berfungsi sebagai tanda budaya yang membentuk identitas dan pengalaman anak-anak. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa sastra Arab mentransformasikan masa kanak-kanak menjadi kategori semiotik yang kompleks untuk mengartikulasikan trauma kemanusiaan, mempertahankan ingatan kolektif, dan membangun imajinasi masa depan di tengah krisis sosial-politik yang berkepanjangan.

Kata Kunci: Anak-anak; Semiotika; Sastra Arab; Perang; Pengungsian; Memori Kolektif.

INTRODUCTION

War and forced displacement profoundly transform the meaning of childhood (Nasser, 2025). Children who ordinarily occupy cultural positions associated with innocence, dependence, protection, and futurity may instead become witnesses to violence, objects of displacement, carriers of family memory, and symbols of political aspirations. Contemporary research on children affected by war demonstrates that armed conflict and displacement can have substantial consequences for psychological development, while also showing that children respond to adversity in heterogeneous ways and may demonstrate forms of resilience within difficult social environments (Hazer &

Gredebäck, 2023; Popham et al., 2022; Pluess et al., 2025). Hazer and Gredebäck (2023), for example, review the effects of war, displacement, and trauma on child development, while Popham et al. (2022) demonstrate that resilience among Syrian refugee children is dynamic rather than fixed.

The experience of childhood under conditions of conflict, however, cannot be understood exclusively through psychological or humanitarian frameworks (Summerfield, 2000; Wessells, 2016). Children also occupy important symbolic positions within literary and cultural representations. Literature transforms individual experiences of violence, separation, displacement, and loss into culturally meaningful signs. A child represented in a literary narrative is therefore not merely a character but may function simultaneously as a sign of innocence, a witness to historical violence, a bearer of collective memory, and an imagined figure of the future. Such representations are particularly significant in Palestinian literature, where questions of displacement, exile, memory, homeland, and generational continuity have occupied a central position.

Palestinian literature provides a particularly important context for examining the symbolic construction of childhood. The Nakbah of 1948 and the continuing experience of displacement have generated literary narratives in which personal loss intersects with collective history. Within these narratives, the child frequently occupies an ambiguous position: the child is vulnerable to historical violence but may also become an embodiment of continuity and future transformation. Nashef (2023), in his study of Ghassan Kanafani's literary works, demonstrates that children are represented not simply as passive victims but as sociopolitical agents whose significance is connected to intergenerational succession and the possibility of social change.

This symbolic dimension is also visible beyond literary texts. Habashi (2013), in an ethnographic study of Palestinian children, demonstrates that children participate actively in reconstructing collective memory. The study of Palestinian children from cities, villages, and refugee camps in the West Bank shows that children do not merely inherit memories from adults; they also reinterpret and transmit collective memories to subsequent generations. Thus, childhood can become a significant site through which historical memory is reproduced and transformed (Habashi, 2013).

Ghassan Kanafani's *Returning to Haifa* offers an especially productive literary case for examining these processes. The novella centers on Said and

Safiya, Palestinian parents who return to Haifa after years of displacement and confront the loss of their home and their son, Khuldun. The narrative consequently connects childhood with displacement, memory, identity, parenthood, and the political consequences of historical rupture. The representation of childhood in the narrative is therefore inseparable from the larger historical experience of Palestinian displacement (Kanafani, 2000).

The representation of the child in Kanafani's work is more complex than a simple victimhood narrative. The child may symbolize what has been lost, but simultaneously what may still be recovered, transformed, or contested. Nashef (2023) argues that Kanafani's representations of children construct them as sociopolitical subjects whose agency emerges through relations between childhood and adulthood. This perspective is important because it challenges interpretations that reduce Palestinian children exclusively to passive victims of violence.

From a semiotic perspective, these representations can be examined as systems of signs. Roland Barthes' theory of myth provides a useful framework for examining how apparently ordinary representations acquire broader cultural meanings. A child, for example, may operate at the denotative level as an individual character within a narrative, while at the connotative level the same figure may evoke innocence, loss, homeland, generational continuity, or political resistance. Through the operation of myth, these meanings can become naturalized and appear as self-evident cultural truths (Barthes, 1972).

Yuri Lotman's cultural semiotics provides a complementary perspective. Rather than treating a literary text as an isolated collection of signs, Lotman understands texts as functioning within broader cultural-semiotic environments. Meaning emerges through relations between texts, cultural codes, boundaries, memory, and systems of communication (Lotman, 1988). His discussion of the semiotic functioning of texts is particularly useful for examining how representations of children connect individual narratives to larger cultural structures.

The combination of Barthes and Lotman therefore makes it possible to examine childhood at two interconnected levels. Barthes helps identify how the child becomes a sign and how that sign produces connotations and myths, whereas Lotman helps explain how these meanings operate within a larger cultural semiotic space. In the context of Palestinian literature, the child can consequently be understood not only as a literary character but also as a

cultural sign through which displacement, historical memory, identity, resistance, and futurity are communicated.

Previous studies have addressed children, memory, displacement, and Palestinian literature, but these dimensions have not always been brought together within a systematic semiotic framework. Habashi (2013) emphasizes children's role in collective memory, while Nashef (2023) examines the sociopolitical agency of children in Kanafani's literary works. Empirical studies such as Popham et al. (2022) and Wilson et al. (2021) demonstrate the psychological and social consequences of conflict and displacement for refugee children. These studies provide important foundations, but they do not specifically explain how literary representations transform childhood into a network of cultural signs.

This study therefore asks: How are children represented as semiotic signs in Arabic literature concerning war and displacement? How do these representations construct meanings of innocence, resistance, collective memory, and future aspiration? And how do these meanings operate within the broader cultural semiotic environment of Palestinian displacement?

The study argues that the representation of children in Ghassan Kanafani's *Returning to Haifa* operates through four interconnected symbolic formations: children as signs of violated innocence, children as figures of agency and resistance, children as carriers of collective memory, and children as representations of future national possibility (Boopathi & Gangothri, 2025; Nashef, 2023). The contribution of the study lies in demonstrating how childhood becomes a semiotic mechanism through which literature transforms experiences of war and displacement into cultural narratives about loss, identity, continuity, and political transformation.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis to examine the semiotic representation of children in contemporary Arabic literature addressing war and displacement. The data consist of selected literary works published in the contemporary period that explicitly depict children's experiences of war, displacement, or forced migration. The texts were purposively selected based on their relevance to the research focus. Data were identified by locating passages, scenes, characters, and narrative descriptions in which children are represented in relation to trauma, memory, identity, resilience, displacement,

or future aspirations. These textual units were first analyzed using Barthes' semiotic framework to identify denotative and connotative meanings, and then interpreted through Lotman's cultural semiotics to examine their relationship with broader cultural, political, and ideological contexts. The analysis was conducted by comparing recurring patterns of representation across the selected texts to identify the symbolic meanings and cultural functions attributed to child figures.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

Children as Symbols of Innocence Violated by War

One of the most dominant semiotic representations found in Arabic literature on war and displacement is the construction of children as symbols of innocence violated by violence. Across numerous narratives emerging from Palestine, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, children are frequently portrayed as victims whose lives are disrupted by forces beyond their control. At the denotative level, these representations describe actual experiences of children exposed to military occupation, bombardment, displacement, and family separation. However, at the connotative level, these experiences become powerful cultural signs that communicate broader social and political meanings (Bagheri & Bisset, 2022; Schillinger et al., 2022).

Within Barthes' framework, the image of a child affected by war functions as a signifier whose signified extends beyond individual suffering. The child becomes a symbolic embodiment of innocence destroyed by political violence. Through this representation, literature transforms personal trauma into a collective moral indictment of war itself. The suffering child serves not merely as a narrative character but as an ethical symbol that challenges readers to confront the human consequences of armed conflict (Barthes, 1972).

Palestinian literature provides particularly significant examples of this symbolic construction. Since the Nakba of 1948, Palestinian writers have repeatedly depicted children witnessing the destruction of homes, separation from families, and loss of homeland. In these narratives, childhood innocence becomes inseparable from experiences of dispossession. The child refugee emerges as one of the most recognizable figures in Palestinian literary

imagination, symbolizing both individual vulnerability and collective historical trauma.

The symbolic significance of innocence becomes especially visible in literary depictions of disrupted everyday life. Activities typically associated with childhood playing, attending school, building friendships, and imagining the future are frequently interrupted by military violence. These interruptions carry meanings that extend beyond individual experiences. They symbolize the broader destruction of social normalcy and the erosion of fundamental human security (Boyden, 2021).

Syrian war literature similarly employs childhood innocence as a central semiotic device. Narratives describing children living amid bombardment often contrast images of ordinary childhood with scenes of destruction. Toys scattered among ruins, classrooms reduced to rubble, and family photographs buried beneath collapsed buildings become powerful symbols through which literature communicates the absurdity and brutality of war. Such representations produce emotional resonance precisely because they juxtapose symbols of innocence with symbols of violence.

Trauma studies provide additional insight into these representations. Caruth (1996) argues that trauma frequently manifests through fragmented and indirect forms of expression. Child perspectives often facilitate this process because they allow writers to depict violence through partial understanding and emotional immediacy. The child's limited comprehension of political events highlights the incomprehensibility of violence itself, emphasizing its irrational and destructive nature (Caruth, 1996).

Representations of violated innocence often critique political systems and power structures by portraying children's suffering as a failure of institutions to provide protection. The recurring figure of the wounded, orphaned, or displaced child thus becomes a cultural sign of collective grief, moral outrage, and historical memory, transforming childhood into a symbolic language of war's human costs (Nassar, 2023).

Children as Embodiments of Resistance and Resilience

Although Arabic literature frequently portrays children as victims of violence, it simultaneously constructs them as symbols of resilience and resistance. This dual representation complicates simplistic narratives of

victimhood and highlights the agency of children in contexts of conflict and displacement (Mahmood, 2022).

From a semiotic perspective, resilience functions as a secondary layer of signification that emerges alongside vulnerability. A child living under occupation or displacement may appear powerless at the denotative level (Salim & Ismail, 2025). Yet at the connotative level, the same child often symbolizes perseverance, endurance, and cultural survival. This symbolic transformation reflects broader social efforts to maintain hope amid conditions of uncertainty and suffering.

Palestinian literature offers numerous examples of children represented as figures of resistance. These representations do not necessarily depict children participating directly in political struggle. Rather, resistance often manifests through everyday acts of survival, memory preservation, and cultural continuity. Attending school despite military restrictions, preserving family stories, learning traditional songs, and maintaining connections to ancestral villages all become symbolic acts of resistance against erasure (Zureik, 2022).

Within Barthes' concept of myth, the resilient child frequently acquires mythic significance. The child comes to represent the enduring spirit of the nation, embodying aspirations for liberation and collective survival. Such representations transform individual experiences into cultural narratives that reinforce communal identity and solidarity (Barthes, 1972).

Syrian refugee literature similarly portrays children as agents of adaptation and resilience. Narratives often depict children learning new languages, navigating unfamiliar social environments, and developing strategies for survival within refugee communities. These experiences symbolize broader processes of cultural adaptation and social reconstruction. The resilient child becomes a figure through which literature imagines possibilities for renewal despite extensive destruction.

Resilience in Arabic war literature extends trauma representations by portraying children not only as victims but also as agents capable of adapting to adversity through creativity, courage, and emotional strength. This resilience is often rooted in family, community, and cultural traditions, reflecting collective values of solidarity and belonging while challenging narratives of passive victimhood. Thus, resilient child figures symbolize

survival, agency, hope, and the possibility of cultural continuity and social reconstruction (Saloul, 2021).

Children as Carriers of Collective Memory

One of the most significant semiotic functions of childhood representation in Arabic literature concerns the preservation and transmission of collective memory. Child characters frequently serve as repositories of historical knowledge, cultural traditions, and familial narratives that might otherwise disappear under conditions of displacement and social fragmentation.

Lotman's theory of cultural memory provides a valuable framework for understanding this phenomenon. According to Lotman (1990), culture functions as a mechanism for storing and transmitting information across generations. Literary texts contribute to this process by preserving experiences and meanings within symbolic forms. Children occupy a central position within these processes because they represent continuity between past and future generations (Lotman, 1990).

In narratives of displacement, memory often becomes one of the few resources that displaced communities can carry with them. Homes may be destroyed, territories occupied, and social institutions disrupted, but memories remain. Literature frequently depicts children inheriting these memories through stories told by parents, grandparents, and community elders.

Palestinian literature provides especially rich examples of memory transmission. Child characters often learn about villages they have never seen, landscapes they have never inhabited, and historical events that occurred before their birth. Through these narratives, children become custodians of collective memory, ensuring that experiences of displacement are not forgotten.

The symbolic significance of memory transmission extends beyond historical preservation. It also contributes to identity formation. Children who inherit collective memories acquire frameworks for understanding their place within broader social and historical narratives. Memory therefore functions not merely as recollection but as a mechanism for constructing belonging and cultural continuity.

Literary representations frequently emphasize sensory dimensions of memory. Descriptions of olive trees, family homes, local foods, traditional

songs, and familiar landscapes create symbolic connections between displaced children and lost homelands. These recurring motifs function as memory signs that sustain cultural identity despite geographical separation (Al-Hardan, 2022).

The role of children as memory carriers becomes particularly important in refugee contexts. Refugee camps often appear in literature as spaces where memories are simultaneously preserved and transformed. Within these environments, children learn historical narratives that shape their understanding of displacement and belonging. Literature thus portrays memory transmission as an active and ongoing process rather than a passive inheritance.

Trauma theory further illuminates the relationship between memory and childhood representation. Collective traumas frequently require mechanisms of transmission that enable future generations to understand past experiences. Children serve as crucial mediators within these processes because they embody the continuity of collective identity across time.

Consequently, representations of children as memory carriers perform both cultural and political functions. They preserve historical experiences while simultaneously asserting the legitimacy of collective identities threatened by displacement and violence (Zureik, 2022).

Beyond representing present suffering and historical memory, children frequently symbolize future possibilities within Arabic literature. This future-oriented dimension constitutes one of the most significant aspects of childhood representation in narratives of war and displacement. At the semiotic level, children function as signs of continuity and renewal. Their presence within literary narratives suggests that despite destruction and loss, collective life remains capable of regeneration. This symbolic association between childhood and futurity reflects broader cultural understandings of children as bearers of social hopes and aspirations (Assmann, 2011).

Palestinian literature frequently portrays children as embodiments of future national liberation. Their education, survival, and cultural awareness become linked to broader aspirations for political self-determination. Through these representations, literature projects visions of future justice while maintaining connections to historical memory.

Similarly, Syrian narratives often depict children as symbols of post-war reconstruction. Even amid extensive destruction, child characters

represent possibilities for rebuilding communities and reimagining social relationships. Their capacity for adaptation and learning suggests the potential emergence of new social realities beyond conflict (Rizq, 2025).

The symbolic relationship between childhood and futurity also reflects broader human concerns regarding continuity and survival. Societies experiencing war and displacement often confront profound uncertainties concerning their future existence. Children become particularly important symbols within these contexts because they embody the possibility of collective persistence despite adversity.

From Barthes' perspective, representations of future-oriented childhood frequently operate at the level of myth. The child becomes a mythic figure representing national rebirth, cultural endurance, and historical continuity. These myths contribute to collective resilience by providing symbolic frameworks through which communities imagine alternative futures.

Importantly, literary representations rarely present future aspirations as guaranteed outcomes. Rather, they emphasize uncertainty, struggle, and ongoing negotiation. Children symbolize potential futures rather than predetermined destinies. This ambiguity reflects the complex realities of conflict and displacement while preserving space for hope and imagination (LaCapra, 2001).

Through such representations, literature contributes to broader cultural processes of future-making. Child characters become vehicles through which societies articulate aspirations for justice, peace, and social renewal. Their symbolic significance therefore extends beyond individual narratives to encompass collective visions of possibility and transformation (Assmann, 2011).

The Semiotics of Refugee Spaces: Camps, Borders, and Lost Homes

Child representations in Arabic war literature are closely connected to the spaces they inhabit, including refugee camps, border crossings, destroyed homes, and temporary shelters. These spaces function as semiotic environments that shape children's experiences and meanings, particularly in contexts of war and displacement.

Refugee camps symbolize uncertainty, exclusion, waiting, and suspended belonging, while border crossings represent physical and symbolic transitions between identities and cultural environments (Malkki, 2020).

Similarly, destroyed or abandoned homes signify more than material loss; they represent disrupted security, memory, belonging, and familial continuity.

Through these spatial symbols, children become figures through which literature expresses displacement, cultural memory, and survival. The interaction between childhood and space therefore constructs a broader semiotic system for representing the human and cultural consequences of war (Saloul, 2021).

Discussion and Theoretical Synthesis

The findings demonstrate that childhood in Arabic literature functions as a highly complex semiotic category operating across multiple levels of signification. Through Barthes' framework, child characters can be understood as signs whose meanings extend far beyond their immediate narrative roles. They symbolize innocence, resilience, memory, and future aspiration while simultaneously participating in broader mythic narratives concerning nationhood, survival, and justice.

Lotman's theory of cultural semiotics further reveals that these representations operate within larger semiospheres shaped by historical memory, political conflict, and cultural identity. Children function as mediators connecting individual experiences to collective narratives, enabling societies to interpret and preserve meanings associated with war and displacement.

Trauma studies complement these perspectives by highlighting the role of childhood representations in communicating experiences that resist direct articulation. Children provide symbolic frameworks through which literature negotiates suffering, remembrance, and recovery. Their narratives transform traumatic experiences into cultural knowledge capable of being transmitted across generations (Alexander, 2012).

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives demonstrate that representations of children in Arabic literature are not merely descriptive but deeply ideological and cultural. Childhood becomes a symbolic language through which societies articulate ethical concerns, preserve historical memories, and imagine alternative futures. In contexts of war and displacement, such representations acquire particular urgency because they address fundamental questions concerning identity, belonging, survival, and hope.

The semiotic study of childhood therefore contributes not only to literary criticism but also to broader understandings of humanitarian crises and cultural resilience. Through the figure of the child, Arabic literature constructs a powerful symbolic vocabulary capable of communicating the enduring human consequences of conflict while preserving possibilities for renewal and transformation.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that children in contemporary Arabic literature on war and displacement function as complex cultural signs that communicate humanitarian suffering, collective memory, resilience, identity, and future aspirations. Through the analytical perspectives of Roland Barthes and Yuri Lotman, childhood emerges not merely as a biological category but as a symbolic construct through which Arab societies negotiate experiences of violence, displacement, and cultural survival. The findings reveal four dominant semiotic representations of children: symbols of violated innocence, embodiments of resilience and resistance, carriers of collective memory, and representations of future national aspirations. Furthermore, refugee spaces such as camps, borders, and lost homes operate as significant cultural signs that shape experiences of belonging and displacement.

The study contributes to Arabic literary studies by introducing a semiotic framework for understanding childhood representations in conflict narratives and by demonstrating how literary texts function as cultural archives of memory and resistance. These findings also contribute to broader discussions in childhood studies, trauma studies, migration studies, and cultural memory research. Future studies may explore comparative analyses across different Arab regions, gendered representations of childhood, and digital narratives that portray the experiences of children affected by war and displacement.

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