

Abstract

Although literature often deals with urban settings, looking into Jerusalem means something different. As a matter of fact, writing about Jerusalem cannot be considered just as an example of the relationship between the act of writing and the representation of the urban space.

As early as the testimonies produced by the Islamic, Christian and Hebrew civilizations, Jerusalem was first assumed as a symbolic space and then as a geographical one, primarily highlighting its value as a centre of political and religious identity.

Considering that, the city was unanimously perceived as a cultural icon and represented in its twofold role: as an intangible symbol of the absolute – religiously, politically and emotionally – and as a real space, with its everyday life related to the people who live there and therefore portrayed in its historical becoming.

The coexistence of the real level and the ideal one, deeply rooted into an eternal and mythical idea of the sacred, is the key to understand the symbolic centrality attributed to the city of Jerusalem, definitely a marginal settlement from an economically and geographically point of view.

According to this outlook, this study focuses on the analysis of some representations of Jerusalem which I found in literary texts and where we can see how the geographical landscape corresponds to a “mental landscape”, a space deformed and informed by cultural, traditional and ritual assumptions.

Thus, I found it particularly interesting to look first into the idea of Jerusalem which comes out from the oldest testimonies. Hence, I chose to give a brief but necessary outline of some representations in Medieval, pre-modern and modern literary texts, in order to point out the ideological and cultural bases of some symbols which are still valid in contemporary literature even if with different meanings.

As far as the field of this study is concerned, I dwelled upon the contemporary era and a specific literary genre: prose texts (novels and short stories), set in Jerusalem and written by Israeli and Palestinian authors. I especially considered works edited since 1948, an emblematic year that leads the change of the political *status quo* and charges Jerusalem with new political values: in Israeli literature the assumption of Jerusalem as a new capital involves the idea of an ideal return to a place that evokes the exile and an eternal feeling of nostalgia; in Palestinian literature too, the *nakaba* (literally the *disaster*, but currently in the Arab world the term refers to the 1948 defeat) has a fundamental role in the change of perspectives: from that moment the urban space of Jerusalem was assumed as a symbol of the destiny of oppression of the whole Palestinian people. I focused on prose instead of poetry for a specific reason: as a matter of fact, despite poetry is undoubtedly important in both the Israeli and Palestinian literature, analyzing fiction means figuring out how the

symbolic and ideal conception of the urban space of Jerusalem deals with the realistic one. It means that prose fiction is a literary genre that compels the author to match realistic - or apparently realistic – views on the Jerusalem daily life with the allure of the symbolic echo of the city.

Into this research field, I took some books as case-studies in order to point out how various artists portrayed the image of the city and, at the same time, investigate how the historical and political dynamics of the past fifty years affected the way Jerusalem was perceived and portrayed. As for Israeli literature, my case-studies are: the stories set in Jerusalem written by the famous Nobel prize Shmuel Yosef Agnon (1959) in which he presents the lives of Hebrew people who migrated to Israel during the 1920s and 1930s, *Michael Sheli* by Amos Oz (1968) a novel that deals with the topic of love and marriage of a young couple who lives in Jerusalem only a few years after the 1948 war; the collection of stories *News from Jerusalem* by David Shahar (1974), an evocation of the author's childhood and youth in Jerusalem and, finally, the novel *Mar Mani* (1990) in which Abraham B. Yehoshua narrates the story of a Hebrew family, the Manis, whose destiny appears deeply and ambiguously related to the city of Jerusalem. As for Palestinian literature, my case studies are: the novels *al-ayādūn fī šāri* *al-ayq* (1960) e *al-Safīna* (1970), by Ibrāhīm Ibrāhīm, stating the feelings of the Palestinian people after the *nakba* and their sense of loss and disorientation; the novel *āra al-niārī* (1969) by Nabil ūrī, a familiar and sentimental drama set on the eve of the 1967 war; the novel *ill aar li-l-madīna* (1998), inspired by the life experience of the author, Maḥmūd ūqayr, who was exiled from Jerusalem during the 1970s and who returned to the city after the Oslo Accords. Finally, I considered the latest novel by Saar alīfā's, *al-ūra wa al-īqūna wa al-'ahd al-qadīm* (2007), a recent work that picks up the thread of some characteristic themes in Palestinian literature related to Jerusalem, such as the loss of love and the reconstruction of a nostalgic memory of the past.

I followed the topics that arose from these case-studies to outline my studies and I will go through the main topics in this summary.

Jerusalem and the representation of the space.

From a perspective and visual point of view, in both literatures a comprehensive outlook on the space of the city is quite rare and it seems impossible for the authors to offer a total description of the city in all its parts. The description is extremely fragmented and all characters appear constricted in their freedom of movement. As a consequence, all the stories happened in well-defined neighbourhoods and among these the Old-City, with its deployment of symbols and sacred places, is the favourite place to locate the plot. I found it particularly important to point out that Palestinian literature often figures out Jerusalem as a “countryside”, setting the events in the country and hills around the city as it was the consequence of the gradually marginalization of the Palestinian people from the new centre of the urban Jerusalem. Israeli authors, on the other hand, present a city

landscape: their main characters are city dwellers, from the middle class and often related to an intellectual or academic setting. As a consequence the description is focused on inner spaces: university, private houses, courtyards, rooms.

Jerusalem in the reflection of memories.

Jerusalem is always portrayed by a first-person narrator as the authors could describe the city just using a declaredly emotional filter. The emergence of autobiographical writing involves the idea of memory, a prevailing theme in the descriptions of Jerusalem that is always related to the childhood or the youth of the protagonist. The portrayal of Jerusalem, basically, is projected in the dimension of the myth and, though apparently realistic, it hides the idea of a lost *illud tempus* no longer attainable in the present.

Jerusalem in the reflection of the soul.

As literary criticism observes, there is a sort of “symbiotic relation” between the city and the main characters of novels and short stories. Jerusalem’s landscape, in fact, seems to reflect the moods of the characters, especially in their melancholy and their nostalgic aspirations.

Jerusalem and the theme of the return.

Since the literary texts of the 1950s and 1960s, the topic of the return is central to Palestinian and Israeli literature. In Palestinian authors, especially those who live in exile, the city has an ideal halo, clearly emphasized by the distance and nostalgia; on the other hand, in Israeli writers, especially those from the 1980s, coming back to Jerusalem entails a loss of balance, an existential deviation or even a harbinger of doom.

Jerusalem, loss and mystery.

On these grounds, Jerusalem emerges as a space of enchantment and anxiety, especially in the latest books and probably as an outcome of a reciprocal influence. It collects the obsessions of the protagonists always terrified by the presence of the *other* and with its allegoric value the city multiplies the inner suggestions, so much that it causes a sort of quirk. Then, all the authors express a strong attraction towards the city but at the same time, in their works, they more or less consciously disclose a sort of mystery or a sentence that is hidden in its symbol.

Jerusalem, the sacred space and the symbol.

In conclusion, all the works where the image of Jerusalem appears show the same idea that the historical dramas and the topographical symbolism linked to the concept of possession and sacred play a fundamental role. Most of the time, even when the city is proposed as a simple background for the events, it acquires a central role not just in relation to the personality of the characters but also with regard to the form, the outline and the development of the plot.