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# Using **Ghassan Kanafani's** novella ***Men in the Sun*** to explore **Palestinian youth's perceptions** of the notions of **emigration** and **homeland**

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## Abstract

This article examines important aspects of the lives of Palestinian youth, who endure a reality of persistent challenges and existential threats. One significant challenge is the appropriation of Palestinian culture by the occupying power, which systematically targets all aspects of daily life. Using Ghassan Kanafani's *Men in the Sun*, researchers explored the extent to which Palestinian youth are aware of their sense of belonging, their homeland, emigration and displacement, by developing dramatic scenes from the novella. This involves encouraging participants to work on these scenes and present their ideas and perspectives on the pre-text drama and the above topics included in these scenes, as a teaching strategy. Five Master's students participated in this study, which adopted a qualitative interpretative approach enriched by found poetry to analyse the data and presentations. Data was collected through in-depth interviews, researcher observations during workshop sessions and participants' reflective journals. The results revealed that the participants enjoyed learning through this pre-text drama strategy and learned how to use this technique in teaching and learning. They expressed a strong sense of belonging to their homeland and a rejection of emigration.

**Key words:** *Palestine, pre-text drama, Men in the Sun, found poetry, emigration, homeland*

## Introduction

Israeli operations and occupation in Palestine continue to make daily life extremely challenging for Palestinians of all ages and backgrounds. Palestinian youth are one of these groups and are one of the most important pillars of society, providing the community with a significant source of energy. They are a group that influences, and is “influenced by various socioeconomic effects” (Al-Sakka et al., 2016, p. 16). Palestinian youth can contribute effectively to all social, civil and political institutions. According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) (2023), as of the end of 2023, youth accounted for 22% of Palestine’s total population. In the West Bank, this figure was around 22%, compared to 21% in the Gaza Strip.

The overall situation is devastating, with people facing various obstacles. Young people are also struggling to survive in harsh conditions in occupied Palestine. In 2023, the unemployment rate for females in the West Bank reached 56% and 34% for males. The highest unemployment rates were recorded among those with an intermediate diploma or higher (48%), approximately half of whom were graduates (PCBS, 2024). Notably, there is a significant gender gap, with 34% of males and 61% of females unemployed, making Palestine home to some of the lowest female labour force participation rates globally (Khatib, 2022). Gaps such as this may be related to cultural expectations, with males being expected to provide for their families, particularly economically.

For educated individuals, high unemployment is linked to limited job opportunities for graduates in the Palestinian labour market. These limitations are a result of the occupation’s various forms of warfare against Palestinians, particularly the restrictions on business and the economic framework. These challenges highlight the difficulties experienced by young people in the region. Khatib (2022) observed that finding employment and a life partner are significant sources of insecurity for young people.

Additionally, restrictions on movement and dehumanisation by the occupying forces towards young people during their daily activities are prevalent. In the West Bank, they face movement obstacles (849 checkpoints and barriers), according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2025), and apartheid among Palestinian localities after the Oslo Accords (85% illegal annexation and expansion wall). Working or studying at national universities in different cities is challenging due to occupation barriers and checkpoints hindering people’s ability to move freely and exercise their right to education or work. This can lead to feelings of anxiety, stress and despair.

A 2015 youth survey showed that around 24% of people aged 15–29 wanted to emigrate. This figure was higher in the Gaza Strip, reaching 37%, compared to around 15% in the West Bank. The percentage was higher for males (29%) than for females (18%). This desire to emigrate is driven by the wish to escape the insecure situation in Palestine (PCBS, 2017; United Nations Population Fund, 2017).

However, Khatib (2022) clarified that “70% of youth have no plans to emigrate, while 10% are thinking of emigrating, 16% would like to emigrate and 3% will certainly emigrate” (p. 26). He discussed reasons related to the stability of the situation at that time that affected these percentages. Furthermore, he examined the growing religiosity within this group and its connection to the Palestinian national struggle, which is associated with *sumud* (Arabic: صمود), meaning steadfastness, perseverance and resistance to the occupying authority (Gren, 2009). Religious people consider *sumud* to be the duty of everyone in order to resist occupation. No later studies have examined the attitudes of young people towards emigration.

In addition to the various issues arising from the Israeli occupation, another challenge is the struggles of young people within the education system.

## Education and arts in Palestine

Since the Nakba of 1948, Palestinians have considered education to be a means of resisting the Israeli occupation and of improving their challenging living conditions, both in Palestine and elsewhere. Consequently, they have the highest enrolment rates in the Arab region (Irfan, 2023). However, this sector has always faced significant challenges imposed by occupying forces, which have deeply harmed the quality of education in Palestine (Adams & Owens, 2016; Al-Yamani et al., 2016; Danil et al., 2023; Rahman, 2009).

The construction of the apartheid wall (or wall of expansion and annexation) negatively affects the progress of the educational process by hindering Palestinian students from easily reaching their schools. This, alongside school closures, blocked roads and restrictions on school construction, significantly impedes the development of a high-quality Palestinian education system (Al-Yamani et al, 2016; Danil et al, 2023).

Moreover, the educational system in Palestine is predominantly traditional, placing the emphasis on the teacher’s central role rather than that of the learner. It emphasises knowledge and textbook content, encouraging memorisation and the “banking concept of education”, as described by Freire (1970). Creative thinking, innovation, active learning and the use of the arts are not very common in educational





institutions. However, recently the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE) adopted “a learner-centered education based on respect of differences and diversity, and adopt all measures needed in this direction in terms of curriculum development, teacher qualification and provision of appropriate teaching and learning resources” (MoEHE, 2017, p. 44).

Significant challenges have been encountered in transitioning from traditional teaching methodologies in formal and non-formal education. Although the arts are not usually included in formal curricula, they form part of non-curricular activities in educational institutions. Artists, community groups and cultural centres have played a significant role in engaging the younger generation with the arts (Abusrour & Al-Yamani, 2021). Palestinians need to

develop a clear, practical model for teaching and learning, in which learners are actively engaged and able to construct their own knowledge in a safe, open educational environment. Rather than being passive, learners should interact with and respond to the different aspects of the world around them. Exploration, interaction, engagement, dialogue, critical thinking and problem solving are key components of this process, as outlined in critical pedagogy by Freire (1970) and the concept of education for liberation. Researchers suggest that drama can serve as a beneficial model for this type of educational approach.

### **Drama and pre-text as a process in teaching and learning**

In Palestine, performing arts have recently been integrated into some educational programmes for teaching and learning. However, few studies have examined the role of the performing arts in education (Alsawayfa, 2025a,b). In this study, researchers used pre-text drama in the teaching and learning process and as a research tool. This is a practice that is not widely adopted in the region.

Pre-text drama is a drama activity that aims at engaging participants in a meaningful learning process. It can be based on real or imaginative events. As Fleming (2001, as cited in Owens, 2014) suggests, it is “often a deceptively simple starting point used to engage participants and allow them to move quickly towards complex and challenging drama activities”. Furthermore, pre-text drama allows all educational competencies to work in a transversal and interdisciplinary way while favouring the different learning rhythms of each participant (Aznar et al., 2021).

In this process, learners “practice living”, as Way (1967) described it, through various activities that transcend time, place and the people related to that time and place. They even go beyond the self by playing different roles to those played in ordinary daily life. They play other roles, using personal experience to help them understand other points of view and discover new aspects of life.

According to O’Sullivan (2018), process drama is a vast, exploratory approach to drama education, where the focus is on the journey rather than the final product. Rather than rehearsing for a polished performance, students step into roles, respond in the moment and engage with authentic scenarios. Through this unfolding experience, they gain insights into themselves, their peers and the issues at hand. It is a participatory social activity in which individuals share or work with others in dramatic situations, facilitating a great deal of “personal and psychological liberation” (Young, 2000, p. 115). This

process enables students to develop a deeper understanding of their core issues, reality, culture, beliefs, attitudes and the world in which they live (Boal, 1998; Kennelly, 2006; Park-Fuller, 2005; Weinstein & West, 2012). As with good teaching and learning practices, the main aim is “autonomy, independence, and mutual respect” (Owens & Barber, 2001, p. 8).

It enables participants to confront the reality of what is inevitable and to challenge familiar ideas, assumptions and definitions. It is a form of art that frees the imagination, allowing participants to explore different possibilities and alternatives for their own lives. It provides golden opportunities to try out different ideas, dreams, hopes and fears, and to explore all sorts of conflicts without feeling fearful or threatened, since in dramatic experiences, people generally inhabit a fiction (Boal, 2000; Cohen-Cruz & Schutzman, 2006; Rohd, 1998). It encourages reflection by using stories related to their own or others’ lives to experience what it means to be human in many different situations (Greene, 1995).

The participants experience a different world and reveal an inner life that they usually tend to hide, especially in Palestine. Through this process, people express deep feelings and confront themselves by comparing the “self” with the “other” in the dramatic process. They discover their own beliefs, attitudes, feelings and thoughts by testing their entire self against the world of the other. They immerse themselves in the social, cultural and political fabric, trying to understand its warp and weft. According to Heathcote (1976), when individuals take on imagined roles, they encounter challenges and situations. Reflecting on these experiences enables learners to discover both themselves and the world around them.

In this process, participants work on investigating, defining, translating and interpreting the situation and all related aspects. This requires participation and engagement, as well as cooperative working, dialogue and open communication to share the thoughts and opinions of all participants. This approach to learning acknowledges and respects “difference”, recognising its value and providing ample opportunity for it to emerge. It enables the group to make their own decisions (Weinstein & West, 2012). Owens and Barber (2001) described this type of process as “liberating rather than reductive and restrictive” (p. 10). Participants think about, practise and imagine alternative realities before enacting them in the real world. This allows people to practise expressing their thoughts and feelings freely, creating a better understanding of themselves and helping them to reorganise (Wright, 2000).

The learning contained in drama has two interrelated aspects. The first is embodied experience and the second is the reflective explanation of experience, which includes communication (Wright, 2000). This reflection is effective in terms of social understanding, social exchange, collective thinking and how to work on changing reality. Drama provides a platform for challenging traditional ideologies and instigating change on various scales, from the individual to small groups (Boal, 2000; Cohen-Cruz & Schutzman, 2006; Rohd, 1998). It is acknowledged that drama provides a space for resisting traditional beliefs and fostering transformation at various levels. This process nurtures uniqueness and profound personal aspirations, which are crucial for holistic growth. It enables learners to evolve from within through creative self-expression and collective awareness of critical issues.

## Research methodology

The main objective of this study is to examine how pre-text drama can be used as a tool for learning, teaching and research. The study will focus on examining the interactions, reactions, thoughts and understanding of participants and groups during and after the drama workshop. It aims to study the various possibilities and challenges of using pre-text drama with Kanafani’s novella *Men in the Sun* (1999) among different Palestinian groups; to study the quality of participants’ experiences of pre-text drama and how they express these experiences; and to explore participants’ actions, interactions and understanding with regard to the novella’s embedded concepts. The main questions that the researchers seek to answer in this article are:

- At what levels can participants engage in this type of drama process and how do they approach it?
- How do participants engage with the main concepts embedded in Kanafani’s novella, such as safety, family and emigration?

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretative, arts-based research design to explore the lived experience of first-year students on the Master’s programme in Creative Pedagogies and Community Practices at Bethlehem University. The study focuses on the quality of the participants’ learning experience and their perceptions in relation to the main concepts embedded in the novel. This participatory drama pre-text prioritises the participants’ voices and enables them to express their views on their experience of drama.

Five Master’s students enrolled on the second drama course in spring 2025 agreed to participate in this study. They were all female and lived in different





cities, including Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Hebron. Two had full-time jobs, one had a part-time teaching position and two were unemployed. They came from diverse economic and social backgrounds and had different experiences.

Researchers used *Men in the Sun*, which was written by Ghassan Kanafani, a leading Palestinian writer, journalist and artist who was assassinated by the Mossad in Lebanon in July 1972. On one level, the novella embodies the collective trauma experienced by Palestinians displaced by the Nakba in 1948. Through the fragmented memories and unspoken losses of its characters, it illustrates how this foundational rupture continues to influence identity and a sense of belonging. On another level, it delves into the universal search for economic survival. By depicting the characters' perilous journey across borders in search of work, Kanafani sheds light on the experiences of migrants worldwide – individuals who are forced to leave their homes yet cling to the hope of a better future (Al-Sultan, 2007). The main characters in the novella are forced to search for a better life. Each character has a dream and a goal to find job opportunities, which leads them to the Arabian Gulf, especially Kuwait. The pre-text drama in this research project focused on three different scenes that included only three main characters from the story.

The researchers selected and adapted scenes from the novella for presentation to the study group. They performed the scenes as actors, narrators, observers, discussion facilitators and guides, using music and videos. They also prepared accessories and costumes for participants to use to improvise certain scenes if they wished. Participants were free to judge the characters, talk to them, challenge them, play their roles and change their choices through improvisation.

Various tools were used by researchers to collect data for this study. These included note-taking observations and recordings of participants' comments and descriptions during different artistic activities in the drama workshop. These activities included introductory warm-up exercises, the main drama activities and exercises at the end of the session. In-depth, semi-structured, individual interviews were conducted with students, focusing on their experience of drama and how they interpreted, embodied and reimagined the story. These interviews explored the students' thoughts and feelings about the embedded concepts of the pre-text drama and their opinions on the actions and interactions of the main characters in the novella. Four students were interviewed via Zoom and one student in person at Bethlehem University. The Arabic language was used for all data gathering, and the responses were then translated into English by the research team for analysis. Students were asked to write their own reflections and express their thoughts and feelings about their experience of the drama session freely.

We approached this research from an interpretivist perspective, using data collected from students. The aim of this analysis is to understand how students interpret their experiences of drama (Denzin et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2009). This approach is deeply rooted in the interpretive process and includes preparing the data, grouping, numbering and coding it, and organising themes by grouping the codes to establish categories and conceptual themes. Philosophically, we believe that research is both subjective and interpretive. Our position is informed by Crotty's (1998) belief that meaning is constructed through engagement with life experiences. For this study, we took an arts-based approach to collecting and analysing the data. We were struck by the figurative language used by the participants. They expressed strong feelings and emotions in a manner that warranted unconventional analysis.

Furthermore, found poetry was employed as an arts-based approach to data analysis. Alsawayfa (2025b) suggests that found poetry is a meaningful means of analysing and presenting qualitative research data. This involves identifying evocative words and phrases in participants' interviews and reflective journals. The process involves repeatedly engaging with the data to select poems that accurately represent participants' experiences. The poems are presented in Arabic, the participants' native language, and in English to help readers engage with and connect to the participants' experiences. We recognise that translation in research can be problematic, with meaning potentially being lost in the process. To address this, we adopted Steiner's

(1998) concept that every act of communication is an act of translation. In other words, translation involves interpretation. Our aim was to move beyond the surface meaning of words and communicate the participants' felt experiences. We were also aware that we were translating the poems for readers from different cultural backgrounds.

A clear explanation of the research idea, objectives and all relevant information was provided to the group of students by ethical considerations. They were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Permission was obtained to record individual interviews and take photos during the drama session. Participants were given pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality, and data was stored securely.

## Findings and discussion

This research used Ghassan Kanafani's novella *Men in the Sun* (1999) to explore the perceptions of emigration and homeland among Palestinian youth. The qualitative findings were based on data collected from students on the Creative Pedagogies and Community Practices Master's programme at Bethlehem University. Mixed methods involving found poetry and interpretation were used to analyse the data collected from the participants. Found poems were crafted from interview transcripts and reflective journals. This creative approach to data analysis

allowed the researchers to present the data in a novel way and also enabled the participants to actively engage in the research process as creators of meaning (Alsawayfa, 2025b).

The findings are discussed in broad, themed categories. These categories are interrelated and are not intended to be exclusive, but rather to represent areas where perceptions and concepts converge. For the purpose of this article, three overarching themes were derived from the five themes identified in the data: Pre-text drama experience, Emigration and Homeland. The discussion of our findings is organised accordingly. The five participants in this study contributed to these salient themes. Throughout the research and data analysis process, they shared their perceptions and experiences of participating in drama activities.

## The pre-text drama experience

The project as a whole was a new and interesting experience for the participants. They enjoyed and appreciated the different aspects of the drama workshop and shared their thoughts on the learning experience. This theme emerged consistently throughout the analysis of the participants' transcribed data. The analysis showed that the pre-text drama workshop encouraged active engagement. The following found poem uses the participant's own words to provide insight into how she described her learning experience:

### Learning experience

Constructive experience

Cumulative

The novella deepened my understanding

Of the topics of migration

And homeland and identity

Made me think deeply

About issues of refugees and diaspora

And homeland and belonging

The suffering of refugees is not just stories

It is complex human experience

A struggle between hope and despair

Drama was able to unravel complex concepts

It broke the barriers of silence and submission

(AI, individual interview)



### خبرة تعلم

خبرة بنائية،

تراكمية،

عمقت الرواية فهمي،

لموضوعات الهجرة،

والوطن والهوية،

جعلتني أفكر بعمق،

في قضايا اللاجئين والشتات،

والوطن والانتماء.

فمعاناة اللاجئين ليست مجرد قصص

هي تجارب إنسانية معقدة،

صراع بين الأمل واليأس،

استطاعت الدراما تفكيك المفاهيم المعقدة،

كسرت حاجز الصمت والخضوع.

(أي، مقابلة فردية)

Participants found the learning experience new and different. Most of them had previous learning experiences based on Kanafani's novella. They had studied it at school, at university or both. They found that our use of drama and related activities set us apart from their former learning experiences: "It was really interesting. I lost track of time; it was practical and memorable" (AN, individual interview).

One participant mentioned that she had studied this story before, but could only remember the main idea and not all the details. The teachers used traditional teaching methods that focused on their own role, and the students were passive. This reflects what Freire (1970) described as "banking education", which is the most dominant approach in our region's educational system. Some students found pre-text drama to be an effective learning strategy.

Others recognised the meaning of the learning experience when it is not related to: "Transforming information, but it's about living various events and experiences, which help people to discover themselves and communicate with others" (AR, written reflection).

This demonstrates an in-depth understanding of the relationship between drama and active learning (Adams & Owens, 2016; Al-Yamani, 2011). It shows the positive attitudes that students have developed towards the constructivist and progressive educational approach adopted in the Master's programme, in which learners are actively involved in the teaching and learning process. One of the students said:

This experience stimulated the critical thinking of the participants, and motivated their feelings towards liberating their consciousness [...] Drama activities provided an excellent opportunity to practise critical thinking through the use of voices and movement [...] All of these activities were liberating because we did not stick to the story as written by Kanafani. Instead, we rewrote it using our voices, movements, and internal dialogue to experience the place, space, characters and various events. (AI, written reflection)

They have noticed the difference between the traditional, dominant approach to education in Palestine and the new, progressive approach adopted by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education in its new strategy (2017).

They recognised the importance of addressing subjects and written materials that are relevant to reality and meaningful in the learner's daily life. Many of them mentioned how this aspect of the drama session helped them to interact with and understand part of their reality. One of the students stressed:

the necessity of starting from individual and group practice and experience in order to develop critical consciousness towards the community [...] This means true learning will not be achieved unless we undergo positive and critical experiences, taking responsibility for our learning and interpreting it according to our reality rather than accepting it as ready-made knowledge. (AR, written reflection)

They mentioned how this experience connected them:

in [pinpointing] suffering as what is going on with people in Gaza Strip. Everyone started thinking about everything around us. The best thing was that it was realistic and pushed us to think deeply about our reality. However, we mostly talked about the importance of a learning process that should be based on reality, and that sometimes we are not living our reality. (ZA, individual interview)

The learning process has value when it relates to subjects and topics connected to the real world and life. However, this is not the case when it relates to rigid educational structures. The learning process should prepare students for the unpredictable challenges of real life by encouraging them to explore, act and interact with their environment (Freire, 1970; Khan, 2012; Robinson & Aronica; 2015).

They realised that drama is more than just an aesthetic medium. They considered it:

an act of cultural resistance, and a means of exploring the deep national human character. It's a tool for raising critical awareness and liberation. Representing issues related to emigration, identity and diaspora has made me think about the concepts of homeland and belonging, and to understand the pain of the displaced, viewing it not as distant stories but as complex human experiences filled with contradictions between hope and despair. (AI, written reflection)

They considered drama to be a tool for breaking down the "wall of silence and obedience" in order to openly discuss various critical issues (AN, written reflection). It provided them with an opportunity to enter the world of others and to "practice accountability both from outside and within the character. This transition between perspectives reshapes awareness of the event and strengthens reflection and emotional empathy skills" (TM, written reflection). They developed empathy by experiencing the conflicts and choices of others, which made the situation and reality of others more understandable (Al-Yamani, 2015; Johnson, L., & O'Neill, 1984).



The drama session was a teaching and learning model that helped students to learn how to use various drama activities and techniques based on a specific text. This included writing letters to the characters in the story and considering the underlying themes. Two students recognised that “teaching could involve more than just using specific strategies, such as reading a story or doing drama activities. It could also stimulate thinking about specific ideas” (ZA, individual interview). There was expressed interest in incorporating drama activities into teaching to enhance student engagement and understanding. One participant stated, “I learned a clear approach to using stories in drama, which will help me plan activities, transition between them, connect to the story content, ask relevant questions and provide engaging activities” (AI, individual interview). Several students also mentioned their intention is to use drama in their work with students or participants. One said, “I plan to integrate these activities into various themes, using drama as an experiential learning approach that fosters transformation and deep understanding of subjects” (TM, written reflection).

Those interested in integrating critical pedagogy into dramatic activity design focus on major questions that occupy the human conscience, such as migration and homeland. They develop dramatic projects based on the real-life experiences and testimonies of refugees and migrants. This gives a collective voice to these experiences and transforms texts into a dialectical dialogue that drives social action. One of them said:

I will strive to integrate a critical perspective into the design of future educational activities. Drama will be more than just a means of representation; it will be broader than that. It will be a space for resistance and collective thinking about the nation and society. Drama will evolve from a narrow context to a vast world, becoming a means of social, cultural and community change. (AI, written reflection)

This reflects students’ critical awareness of the role of the performing arts as a medium through which people can explore stories, conflicts and real events. They engage in thought processes, practise various techniques and imagine alternative realities before enacting them in the real world (Boal, 2000; Cohen-Cruz, & Schutzman, 2006; Johnson & O’Neill, 1984; Rohd, 1998). Students recognise how drama can provide a space for resisting dominant traditional thoughts and creating change at various levels, from the individual and small group to the community and societal levels.



### ***Emigration and existence***

Another salient theme that emerged from the research data was emigration and existence. During the drama session, students displayed two different attitudes towards travelling to other countries and migration. They all expressed a desire to visit other countries, mentioning destinations such as Switzerland, Spain, France, Turkey, Qatar and Algeria. They explained their reasons for choosing each country, primarily focusing on its natural beauty, the opportunity to freely explore different places and cultures, and the shared culture and identity. These reasons reflect the participants’ desire to experience freedom in other locations, given the restrictions on movement imposed by Israeli occupation. Furthermore, a number of individuals showed an interest in cultural aspects and identity, particularly those related to language and religion.

Regarding the concept of emigration, most participants in the session expressed a refusal to leave Palestine, except for one individual who was open to the idea of moving to a new country. Some said that leaving the country temporarily for specific reasons, such as continuing one’s education or exploring other places, is acceptable, but not permanently. During an individual interview, TM said: “I thought deeply about this question and my answer was always not to emigrate, but travel and come back to my homeland [...] When you asked about selecting a place that we would like to visit or live in, I decided to travel and come back to my home”. Two of them discussed how difficult it was to answer questions about emigration and leaving Palestine. This was the first time they had been asked this type of question. “I struggled with the content of the session and



with answering the question of whether to stay or emigrate to other countries. I felt hesitant about answering it as if it were a subject of life or death" (ZA, reflection).

These feelings reflect the strong bond between a person and their homeland. The group presented various reasons for rejecting the idea of leaving their homeland. One person considered this to be part of accepting their reality as it is and being unable to change it. She said,

I call this the future, or I would call it the unknown ambiguity, which always carries negative aspects and never positive ones. Sometimes, a person tries to improve their reality by holding onto the things around them. As Freire mentioned in 1970 regarding the oppressed reacting to oppression,

but they have nothing except this reality and they hold onto it. (AR, individual interview).

In this case, the refusal is related to fears surrounding the unknown consequences of migration. She explained the passivity of accepting reality as it is, rather than advocating critical consciousness and taking transformative action, as Freire (1970) explained regarding the position of the oppressed who are fearful of freedom. Others refused to emigrate due to their love for Palestine and the value they place on the land and homeland.

Identity develops through experiencing various situations within a specific context, remaining strongly connected to the social and cultural environment. Said (2000) discussed identity in the context of exile. He considered exile to be a time of divided identity, where a person is torn between their memories of the past and the new person they are forced to become. The students' concerns related to their identity and sense of belonging in terms of their culture, nation and personally. Furthermore, the concept of *sumud*, meaning steadfastness and rootedness, was cited by students as a reason for not emigrating from Palestine. They face significant difficulties in Palestine, such as checkpoints, closures and challenging life circumstances, particularly in Jerusalem, an area subjected to strict control procedures by Israeli occupation forces. From a religious viewpoint, living in Jerusalem

means having a sense of steadfastness. We face significant difficulties, and it is not easy to live in Jerusalem and abide by all the restrictions. From a religious perspective, there is a big struggle between our existence and our being rooted to the Al-Aqsa Mosque, which challenges our presence and connection to Jerusalem. (AI, written reflection)

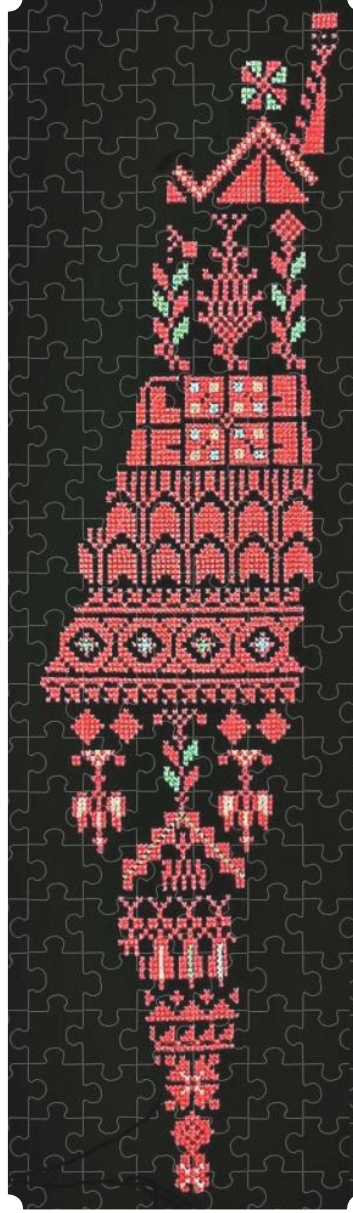
This highlights the significance of religious beliefs that inspire people to remain in Palestine, protecting their homeland and holy sites from the occupier and maintaining their connection to the land. The people's existence as resistance proves the land's authenticity. Khatib (2022) touched on this concept in his study of Palestinian youth and their attitudes towards emigration. He considered *sumud*, or steadfastness, whereby some young people believe it is important to hold tightly to the land and resist simply through their existence.

The following found poem, crafted from participants' interviews and reflective journals, reflects the concepts of emigration and existence:



## Migration and staying

During a dramatic activity,  
We were asked a question:  
If you had to emigrate,  
Which country would you choose?  
And we were asked to express  
ourselves artistically:  
In drawing,  
In poetry,  
Or a prose poem.  
At first,  
I didn't know my destination,  
Especially since I hadn't thought  
about it  
Before seriously.  
It didn't concern me at all,  
Because I always prefer staying  
in my country,  
The idea of immigration was not  
present in my life,  
Or in my imagination.  
I felt a bit confused,  
When he asked us to choose,  
I found myself thinking shallowly,  
My thoughts were trivial.  
Automatically,  
I imagined myself in France,  
In one of the streets of Paris,  
On a cold morning,  
I wear a brown coat,  
I drink coffee,  
And I have a croissant,  
And I watch the passers-by.  
The scene appeared elegant and  
calm to me,  
Especially since I love photography,  
Capturing such atmospheres,  
So I decided to embody it as a kind  
of beautiful fantasy,  
Without initially succeeding in its connotations,  
Where I drew a cup of coffee,  
and the sweets,  
And a brown coat.  
I am not looking to emigrate,  
But rather to temporarily travel,  
I expressed my opinion honestly,  
I might travel to a country like  
Turkey,  
But I will definitely return to my homeland.



## الهجرة والبقاء

في نشاطٍ درامي،  
عرض علينا سؤالاً:  
إذا كان عليكم أن تهاجروا،  
فأي بلدٍ ستختارون؟  
وطلب منا التعبير فنياً:  
بالرسم،  
بالشعر،  
أو الخاطرة.  
في البداية،  
لم أكن أعرف وجهتي،  
خاصةً أنني لم أفكر في هذا،  
من قبل بجدية.  
لم يكن يشغلني أصلاً،  
لأنني دائماً مع البقاء في وطني،  
فكرة الهجرة لم تكن حاضرة في حياتي،  
أو في مخيلتي.  
شعرت بشيءٍ من الازدواج،  
حين طلب منا أن نختار،  
وجدت نفسي أفكر بسطحية،  
كان تفكيري تافهاً.  
بشكل تلقائي،  
تخيلت نفسي في فرنسا،  
في إحدى شوارع باريس،  
في صباح بارد،  
أرتدي معطفاً بنياً،  
أشرب القهوة،  
وأتناول قطعة كرواسون،  
وأراقب المارة.  
بدا لي المشهد أنيقاً وهادئاً،  
خاصةً أنني أحب التصوير،  
تصوير مثل هذه الأجواء،  
فقررت تجسيده كنوع من الخيال الجميل،  
دون أن أوفق في البداية عند دلالاته،  
حيث رسمت كوباً من القهوة،  
والحلويات،  
ومعطفاً بنياً.  
أنا لا أبحث عن الهجرة،  
بل عن سفر مؤقت،  
عبرت عن رأيي بصدق،  
قد أسافر لبلدٍ كتركيا،  
لكن أعود لوطني حتماً.



Unsurprisingly, participants in this study spoke of existence and interconnectedness playing an integral part in their experience. This view is clearly reflected in the above found poem and the transcribed data from participants. It could be argued that the participants' experiences are an example of their identity as Palestinians, who remain steadfast in their homeland despite political instability and injustice.

### ***Homeland: Space and place***

The significance of drama lies in its ability to provide individuals with the opportunity to develop their own unique perspectives. It positions them as subjects in the world rather than objects. In this pre-text drama, participants deeply discuss and reflect upon the notions of homeland, space and place. Almost all of the participants in this study emphasised the importance of homeland, space and place when reflecting on their participation in the pre-text drama. The concept of homeland was perceived differently by each individual. One participant differentiated between what we consider to be a homeland and what actually serves the homeland. This concept aligns with Bakhtin's (1984) belief in a direct relationship between geographical, historical and social conditions, and the emergence of polyphony, resulting in multiple voices and self-expression.

The family was an important factor when discussing the concept of homeland. This was evident when developing the scene of Abu Qais's decision to leave the country; a number of students focused on the idea of place. They emphasised either staying together as a family in their homeland because "no place would be better than this place" (TM, Observation), or leaving together and facing the same destiny.

The following scene showcases the participants' attachment to family regardless of the place where ZA (Mother), AI (son) and AN (Father) are:

ZA (Mother): If you're leaving, you can go of course, but you should take us as a family with you.

AI (son): Father, please take us with you.

AN (Father): I have no idea where I am going yet. I swear to God that I have no idea specifically where I'm going.

ZA (Mother): Instead of worrying about us and what is happening to us, let us accompany you.

AI (son): Please, Father, take us with you.

AN (Father): If I take you with me, I'll be pre-occupied with you, the things I'm carrying and where we're going.

ZA (Mother): Listen to me, let's go together,

the three of us, and either live together in our homeland or die together.

AN (Father): Either we live together or we die together. Our path is unknown!

ZA (Mother): No one will leave while the others stay; we all share the same destiny. (Observation)

This reflects their refusal to be separated as a family and their desire to stay together and face life united, indicating that family is also homeland. Others believe that a place is connected with the people who live there, as they have expressed it:

I like living in places where I like the people who are there. I wouldn't be able to live in a place without friends or relatives. On the contrary, when I am with my family and loved ones, then I feel like the homeland is connected with family. People who lost their families in a specific place may still live there and consider it their homeland because it reminds them of their family. (ZA, individual interview)

Therefore, homeland is more than just a geographical location; it is about the people, stories and memories associated with it, and it is a place where a person feels safe and secure (Said, 2000). It is a space filled with dynamic relationships and interactions with the social and physical environments.

They considered those without a land or homeland. "We would never have them in exile or in other countries. We have learned this, and it is rooted within us as part of our socialisation" (AN, individual interview). They feel it is their responsibility to pass this on to the next generation, either directly or indirectly, since doing so directly is not permitted, particularly in formal education in the Israeli-controlled parts of Palestine. Said (2002) discusses the experience of exile and the impossibility of fully reclaiming a lost homeland. A homeland is rooted in a person's spirit and body. Others recognised that they could not even imagine leaving Palestine because they are so deeply rooted there. They consider emigration to be "leaving a part of their personality, the place where they were born, as well as their cultural and national identity" (AI, individual interview).

Participants express their personal and national identities through their connection to their homeland. Leaving that place can impact their identity. Al-Sakka et al. (2016) described this as a dynamic process in which all elements interact to form a united, shared identity shaped by strategies of belonging.

The poetics of space and place, and the concept of "homeland", are reflected in the poem below, which was created from a participant's reflective journal:

## My homeland

I chose my homeland,  
For the beauty of its nature,  
And the scent of the earth,  
And the details of  
tranquility,  
The homeland is a living  
spirit,  
It beats within me.  
Belonging is not a decision,  
Politically or economically,  
But an internal feeling,  
It cannot be taken away.  
I felt that the homeland  
resides within me,  
Even if I distance myself  
from it,  
The departure seemed  
painful,  
Even if it was temporary,  
I couldn't imagine the  
idea of immigration as an option,  
Because I see the  
homeland in small details,  
Do not leave me,  
In the depths of my mother,  
In the smell of bread,  
In the shade of a small tree,  
I have known it  
since childhood.



## وطني

اخترت وطني،  
لجمال طبيعته،  
ورائحة الأرض،  
وتفاصيل الطمأنينة،  
الوطن روحاً حياً،  
ينبض بداخلي.  
الانتماء ليس قراراً،  
سياسياً أو اقتصادياً،  
بل شعوراً داخلياً،  
لا ينتزع.  
شعرت أن الوطن يسكنني،  
حتى وإن ابتعدت عنه،  
بدا الرحيل مؤلماً،  
حتى لو كان مؤقتاً،  
لم استطع تخيل فكرة الهجرة كخيار،  
لأنني أرى الوطن في تفاصيل صغيرة،  
لا تغادرني،  
في لجة أمي،  
في رائحة الخبز،  
في ظل شجرة صغيرة،  
أعرفها منذ الطفولة.

The findings of this research suggest that a sense of homeland, space and place, and family are essential in shaping the identity of Palestinian youth. This is evident in the participants' responses and reflections on their pre-text drama experience. The found poem above shows how one participant described her homeland and what it means to her: homeland is more than just a place of birth; it is something that lives inside her.

## Conclusion

In their approach to arts-based research methods, as outlined in this paper, the researchers explored the use of stories in their drama-in-education research. The choice of Ghassan Kanafani's *Men in the Sun* was significant given the current history of forced emigration due to political, social and economic conditions. Examining cases in Africa, Iraq,

Syria, Myanmar (Rohingya), Ukraine, Sudan and Palestine, among others, we found that the novella was highly relevant to such research. The researchers were involved in designing the methodology, strategy and selection of the study group. They selected and adapted scenes from the novella to present to the study group. The researchers performed these scenes as actors and narrators and, as facilitators, encouraged participants to improvise certain scenes from the novella. Participants had the freedom to improvise with the characters and their choices. They reflected on their experience in journals and during individual interviews. Their input was kept anonymous to protect their privacy.

This research was about learning and exploring together through action. It was research with them, not about them: collective thinking, a focus on questioning, a sense of belonging and the making

of challenging choices. It was also a learning experience for us as researchers, teaching us about the choices that Palestinian youth make concerning their identity, homeland and emigration when given the opportunity. They also learned about themselves in the process.

The research produced clear evidence of the effectiveness of using pre-text drama in the Palestinian educational context. It provides a positive educational model for the study's participants, emphasising learner-centredness and liberatory education as fundamental principles. This is particularly pertinent given the reality in which the learners live, with the world serving as a fundamental principle when addressing, analysing and discussing various topics. The experience highlights the importance of incorporating pre-text drama into educational practices and of learning through working on this educational strategy. It also demonstrates how the experience contributes to planning and thinking when working with others in an educational context. The study also explored how the artwork interacted with the key concepts of emigration and homeland presented in the novella.

This study examined the attachment to the homeland and reluctance to emigrate, despite the difficult circumstances in the region. The pre-text drama experience helped the participants to empathise with the experiences of others living in difficult circumstances who choose to emigrate, such as people in the Gaza Strip. It also became evident that the concept of homeland is tied to the people and all the experiences and memories associated with that location.

Using found poetry in this research provided a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences of taking part in the pre-text drama, as well as their perceptions of emigration, existence, homeland, space and place, and family. Found poetry is valuable in its own right, as it provides an opportunity for engagement and challenges conventional ways of knowing and existing in the world (Alsawayfa, 2025a).

We urgently need to incorporate this type of educational work into various contexts, such as learning and teaching, scientific research and working with different groups. All individuals involved in education should be encouraged to enhance their knowledge and skills.

Conversely, this work is one of the few studies in arts-based research. Therefore, there is a need for further research in this field to examine the effectiveness of arts-based research in participants' lives. This study primarily included a group of young

Palestinian females and did not include males. It is important to study the various aspects related to the drama strategy and the multiple themes conveyed by the story of *Men in the Sun* (1999) with other groups from different cultures and ethnicities

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