

The Symbolism of Honeysuckle bush in *Once Upon a Country: A Palestinian Life* by Sari Nusseibeh

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Abstract

The honeysuckle bush functions as a powerful symbol that represents coexistence and survival and positive thinking in Sari Nusseibeh's 2007 book *Once Upon a Country: A Palestinian Life* which presents a detailed analysis of peace and identity during the Israeli Palestinian conflict. The paper examines the symbolic value of honeysuckle vines in the book to show how they represent the strong bonds between Israelis and Palestinians and between different religious communities. The three religiously diverse individuals who planted the bush together demonstrate Nusseibeh's mission to unite cultures while avoiding rigid nationalistic divisions. Mr. Seem's distant observation of the scene challenges traditional views about land ownership and territorial disputes while demonstrating how reality exists as a flexible construct of interpretation. The paper demonstrates Nusseibeh's non-traditional Palestinian statehood approach which focuses on historical dialogue and shared experiences instead of territorial conquest through the application of postcolonial theory and multidirectional memory and philosophical studies of sacred areas. The honeysuckle bush represents three essential themes of the time: it symbolizes staying connected to one's roots during times of displacement and it represents optimism during periods of social breakdown, and it serves as a symbol for uniting people across political boundaries during times of territorial disputes.

Keywords: Symbolism, Resistance, Honeysuckle bush, Palestinian Identity, Exile, Rootedness, Intercultural Harmony.

Introduction

As a form of opposition, Palestinians have developed several methods to depict and preserve their heritage over the years. Symbols play a major part in uniting and establishing Palestinian identity. Thrust in the middle of the myriad and lush towns of Palestine, flowers and vegetation have become the symbol of occupied resistance and is sign of hope for a

return to their ancestral home as land. A frequent symbol in Palestinian literature, the honeysuckle bush represents sexual pull, Beauty's temptress in overcoming adversity. As is clear in Sari Nusseibeh's novel, in Palestine it has profound cultural and literary significance. In Palestinian lore, the honeysuckle bush is a powerful metaphor, deployed in accounts of survival against the odds, and as metaphor for resilience and hope. As it is interspersed in these narratives, it explains the perseverance and defiance of the Palestinian population.

The book *Once Upon a Country: A Palestinian Life* (2007) by Sari Nusseibeh is an eloquent meditation on what it means to be Palestinian, to be without a home, and yet to be hopeful even against the backdrop of the Israeli Palestinian conflict. The honeysuckle bush in this story serves as a symbol that goes beyond its physical presence. The honeysuckle bush represents home and memory as well as departure and return and personal identity at a profound level. The honeysuckle bush functions as a physical marker that represents the multiple identity losses and fragmented self-perceptions which Nusseibeh experienced throughout his life in Palestine. The honeysuckle bush carries nostalgic scents that represent the bittersweet quality of memory because it thrives in areas that seem impossible to inhabit and remain trapped which mirrors the ongoing Palestinian struggle for freedom.

Moreover, the honeysuckle bush also develops with the weather, which develops in a patchy manner, indicating how, just like the weather, the concepts mentioned here make it difficult to establish identity; the more irregular the history, the more the existence is rooted, since people will build homes, no matter what the conditions will offer (Shakespeare). Finally, the honeysuckle bush becomes symbolic of the compromising degree of intersectional individual/collective identity formed by the vines that grow together; no single story grows apart. The fight of everyone is some element of the entirety that extends beyond Nusseibeh. Thus, the analysis of the symbolism of the honeysuckle bush leads to a second interpretation of the less obvious manifestation of Palestinian identity through memory, place, and belonging in the literature of Nusseibeh. More so, delving into the more symbolic meaning of the plant, gives the reader the longing to reclaim a sense of identity, which someday could bring justice and peace, and allow the Palestinian to be connected back to his native land.

Literature Review

The honeysuckle shrub has long been used in literature as a robust symbol of strength, memory, and culture. Sari Nusseibeh in his 2007 book *Once Upon a Country: A Palestinian Life*, introduces the concepts of peaceful coexistence, rootedness and interconnectedness into his text through the honeysuckle bush. His approach is compatible with the more broadly literary traditions where honeysuckle is employed as a symbol of persistence in the face of dislocation. Although the poem *The Bee* (1886) by Emily Dickinson applies honeysuckle to underline the delicate state between beauty, memory and survival, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595) by Shakespeare applies honeysuckle imagery to show how fates are

intertwined and connected. Honeysuckle helps characters who deal with bereavement and exile in the 2021 novel of Elif Shafak, *The Island of Missing Trees*. The paper discusses the way the use of the honeysuckle bush to challenge established ideas of territory ownership by Nusseibeh through a focus on shared spaces and reconciliation using lessons of post-colonial theory and multidirectional memory. The bush represents the flexible nature of identity and historical co-existence with its bound-up vines.

Methodology

This paper applies a qualitative methodology in the analysis of the ways in which honeysuckle is represented in the novel by Nusseibeh and in other literature. The textual analysis involves a close reading of *Once Upon a Country: A Palestinian Life* involving the mention of the honeysuckle bush, and its thematic meaning and symbolism. Comparative Study is concerned with the symbolism of honeysuckles in the poetry of Dickinson, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *The Island of Missing Trees* to determine how the metaphor is the same in both poems. Applying a postcolonial lens, the alternative vision of Palestinian sovereignty expressed by Nusseibeh can thus be put into context through the application of exile, identity, and memory theories.

Results

Nationalistic dichotomies are contested in the book by Nusseibeh, who introduces the honeysuckle bush as a source of interfaith unity, hope and perseverance. The theme of love, nostalgia, and perseverance recurrent in the honeysuckle are pointed out in comparative literature to support Nusseibeh in his concept of harmonious coexistence. Through its sense of rootedness in exile, the plant contests traditional territorial discourse in favor of a more inclusive, shared image of space, as the postcolonial reading reveals.

The Symbolism of Honeysuckle Bush in Nusseibeh's Narrative

Floriography was the secret language of lovers because every flower spoke a secret during the Victorian period. Honeysuckle was an addict, and his love was a favourite, implying a knot fastening with fervour and with perseverance. Different kinds of this message were mixed, French honeysuckle was about rural beauty, and wild honeysuckle was about unstable love. Even though the novel *Once Upon a Country: A Palestinian Life* by Sari Nusseibeh is not a classical love story, there are still some undertones in the book of very strong feelings towards Jerusalem, towards Palestinian identity, about the potential of coexisting. Even though the book is a work of hope, reconciliation, and human connection, it is also about Palestinian nationalism, exile, and peace struggle. There is an inescapable romance to the story, but it is more of an idealistic dream of a future with Nusseibeh than a conventional love story.

Honeysuckle is referred to in literature and mythology. The plant, as an illustration, is related to the magical and supernatural aspects of nature in Shakespeare *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595).

Sleep thou, and I will wind thee in my arms...

So doth the woodbine, the sweet honeysuckle,

Gently entwist, the female ivy so

Enrings the barky fingers of the elm.

- Shakespeare (Act 4, Scene 1)

In this case, honeysuckle symbolizes love and magic that is intertwined because Titania is in love with Bottom to the point of obsession due to the magic of Oberon. The theme of intertwining fates and turbulent romance that runs through the play is echoed in the description of twining vines. Reflecting the disorganized nature of love throughout the play, the imagery describes the complex romantic relationships among the lovers. Shakespeare constantly associates human feelings with nature by using plant symbolism, repeating the thought that love is wild and uncontrollable, just as nature is.

The honeysuckle is another symbol that is used in several poems written by Emily Dickinson. It is often used to represent elements of fragility, beauty, nature, and temporarily happy. The honeysuckle symbolizes the very shortness of life and the fragile balance between happiness and sadness. Dickinson analyses the complexity of human experience and feeling through the honeysuckle in her work. Honeysuckle represents, in the poem, *The Bee* (1830-1886) by Emily Dickson

Like trains of cars on tracks of plush

I hear the level bee:

A jar across the flowers goes,

Their velvet masonry

Withstands until the sweet assault

Their chivalry consumes,

While he, victorious, tilts away

To vanquish other blooms.

- Dickson (Lines 1-8)

The poem written by Emily Dickinson that employs honeysuckle as a symbol or motif is *The Bee* (1830-1886). In this poem, Dickinson discusses the beauty, nature and interdependence of all the living creatures through the honeysuckle. The honeysuckle is a potent image of something light and strong, and it is the intelligent perception of the poet to the natural state of affairs and deep insight to the human situation. By this symbol, Dickinson makes her readers think about the narrow line between life and death, development and decay, and the supreme power of love and connection.

A major theme in the book *The Island of Missing Trees* by Elif Shafak (2021) about perseverance, longing, and loss is the honeysuckle bush. When reflecting the relationship between nature and human experience, Shafak uses the image of the honeysuckle bush to portray the relationship that exists between nature and memory as well. The honeysuckle bush is used as a symbolic image of the scramble of home and meaning the characters find in the wake of tragedy and displacement on the island. In *The Island of Missing Trees*, Shafak effectively combines sentiment and nature, using the honeysuckle bush as an eloquent metaphor of memory, endurance and desire. It is precisely because the author considers the turbulent history of Cyprus that the book explores the issue of identity, displacement, and the long-term ramifications of the war. The honeysuckle bush reflects the close bonding of the characters to their homeland and recalls the impermanence of the memory and nostalgia. The honeysuckle bush is a symbol of the book, as the fig tree is, of survival and the strength of people who have been displaced and affected by war. The smell and the Honeysuckle flowers reflect the wandering of the relations, the prohibited love between Kostas and Defne because of the culture and political distance. Shafak often uses trees and vegetation as witnesses of the history of humanity, which speak silently. Similar to the fig tree, the honeysuckle bush would function as a living record of the past on the island by taking in the emotions and events surrounding it. In his book, Shafak explains that nature has a memory just the way humans do. The inability of the characters to find meaning and sense of belonging is manifested by the perennial growth and sweetness of the honeysuckle bush. It becomes a metaphor of how identity and love can survive even when they have been exiled and separated.

Honeysuckle bush represents the strong and persistent soul of the Palestinian people in the harsh environment of the conflict and occupation, which is described in *Once Upon a Country: A Palestinian Life*. The sweet flowers and bright development of the bush, even though they are planted in an unequal situation, are the symbol of never-giving hope and survival of the Palestinian people through difficult times. The desire of the Palestinian people to be themselves culturally and to build a greater future is represented by the honeysuckle that manages to survive and bloom each year despite the bleak reality of the conflict. The process of taking care of a honeysuckle bush described in the book could be perceived as the attempts of Palestinian people to save their culture, contribute to its further cultivation and upbringing their generation. Like many other plants and trees that are talked about in the book, the honeysuckle bush is a representation of how the Palestinian people have a strong connection with their land.

The only hope comes when we listen to the wisdom of tradition, and acknowledge that Jerusalem cannot be conquered or kept through violence. It is a city of three faiths, and it is open to the world. Even after the erection of Sharon's wall and the ensuing Hamas victory, the way my fairy tale ends still seems right to me: three characters, each from a sister religion, join hands to plant a honeysuckle bush.

- Nusseibeh (p. 553)

These are the words of the 2007 novel Nusseibeh wrote that sums up his thoughts regarding harmony, peace, and reconciliation in Jerusalem. Nusseibeh believes that tradition and knowledge are the real remedy rather than violence to take ownership or control the city. He emphasizes that Jerusalem must remain open to the world because it is a shared region which belongs to the 3 religions of Islam, Christianity and Judaism. The mention of the Israeli wall of separation or the wall of Sharon and the triumph of the Palestinian government draws the reader to the political wars and divisions which have defined the region. Despite these facts, Nusseibeh still hopes that this will come to a peaceful resolution, and this is symbolized by the fairy tale ending where 3 people of various religious beliefs come together to plant a honeysuckle bush. This part of the text is indicative of Nusseibeh and his political and philosophical beliefs in favouring discussion and shared history as opposed to conquest and partitioning. His offer of Palestinian statehood is accommodative and contrary to unbending ideologies of nationalism.

Conclusion

In *Once Upon a Country: a Palestinian Life*, the honeysuckle bush symbolizes hope, strength and communal spaces, in contrast to politics which uphold the philosophies of exclusion. The plant is made a living model of coexistence and various destinies of Palestine as the result of the philosophical thoughts of Nusseibeh. The honeysuckle allegory, which was likely more vivid in the Shakespearean-Shafak literary tradition, shows how it has been applicable in love and heartbreak stories, but also in stories of perseverance. Symbols such as the honeysuckle bush are noisy but powerful statements of resistance and belongingness as Palestinians live in the struggle to defend their identity and their land.

Author Biography – Anam Rizvi

Anam Rizvi is a teacher and scholar working on a Doctorate in English Literature at Integral University, Lucknow. Based on her experience with the stories of exiles, cultural diversity, and literary symbolism, she discusses how identities overlap, how memory intersects with identities, and how historical causation works through literature. Her research focuses on Palestinian narratives, theories that are multi-directional and the philosophical nature of displacement. Outside of academia, Anam has an extensive teaching / mentoring background, which has informed different learning experiences. She is committed to publishing and making contributions to the field of academics by writing and teaching.

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