



Echoes of the Hakawati: The art of Storytelling in *The Map of Salt and Stars*

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Submitted: 31.05.2024

Revision Requested: 07.09.2024

Last Revision Received: 02.10.2024

Accepted: 06.01.2025

Citation: Abraham, J., & PR, S. (2025).
Echoes of the hakawati: The art of
storytelling in *The Map of Salt and Stars*.
Litera, 35(1), 219-232.
<https://doi.org/10.26650/LITERA2024-1493428>

ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on how the storytelling tradition in Syria, practiced by hakawatis, has become the narrative strategy of the novel *The Map of Salt and Stars* (2019) by Jennifer Zaynab Joukhadar, a Syrian American writer. Hakawatis, the storytellers, are keen observers of political and cultural developments in society, and narration is a tool for the reaction to these changes. Gravely affected by the civil war, Syrian culture suffers from the disruption of its long-cherished cultural practices, including storytelling. *The Map of Salt and Stars* employs the lens of the characteristic features of a story narrated by hakawati. This study argues that the novelist transfigures herself into a modern hakawati, realising the power of storytelling and deploying it as a medium of truthful representation and social criticism. Joukhadar transforms the oral storytelling tradition into a written narrative, informing the world about the gruesome realities of the civil war and forced migration. She considers this the most appropriate and accessible form of expression and adheres to the hakawati tradition throughout the text. This paper follows the method of textual analysis and evaluates aspects of the novel, such as the narrative, the plot, the characters, the spectacle, and the message—the key traits of a story recounted by a hakawati, as Ahmed Yousaf, a famous storyteller from the United Arab Emirates, states.

Keywords: Syria, culture, hakawati, storytelling, civil war



Culture is ever-developing in a dynamic society, and efforts to hold fast to the celebrated aspects of each culture are part of national consciousness. The unprecedented movement of people across borders due to political, climatic, ethnic, and economic reasons largely gives rise to progressive and occasionally repressive effects on culture and traditions. This paper aims to analyze the influence of the civil war on Syrian culture in the context of the heated refugee issue and to determine the significance of this approach as the number of Syrian refugees swells every day.

Historians have described the rich national culture of Syria in detail through various narratives. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Greater Syria (Bilad al-Sham) encompassed Lebanon, Syria, Israel, Palestine, Jordan, and some parts of Turkey. Syria has always been an influential actor and center of complex political engagement. *The History of Syria* states, "[t]hroughout the country, before the civil war, visitors encountered a highly educated population that, though modern, was not Westernized" (Shoup, 2018, p. xiii). Other authors have also noted the attachment to the national past and the joy of social life in Syria. In the preface to *Destroying a Nation: The Civil War in Syria*, Van Dam (2017) discusses the magnificent cultural heritage of Syria as follows:

What struck me most during my frequent visits to Syria over the years was the kindness and great hospitality of the Syrian people wherever I went. I got to know the Syrians as friendly and charming, open-minded, tolerant, and respectful heirs of rich civilizations. I enjoyed the fascinating historical cities of Aleppo and Damascus, with their industrious people, the smells of oriental spices, and the busy sounds of market life; the ingenious architectural splendor of beautifully decorated palaces and traditional houses, with their treasures surprisingly hidden behind anonymous walls; all this next to the cosmopolitan buzz of the modern city quarters, where people remained attached to their valuable traditions. The soft-spoken Syrian Arabic sounded like harmonious music to my ears. (p. ix)

The political and cultural invasions of the country by different empires across time have made the land susceptible to sudden and convoluted alterations. The end of Ottoman rule and the dissection of Greater Syria under colonial powers through the implementation of the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement (Shoup, 2018, p. 101) had a long-lasting effect on national history. After becoming a republic in 1945 (p. 109), Syria was confronted with political uncertainty, and the struggle to define and practice Arab nationalism culminated

in a “bloody war among Syrians themselves” and the interference of other nations in Syria’s internal issues (Van Dam, 2017, p. xi). The Arab Spring aroused the vigor and enthusiasm to fight the despoiled government, which gradually gave way to the civil war (Shoup, 2018, p. 144).

The civil war has distorted the very existence of the material and non-material cultural heritage of Syria. Youssef Kanjou (2018) points out the adverse influences triggered by the civil war and the resultant social fragmentation, displacement, and migration that threatened the intangible cultural heritage of the nation. In his view, “the loss of human life includes the loss of oral traditions and traditional skills” (p. 377). He again maintains that cultural heritage represents the identity of a community, that heritage comes from the past, lives in the present, and is transmitted to future generations (p. 382).

The hakawati, or storyteller, plays a crucial role in the cultural life of the Arabian Peninsula and the Middle East in sustaining and transmitting fables and tales of legendary kings and warriors. The oral transmission of such stories preserves the dramatic elements embedded in them and thus “breathing life into them” (Chaudhary, 2014, para. 1). In the context of the civil war, the role of public storytellers becomes problematic, and it challenges the opportunities for criticism and commentaries on the political system that are once enjoyed by the practice. Moreover, this crisis in the storytelling tradition is an example of how conflicts and violence destroy the cultural fabric of a nation.

Jennifer Zaynab Joukhadar, a Syrian-American writer, proficiently employs the storytelling tradition of her nation in *The Map of Salt and Stars*. The intertwining of stories is a fundamental characteristic of hakawati, which is applied in the novel by narrating the twin stories of Nour and Rawiya. The novel incorporates myth, allegory, music, satire, and dramatic narration of emotions, gestures, and facial expressions, all of which are fundamental elements of hakawati. This paper argues that the meticulous act of storytelling in the novel equates the author, Jennifer Zaynab Joukhadar, to a modern hakawati, who turns an established oral cultural tradition into a literary narrative to elaborate upon displacement. A close reading of the novel substantiates this point through an analytical framework of the established storytelling culture of the Arab region.

Hakawati: The Storyteller

The word hakawati originates from two Arabic words, *hekaye* and *haki*. The first word means 'story', and the latter means 'to talk' (Chaudhary, 2014, para. 5). Storytellers historically emerged as town criers during the pre-Islamic period and also served as news correspondents in society. At the beginning of the Islamic era in 622 C.E., "a new generation of Hakawati appeared whose role was to spread the story of the Islamic prophet Muhammad" (Skeiker, 2010, p. 225). Later, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, their popularity increased, and they appeared as secular entertainers in public spaces (Nassar, 2006, p. 20), narrating love stories and war stories (Skeiker, 2010, p. 225). Hakawati transformed into a public influencer who could influence people's attitudes toward the social, political, and cultural issues of the time. He was believed and accepted by the public and occupied "the second most important position" in society, just after the ruler (Chaudhary, 2014, para. 21). Storytelling is a profession, a medium of expression, and a call to evaluate the existing systems. A hakawati's example "demonstrates how popular artistic forms can provide a safe environment for people to voice their concerns, articulate their social problems, and share their hope for a better future" (Skeiker, 2010, p. 224).

The profession of storytelling is maintained across generations. First, it can be a matter of inheritance: the father is a master of storytelling, and the son learns from him. The second mode of transference is "borrowing" through observing and reproducing the art of narration from another storyteller (p. 229). The traditional hakawati was a male who met his male audience at coffee shops and public spaces during day and night. According to Royce Lyssah Malabonga, women also told stories, but in their domestic spheres, only in the evening, particularly bedtime stories at home (2019, p. 36). The advent of radio, television, and other internet facilities mostly replaced these proficient storytellers in the late twentieth century (pp. 38–39).

Syria's tumultuous political condition and the resultant civil war have made social gatherings and public narration impossible. The long-endured culture of storytelling and many other culturally specific, prestigious practices have faced severe challenges. In her essay titled "Remembering the Storyteller of Damascus, Before the War", Michelle Hoover (2016) describes her meeting with Abu Shadi-Rasheed Al Hallaq in 2009, the last professional storyteller of Damascus, before the outbreak of Arab nationalism and the civil war. She says the man was later forced to flee to Lebanon as the situation in

his country worsened: "Because of war and violence and greed, the lesson seems, the storytellers of Syria have lost their faith in dreaming" (para. 22). Once "kings too depended on storytellers to spread their messages" (Chaudhary, 2014, para. 21), but now hakawati is compelled to weave "stories that only distracted his listeners from solutions needed in the present day" (Hoover, 2016, para. 21).

Suchitra Bajpai Chaudhary (2014) quotes Ahmed Yousaf, an acclaimed storyteller from the United Arab Emirates, in her article "Hakawati: An Ancient Arab Art of Storytelling". In Yousaf's words, the essential matters a storyteller must keep in mind during his public narration are as follows:

The narrative: Every story selected should have a strong plot that captures the interest of listeners.

The characters: There must be a minimum of three to four characters in the story who interact and move the story towards its climax.

The action: The story must have sound and fury- a clash of kings, an adventure on the high seas or a quest for something that is undertaken over a vast expanse of sand dunes. The sweep of the story and its setting is what engages the listener.

The spectacle: This includes music, soundtrack and colors that work as symbols. For example, blue to represent the sea or yellow to represent the sand or sun. The spectacle helps the audience to be led willingly into the thick of the tale.

The message: Stories must act as an important community service and the storyteller must shoulder the responsibility of communicating the importance of living a principled life to the people at large. (para. 26)

Malabonga (2019) states after a personal interview with Paul Mattar, the lead researcher on the oral tradition in Lebanon, that "[a]n important aspect of ancient storytelling is its attachment to the cycle of life. Similar to life, storytelling follows a course of movement; it is dynamic and evolving" (p. 36). Storytelling is also a part of social activism to criticize and ridicule contemporary realities using metaphors and fables. According to Barbara

Romaine (2007–2008), “the theme of storytelling recurs most strikingly as a feature of societies in conflict, especially as part of a culture of resistance, where telling a story may constitute a political statement” (p. 259). Furthermore, hakawati is a messenger. The selection of stories and the incorporation of myths and fables are based on the message to be delivered. Nassar’s words: “At the same time, he has personal freedom to reflect and comment upon current events taking place in his society” (2006, p. 22).

In an online article titled “The Storytellers of Syria: Displaced Women Keep Tradition and History Alive with Folktales”, Catherine Cartier (2018) delineates the role of women as the preservers of their traditional stories and carriers of the storytelling profession. After a meeting with the woman storyteller Aisha, Cartier states, “[l]ike other Syrian storytellers, she draws upon lived experience combined with a long history of literature and folklore. Through storytelling, the younger generation connects with this history, which is largely unknown to them” (para. 10). The essay also notes the transformation of the themes and contents of stories and how they are being shared now due to the changing realities of life in Syria. Thus, they are not mere stories for entertainment but a rich repertoire of facts mingled with imagination for narrative appropriateness.

This essay studies the novel *The Map of Salt and Stars* as narrated by a modern hakawati, Jennifer Zaynab Joukhadar. The novel’s distinctive features, identified when analyzed from the perspective of Ahamad Yousaf, qualify the text as a new version of the hakawati tradition. Joukhadar follows the complicated political situation in the country and is very specific in selecting themes and content. This article evaluates how the author elucidates the life of the Syrian people by incorporating history, fables, and imagination. In a context in which the direct storytelling method is not possible, the author appears to be a hakawati who assumes the role of a traditional storyteller in all its implications.

The Map of Salt and Stars: A Resumption of Hakawati

The amalgamation of history and creativity is a brave attempt at narrative composition in *The Map of Salt and Stars*, which prompts readers to assimilate the situation with the backup of fantasy and excitement. The famous mapmaker Abu Abd Allah Muhammed al-Idrisi, the Sicilian king Roger II, and his son William I are the historical characters in the novel. Similarly, Joukhadar introduces the readers to the

North African indigenous ethnic group Amazigh, which is considered barbarian and thus called Berbers by Arab migrants. Along with these historical references, the well-known collection of Middle Eastern folktales, *One Thousand and One Nights*, has been revisited in the novel. The author borrows the mythical roc from the tale of Sinbad the Sailor, and the legend of the roc's eye stone is from the tale of the fisherman and the jinni. Incorporating these elements into a recent novel is not an unconscious act of narration but rather an intended effort to revive and restate the rich storytelling tradition in the Arab and Islamic world, as the author's note claims: "Everybody knows the story of Rawiya; they just don't know they know it" (Joukhadar, 2019, p. 6). The style in which Nour begins telling Rawiya's story articulates the author's deliberate act of storytelling as a hakawati does.

The Map of Salt and Stars tells the story of a girl named Nour, born and raised in Manhattan, the United States, to a Syrian couple. She loses her father to cancer and leaves the US with her mother and two elder sisters, Huda and Zahra, to Syria. The loss of her father haunts her day and night, and the nostalgic voice of his telling stories reverberates in her memory. In Homs, Syria, violence and turmoil shadow the lives of the people at the onset of the civil war immediately after the family's return. They flee from Homs with Baba's friend Abu Sayeed and move to Jordan and Ceuta. The twin narrative of the novel begins at the very beginning of the narration, as Nour tries to identify herself with Rawiya, the main character of her favorite story, as told by her father. Rawiya lost her father as a child and embarked on her journey from Ceuta to become an apprentice to the famous mapmaker Al-Idrisi. Under the orders of King Roger of Palermo, the expedition headed by Al-Idrisi marks the boundaries of various dynasties and engages in battle with bandits and warriors. The victory over the deadly roc makes Rawiya the hero of the group. Her story ends with her return to her mother in Ceuta after she was saved from the civil war in Palermo and then ruled by Roger's son, William I. Nour is fascinated by the story and finds that both travel through exact locations throughout their journeys. During his escape, Nour recognizes that she is not Rawiya and cannot save others from troubles as Rawiya could. However, days of separation and suffering end at Ceuta for the cost of Abu Sayeed.

In Noah Bogdonoff's (2020) opinion, the subordinate story of Rawiya does not "denigrate or commodify the pain of displacement" detailed in the novel (p. 274). Instead, Joukhadar could juxtapose, with precision and brilliance, the magical world of imagination and adventure with the horrific refugee life. Narrated from the perspective of a child, the

novel marvels in its construction and presentation and is capable of swaying grown-up minds. In the novel, there is a reference to a man among the refugees, a hakawati, who was a storyteller in a café in Damascus before the war. He left Syria when the café was shelled and could not find work. He says that he used to tell “Tales of kings and adventures. . . . Salah ad-Din. Sinbad the Voyager. The great love stories, fables that fed my parents and grandparents” (Joukhadar, 2019, p. 107). The hakawati continues, “I don’t tell stories anymore. . . . just the truth of things. I used to love the tales of jinn and the deeds of princes. My heart beat for all that once was – the lovers, the mapmakers, the adventures” (p. 108). He concludes by saying, “Don’t forget. . . . stories ease the pain of living, not dying. People always think dying is going to hurt. But it does not. It’s living that hurts us” (p. 108). This reference ascertains the author’s knowledge of the status and role of hakawati in Syrian culture and society. Through the novel, she transforms this information into the practical level and demonstrates herself as a hakawati. The typical characteristics of the story narrated by a hakawati can be found while examining the novel through the lens of its narrative, action, characters, spectacle, and message.

Joukhadar selects a strong plot for the novel that unfolds against the Syrian civil war. The failure of Nour’s attempt to narrate her favorite story foreshadows the destruction of order and spontaneity of life in the immediate future. The author, to imply the gravity of the situation, chooses to locate the commencement of the novel on the eve of Ramadan, the most auspicious occasion for Syrian people. The abrupt swing into rising action occurs in the main plot and is gradual in the second story. The first-person narrator of the novel, Nour, transforms into an omniscient narrator as she begins recounting the story of Rawiya. Joukhadar is aware of the questions that can be raised on the reliability of the novel written by an American writer with only a basic knowledge of Arabic who lives miles away. The problem is solved through the character of Nour: Nour, just like the author, is a Syrian American born to a Muslim father and Christian mother, accustomed to the language and culture of the US than that of Syria and often feels “not-homeness” (Joukhadar, 2019, p. 21) in the land. The author’s careful attribution of her own traits to Nour helps readers grasp and appreciate the uniqueness of Syrian culture, rather than being skeptical of the narration’s dependability.

The story is told straightforwardly, avoiding all the complexities of narration to make it comprehensible to the reader. The careful interweaving of two parallel stories follows a chronological storytelling pattern with a beginning, middle, and end. The author maintains a reasonable pace for the development of the two stories and takes utmost

care to ensure that both journeys spatially coincide throughout the novel. The novel can also be approached as a quest narrative in which the main characters are invigorated by their aspirations toward the goals they have to accomplish. The first phase of Nour's life is motivated by her pursuit of the purple-green stone, the roc's eye, which she believes is on her premises. The roc's eye is Nour's childhood fascination, but a sudden growth to maturity is presented after she achieves the stone. In the latter half, she is on a mission to find the unrevealed place where she is supposed to unite with her mother. Rawiya is fascinated by the prospect of exploring the world with the renowned mapmaker Al-Idrisi. The roc's eye stone is a magical potion that imparts superpowers to Nour and Rawiya to help them achieve their goals. The novel follows the traits of a viewpoint narrative as it explains the feelings and experiences of the protagonist. Although the narrative is subjective, readers find it trustworthy because the context of war and its consequences are familiar in the current scenario.

The actions depicted in the novel encompass sound, fury, and adventure. From the beginning to the end, the narrative is filled with conflict, dilemma, suspense, and tension. The horrible faces of the civil war are presented through the details of bombings, explosions, blockade of water, electricity, and food, pro-government and anti-government movements, forced displacements, death, separation, mental and physical pain, human trafficking, border crossings, firing and fights, detention camps, and abuses. The tension is evident from the opening of the novel as the characters anticipate an attack at any time. The most sacred and festive occasion of Ramadan eve is ravaged by shelling, which ends up in family displacement. The fatal wounds carried by the characters, especially Huda, in their bodies signify the trauma and deepen the action of the novel. The dilemma regarding their future and the complexities of refugee life are well presented during their journey. Nour's continuous pursuit of the purple-green stone seems out of context but is necessary for the development of the character. The tragic elements of the story gradually intensify with the wreckage of the boat in which Abu Sayeed drowns in his attempt to save others. The separation of Nour and Zahra from Mama and Huda arouses tension, but the reader is trained to hold the hope of reunion, which becomes true at the end when the characters gather at Uncle Ma'mun's in Ceuta.

The second story is quite interesting, although it is filled with similar conflicts and dilemmas. Rawiya is determined to attain her wishes and displays incomparable willpower and talent. Every step she takes is exciting as she hides her identity: she appears like a boy and cracks the puzzles Al-Idrisi puts forward. The friendship between King Roger of

Palermo and Al-Idrisi is the relief factor in the novel, and the mission entrusted by the king is a call for Rawiya to find her true self. The dropping of the dead body at the khan by an anonymous creature hints at the possible dangers the expedition has to overcome during their journey. Rawiya's story is very active and thrilling, with the fast movement of the horse riders and rivalry among kings and warriors; the magical appearance of the mythical characters, like the deadly roc and the valley inhabited by green serpents, marks a new turn in the novel. Knowing the roc's only weakness, Rawiya asks Khaldun, the poet, to sing his sweet songs and thus plans to attack the roc in his slumber. The expedition encounters the roc three times in the novel: the occasions are filled with suspense and terror. The adventure story is rich in antagonists like the mythical roc, the Fatimid and Almohad warriors, Ibn Hakim and Mennad, and the giant green serpents.

The expedition passes through mountains, valleys, wadies, souqs, dunes, rocky areas, ancient cities, forgone courts, and seas. The victory of virtue over sin and reward for the deserved are portrayed elegantly. The romance between Rawiya and Khaldun adds flavor to the plot but receives limited attention, of course, to highlight the gravity of their situation. The combat with the warriors of the Fatimid and Almohad empires on different occasions raises the tempo of the novel. The fight with the Almohad Empire is furious, accompanied by an unexpected attack by giant serpents and a revenge-seeking roc. After being relieved of their enemies and escaping the roc, the group sails to Palermo with the Sicilian army. The roc's last attempt to defeat the sailors is ferocious, and he is defeated by the wit and valor of Rawiya, the perfect time to disclose her identity to Al-Idrisi. The novel develops into the death of King Roger and the civil war against the newly enthroned King William, his son, followed by the return of Al Idrisi and Rawiya to their native land, Ceuta.

The novel introduces several characters who participate in the development of the story in their own ways. The first narrative deals with the life of Nour, a small girl who acts and thinks like a typical child but instills a ray of hope in the reader. Nour struggles in Syria as a foreigner, especially with the Arabic language, but tries to find her place in the family and culture. She is a good storyteller, which is evident from how she recounts the story of Rawiya. Her constant presence and interaction with every character make a close reading of events and personalities possible. Nour is both observant and critical: she forms opinions about everything and everyone. Gifted with synesthesia, Nour attributes colors to every feeling and vision she experiences. She is absorbed by Rawiya's story and receives Rawiya as a loadstar who guides her. She spends most of her time reviving her favorite story and searching for different types of stones. Nour's

presence of mind and resilience is noteworthy compared to the atrocities she is facing. She is very attached to her elder sister Huda, whose fatal wound and pain prompt her to think seriously about life and death. After two boys attempt to rape Huda, Nour reiterates, "I am not safe, and I can't keep anybody else safe either. I am not Rawiya. I repeat it over and over: 'I'm not, I'm not'" (p. 164). Recognizing her inability to save everyone, she stops identifying with Rawiya. Rawiya's journey was an adventure, but Nour's journey is a matter of life and death. This is the transformation that takes place in Nour. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that, Nour, like Rawiya, is efficient in utilizing the opportunities and potentials she has to encounter the realities of life.

Along with Nour, the protagonist, the novel portrays other significant characters like Mama, Abu Sayeed, Huda, and Zahra and several supporting characters such as Umm Yusuf, Yusuf, Rahila, and Sitt Shadid. Mama is a static character throughout the text and, according to Baba, "is always a lady" (p. 53). She is a mapmaker and protective mother who firmly believes in Nour's ability to read colors. Abu Sayeed is Baba's friend. In Baba's absence, he accompanies the family and is a part of all their struggles. Obsessed with the study of stones, he is the one who understands and supports Nour's quest for the roc's eye stone. Huda suffers much physically but is resilient and mature. In Nour's account, Zahra is "the worst sister ever" (p. 29), who complains about and criticizes people and situations. Likewise, Yusuf is a tough boy who invokes tension in his mother and grandmother and terror in Nour. While all the other characters support the flow of the story, Zahra and Yusuf undergo a transformative process as they experience the insecurity of life. When they love each other, their softer feelings emerge, and they show empathy and compassion during distress. In the second narrative, the main characters are Rawiya and Al-Idrisi, with whom Khaldun later joins. Al-Idrisi and Khaldun set the background for Rawiya's character development, and she is confident about challenges and knowledgeable, skilled, and courageous.

The Map of Salt and Stars is rich with spectacular elements such as music and colors. The novel comprises five parts, each beginning with a poem as a prologue and a pictorial representation of the countries Nour's family passes by. The content of the poems suits the mood of each chapter and serves as an entry point for the following events. The poetic style is so impressive and emotional that it prompts the readers to visualize and feel the details in each line. The use of symbols like salt and stars and references to constellations spark the reader's imagination. Nour describes her feelings and experiences through the use of colors, which makes understanding them easy. For example, when

Mama is angry, she says, “her voice all red edges” (p. 60). The novel is rich in imagery, as shown in expressions like “I taste purple air and oil” (p. 6), “I rub the smell of water out of the fig’s bark” (p. 6), “...Huda’s pink-and-purple laugh” (p. 13), and “blue marbles of conversation” (p. 17). The map is a spectacle, indicating their refugee life and the places they are destined to be. Nour discovers that Mama secretly scribbled the poems under the colors of each country; the poems appear as prologues. The bombing of the house and the city, the roc’s attack, the fight with the opponents, the construction of the silver planisphere, and the civil war in Palermo provide vivid portrayals in which readers are emotionally and imaginatively immersed in the fictional world.

The novel plays a significant role in promoting peace and harmony. Primarily, *The Map of Salt and Stars* is a refugee novel intended to disclose the realities of refugee lives. The production of the novel is an intentional act, and the author dedicates the text to the Syrian people, both in Syria and in the diaspora, and all refugees. The author juxtaposes reality and fiction to point out the consequences of war. The first depiction is the Syrian Civil War and how it affected the people and forced them to leave the country helpless and wounded. Without any exaggeration, the realities are presented in detail, such as charred buildings, overcrowded hospitals, long queues of refugees injured and separated from families, smuggling of people, boat wrecks, and drowning of forced migrants. The second narrative, a historical fiction, presents the emergence of the civil war in Palermo. William I, the successor of King Roger II, was overthrown by a conspiracy due to his ineffective rule. This historical narrative directs the reader to seek and comprehend the reasons for civil war wherever it happens. The transhistorical nature of such atrocities implies that human beings never learn anything from the past, and the situation may continue unless they take the initial steps toward change. The novel also states that “[i]n times like these, it’s the small people who suffer” (p. 80). The narrative is an excellent example of how human beings transform in the face of suffering and loss. The instances of the deadly roc and the proud and crooked characters like Ibn Hakim and Mennad, indicate that justice will rule over wickedness.

Conclusion

The widely accepted and long-lived customs in society enable people to communicate their feelings, thoughts, and tensions creatively. Art and artistic expressions are not mere agents of entertainment: they are cultural, social, and political barometers of a given society. In Syria, the civil war emerged as a result of a series of conflicts and

discordance over decades and radically disheveled the country's glorious cultural heritage. This study is focused on one of those lost cultural practices: storytelling and the art of storytelling exercised by hakawati or storyteller. Storytelling is an integral part of the Arab tradition and a prominent component of its non-material cultural heritage cherished by Arab peoples. Stories facilitate recounting the past, evaluating the present, and preparing people for future experiences. This article revisits the tradition and analyzes the novel *The Map of Salt and Stars*, using the fundamental elements of storytelling, narrative, action, characters, spectacle, and message.

Hakawati is a professional storyteller and a constant presence in Syria's social life. Jennifer Zaynab Joukhadar, in her novel *The Map of Salt and Stars*, presents herself as a hakawati to revive the Syrian storytelling culture. Loyal to all the essential characteristics of a story narrated by hakawati, Joukhadar skillfully weaves the stories of Nour and Rawiya, one fleeing Syria amidst the civil war and the latter setting out on an adventurous journey. The difficulty of incorporating all the characteristics of a tale told by a hakawati in a novel has been incapacitated by bestowing a child narrator. A child's world of wonder and curiosity has been manipulated brilliantly to accommodate the atrocities of war and displacement without affecting the originality of both stories. The spectacular representation of the world of colors and suspense is similarly made possible. The novel ridicules the existing political system in Syria, which is blind to the people it 'serves' and is an act of cultural resistance through storytelling. The theme of discussion is not just the experience of a person or family but the shared trauma of a nation and its people. As a modern hakawati, the author realizes the power of storytelling and deploys it as a medium for truthful representation of war-torn Syria. The social criticism in the novel seeks to promote a practical solution to the refugee crisis by pointing out its causes and consequences.

This paper recognizes its limitation in conducting an in-depth analysis of the storytelling tradition of the country. The lack of authentic records on the cultural practices of Syria with a particular reference to its performing art forms makes such a study challenging. The narratives on prewar Syria mainly address the historical and political landscape of the country in comprehensive detail. Attempts have also been made to study the nation's material culture, particularly its rich architecture, historical buildings, and museums. This article proposes that extensive research can be conducted on the performing arts of Syria and acknowledge the initiatives undertaken by the local community and the diaspora to safeguard these cultural forms specifically after the outbreak of the civil war.

Peer-review: Externally peer-reviewed.

Author Contributions: Conception/Design of Study- J.A.; Data Acquisition- J.A.; Data Analysis/ Interpretation- J.A., S.P.R.; Drafting Manuscript- J.A.; Critical Revision of Manuscript- J.A., S.P.R.; Final Approval and Accountability- J.A., S.P.R.

Conflict of Interest: The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

Grant Support: The authors declared that this study has received no financial support.

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