



Original article

A Semiotic Analysis of Children's Suffering in the Tragedies of Karbala and Gaza



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ABSTRACT

Children's suffering in conflict texts has received limited semiotic attention, particularly in studies comparing historical and contemporary contexts. This study investigates the depiction of children's suffering in selected texts from the tragedy of Karbala and the Gaza crisis. It uses a qualitative methodology and examines four extracts, applying Barthes' (1968) semiological model at the sign, denotation, and connotation levels. The analysis focuses on the representation of thirst, deprivation, and destruction in the chosen texts and how these meanings are sustained through the repetition of semiotic patterns. The findings illustrate how suffering is represented in terms of the deprivation of basic resources and the loss of safe spaces. They also demonstrate that water is linked to availability and denial, while shelter is always related to human presence, displacement, vulnerability, and exposure in historical and contemporary contexts. The study highlights the continuity of suffering across historical contexts through semiotic representation.

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تحليل سيميائي لمعاناة الأطفال في مأساة كربلاء وغزة

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المُستخلص

حظيت معاناة الأطفال في نصوص النزاعات باهتمام محدود من منظور سيميائي، ولا سيما في الدراسات التي تقارن بين السياقين التاريخي والمعاصر. تتناول هذه الدراسة تمثيل معاناة الأطفال في نصوص مختارة من مأساة كربلاء وأزمة غزة. وتعتمد منهجية نوعية، إذ تحلل أربعة مقتطفات من خلال تطبيق النموذج السيميولوجي لبارت (1968) على مستويات العلامة والدلالة المباشرة والدلالة الإيحائية. ويركز التحليل على تمثيل العطش والحرمان والتدمير في النصوص المختارة، وكيفية الحفاظ على هذه المعاني من خلال تكرار الأنماط السيميائية. وتوضح النتائج أن المعاناة تُمثل من خلال الحرمان من الموارد الأساسية وفقدان المساحات الآمنة. كما تبين أن الماء يرتبط بالإتاحة والمنع، في حين يرتبط المأوى بصورة مستمرة بالحضور الإنساني والنزوح والهشاشة والتعرض للخطر في كل من السياقين التاريخي والمعاصر. وتسلط الدراسة الضوء على استمرارية المعاناة عبر السياقات التاريخية من منظور التمثيل السيميائي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: معاناة الأطفال، كربلاء، السيميائية

1. Introduction

The tragedy of Karbala occurred in 61 AH, when Imam al-Husayn ibn Ali, peace be upon them, and members of his household were killed, and the suffering of those who survived the battle ensued (Vaglieri, 1971). The event is described in early historical and devotional sources by means of narration, in which the actions, the subjects, and the consequences are ordered according to a historical narration (al-Mufid, 1990). This study does not cover previous crises that have occurred in the Gaza Strip, but focuses solely on the current crisis that followed the events of 7 October 2023. Children suffer death, injury, displacement, and the disruption of basic services such as water, food, shelter, and healthcare, as documented in the humanitarian and human rights reports (UNICEF, 2024). Children and armed conflict reports also highlight serious violations against children, such as killing and maiming, attacks on schools and hospitals, and restrictions on humanitarian access (United Nations, 2023).

Barthes' description of signification forms the base for the examination of text meaning in semiotic analysis. The sign is the elementary unit of meaning, and the denotation and connotation are two modalities by which meaning is constructed. In this study, the sign has been chosen to explore the idea of suffering represented in the text; the denotation has been selected for the direct meaning of some of the expressions, while the connotation has been selected for the associated meaning that follows some of the expressions within their textual contexts (Barthes, 1968).

Both areas have been approached in different ways in previous studies. Investigation into early Islamic historiography has focused on how historical accounts of the early Islamic events were transmitted, and on the nature of their sources and the way in which they are organised (Humphreys, 1991). Research on children in armed conflict has focused on mental health and well-being, resilience, trauma, and post-conflict adjustment of children impacted by war (Betancourt et al., 2013). Although these studies are relevant and important, the suffering of the children in the selected

texts from Karbala and Gaza has not been sufficiently studied from a semiotic point of view at three levels, namely the sign, the denotation level, and the connotation level.

In this regard, the main focus of the current study is to examine the semiotic representation of children's suffering in selected texts of the tragedy of Karbala and the recent Gaza crisis. This study aims to bridge this gap by studying the use of the sign, denotation, and connotation in the selected data in order to represent this suffering.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Semiotics

According to Saussure (1959), the linguistic sign is composed of two parts: the signifier and the signified. The signifier is the form of the sign, and the signified is the concept that is attached to the form of the sign. The sign is created from the relation between these two components, as neither the form nor the concept alone is an original sign.

The term semiotics is often linked to two different streams of semiotics, one based on the Peircean tradition and one based on the Saussurean tradition, and the word is also frequently used to designate a more general 'semiotics' discipline rather than just a single theoretical approach (Nöth, 1995). In this area, semiotics deals with the processes of sign production and the signifying system that generates meaning.

In this way, semiotics is not limited to the verbal language; it is extended to other avenues of representation; anything that can be treated as representing something else is a matter of interest for semiotics (Eco, 1976). It's also defined as the study of signs and how they work in systems of meaning, in which the sign is used as the building block of study (Chandler, 2007).

2.2 Barthes' Semiotics

Barthes (1968) defines semiology as the analysis of sign systems, and he expands the use of semiotic analysis beyond natural linguistic communication. In this account, signification takes place in the sign, and in two degrees of meaning: denotation and connotation. Denotation is the first level of signification, in which the connection between the signifier and signified creates a straightforward level of meaning. Connotation is the second order of signification, in which the denotative sign is used as the basis for a second layer within a larger set of associations. This fact aligns with research that considers symbolic meaning to be more than literal value, because the meaning may have further symbolic features embedded in the same language sign (Alhusseini & Khaluhin, 2025).

Denotation relates to the explicit and literal content of a term, while connotation relates to meanings extending beyond the term in explicit content and is influenced by context and culture. These two levels are distinguished from each other in accordance with the difference of direct meaning and associated meaning in semiotic analysis (Chandler, 2017).

2.3 Children's Suffering in Armed Conflict

Children enduring situations of armed conflict often endure recurring stressors that contribute to their psychological suffering and emotional instability, such as fear, loss, insecurity, and the presence of violent conditions. These stressors can have a long-lasting impact beyond the immediate crisis, especially when these stressors are connected to repeated threats, loss of loved ones, and instability (Freh, 2015).

Children's experiences of war are also linked to disruptions in family life, education, and community structures as conflict undermines children's social contexts that help provide for their psychosocial development. Such disruptions of caregiving systems, education, and routines are therefore at the core of children's experience of conflict (Macksoud & Aber, 1996).

The trauma of fear, loss, and hopelessness in conflict contexts is described in culturally and linguistically distinctive sets of words or lexicon, and language or textual expression is one way in which this is communicated (Laila et al., 2025).

2.4 Language and Suffering

The connection between suffering and language has been explored in relation to the challenges of saying what suffering is in words and the impact of extreme suffering on linguistic expression. The use of the term 'pain' gives the impression of it as resisting language, because it can be a condition that tests language's ability to represent experience, especially when involving violence and conflict (Scarry, 1985).

In the field of applied linguistics, trauma has also been investigated as a field of inquiry, looking at the challenges in language expression and language narration associated with difficult experiences. This study explores the link between trauma and linguistic expression, as well as discourses of the unsayable, which is a description used for an experience that is hard to say (Busch & McNamara, 2020).

In contexts of war, children's feelings of fear, loss, and vulnerability are expressed in ways that are linguistically specific and have been embedded in specific cultural and linguistic traditions, in which suffering is linguistically represented by using the repetition of lexical and thematic elements in texts (Laila et al., 2025).

2.5 Previous Studies

Salim and Hayaati Syed Ismail (2025) presented the study entitled (*Decoding Innocence in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Semiotics of Palestinian Children's Cartoons on Twitter.*) The study focused on the visual portrayal of Palestinian children in cartoons that were shared on Twitter after the attacks in October 2023. Themes of victimhood, innocence, resistance, and emotional appeal were analysed using Barthes' semiotic framework. The findings discovered how children were constructed as vulnerable victims in the context of suffering and conflict by using visual signs.

In a similar vein, another study titled (*Tongues of War: Deconstructing the Lexical Narratology of Children in Conflicted Regions*) was done by Laila et al. (2025). This study focused on the linguistic representation of children in war-related stories, and the analysis was based on the words used for violence, fear, and suffering. The findings presented that language is an aspect that affects the representation of children's suffering in the context of conflict.

The current study differs from the previous studies, which investigated the lexical and visual representation separately, because it studies the semiotic representation of children's suffering in selected texts from both Karbala and Gaza from the viewpoint of the relationship between sign, denotation, and connotation in the chosen texts.

3. Methodology

In this study, a qualitative analysis method is used. Qualitative research is focused on the understanding of the meaning and interpretation of experience in a specific context (Merriam &

Grenier, 2019). It also focuses on the participants' point of view, as well as on data analysis being an interpretive process (Lapan et al., 2012).

The data was taken from two contexts, that of the tragedy of Karbala and that of the recent Gaza crisis. The sources for the Karbala texts will be al-Tabari's History, while the Gaza texts will utilise the reports provided by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and Reuters. The Karbala excerpts are in Arabic and analysed in conjunction with their English translation, and the Gaza excerpts are in English.

The two texts from Karbala alongside the two from Gaza are selected for analysis. They have been selected because of their relevance to the representation of children's suffering, the clarity of the text, and their suitability for semiotic analysis. The study will only cover verbal texts and exclude non-verbal texts like images, colours, and videos.

The chosen texts are analysed by using Barthes' (1968) semiological framework; this model works on the relation between sign, denotation, and connotation. The analysis studies the linguistic illustration of children's suffering in the selected texts through lexical expressions associated with fear, deprivation, loss, and pain, together with the contextual relations by which these meanings are built within the texts.

The theoretical framework of the existing study, which contains the adopted semiological framework used to analyse the selected data, is illustrated in the following figure:

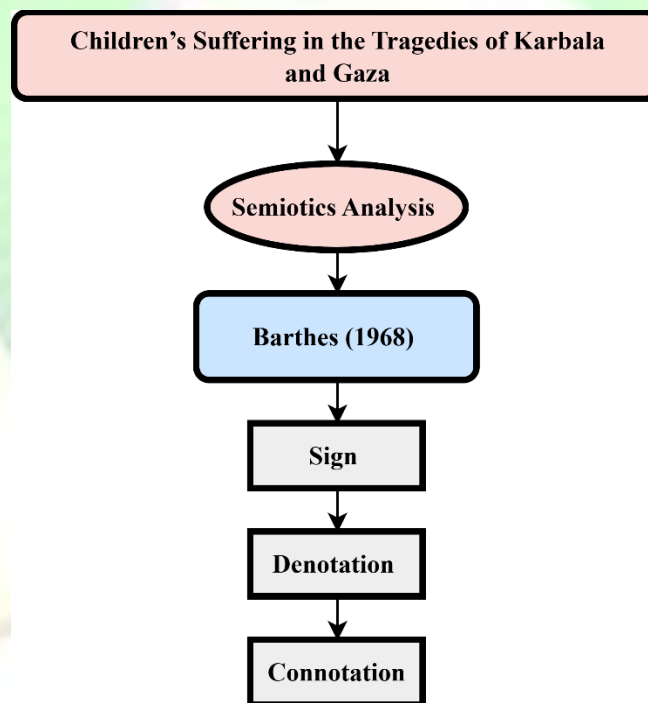


Figure 1. *The theoretical framework is based on Barthes' (1968) semiological framework.*

4. Data Analysis

This section will provide an analysis of texts chosen for the tragedy of Karbala and the Gaza conflict. The analysis in the present report is presented in two thematic groupings, namely, in relation to two themes of children's suffering. Selected extracts are analysed in each section using the semiological framework that was adopted.

4.1 Weaponised Deprivation of Water

Representations of water deprivation in the selected texts take the form of something restrictive, something necessary. This section highlights the linguistic structures that represent access to water and the immediate consequences that are linked to the lack of access, within the same linguistic frame.

4.1.1 Karbala Excerpt (1)

فقال الحر: يا أهل الكوفة، لأَمَّكُم الْهَيْلُ...أَمْسَكْتُمْ بِنَفْسِهِ، وَأَخَذْتُمْ بِكَظْمِهِ، وَأَحْطَمْتُمْ بِهِ مِنْ كُلِّ جَانِبٍ...وَأَصْبَحَ فِي أَيْدِيكُمْ كَالْأَسِيرِ لَا يَمْلِكُ لِنَفْسِهِ نَفْعًا، وَلَا يَدْفَعُ ضَرًّا، وَخَلَّاتُمُوهُ، وَنَسَاءَهُ وَأَصْيَبِيَّتَهُ وَأَصْحَابَهُ عَنْ مَاءِ الْفَرَاتِ الْجَارِيِ الَّذِي يَشْرَبُهُ الْيَهُودِيُّ وَالْمَجُوسِيُّ وَالنَّصْرَانِيُّ، وَتَمَرَّغُ فِيهِ خَنَازِيرُ السَّوَادِ وَكِلَابُهُ، وَهَاهُمْ أَوْلَاءُ قَدْ صَرَعَهُمُ الْعَطَشُ، بَنَسْمَا خَلَّفْتُمْ مُحَمَّدًا فِي ذَرِيَّتِهِ ! لَا سَقَاكُمُ اللَّهُ يَوْمَ الظُّلُمِ إِنْ لَمْ تَتُوبُوا وَتَتَزَعَّوْا عَمَّا أَنْتُمْ عَلَيْهِ مِنْ يَوْمِكُمْ هَذَا فِي سَاعَتِكُمْ هَذِهِ. (الطبري، 1966، ص. 428)

Then al-Ḥurr said, "People of al-Kūfah, may your mothers be deprived of their sons and may tears come to their eyes... You have laid hold of his life; you have seized his throat; you have encircled him on every side... He has come into your hands like a prisoner who no longer can attract benefit to himself and cannot secure himself against harm. You have prevented him, his womenfolk, his children, and his followers from the water of the flowing Euphrates, which Jews, Magians, and Christians may drink, and which the pigs and dogs of Sawād wallow in. Now they are likely to die of thirst. How wickedly you have treated the offspring of Muḥammad! May God not give you water to drink on the Day of Thirst, if you do not repent and do not desist from what you are set upon this day and this hour. (Al-Ṭabarī, 1990, pp. 128–129)

The extract reflects a representation of the resource water, which is available within the text, but access to it is denied. The sign is created by a configuration in which the resource is clearly maintained and denial is directed against a specific group, such as *وَحَلَّاتُمُوهُ، وَنَسَاءَهُ وَأَصْيَبِيَّتَهُ وَأَصْحَابَهُ* (and *You have prevented him, his womenfolk, his children, and his followers from the water of the flowing Euphrates*), This clause combines the reference to the resource with its simultaneous restriction. From the denotative level, the word (ماء) and (*water*) is used to denote to a tangible substance, while (الفرات الجارى) and (*the flowing Euphrates*) point to an actual and available source in the same frame. The coordinated arrangement (وَنَسَاءَهُ وَأَصْيَبِيَّتَهُ وَأَصْحَابَهُ) and (*his womenfolk, his children, and his followers*) allows the affected set to be expanded to more than one referent, while the clause (*which Jews, Magians, and Christians may drink*) introduces another group that also has access to the same resource. This difference is accentuated further in (*in which the pigs and dogs of Sawād wallow*), where other entities are displayed interacting freely with the same entity. At the connotative level, the simultaneous presence of such expressions maintains a situation that involves a simultaneous sense of lack of availability and of restriction, because the idea of lack is not signaled by the absence of the resource, but through inequalities in the allocation of the same resource between participant groups within the same text.

4.1.2 Gaza Excerpt (1)

Israel is using thirst as a weapon to kill Palestinians, the experts said. Cutting off water and food is a silent but lethal bomb that kills mostly children and babies. The sight of infants dying in their mothers' arms is unbearable. How can world leaders sleep while this suffering continues?... Israel's blockade and destruction of civilian infrastructure has left most of Gaza's two million residents displaced and without access to the minimum vital amount of drinking water, the experts said. This

has led to deaths and widespread illness caused by water pollution, and a lack of sanitation and hygiene. (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR], 2025, paras. 2–3)

The extract suggests that thirst is manufactured as a state directly associated with the denial of a key resource. The sign is constructed through a configuration setting that can be adjusted such that it is maintained as needed and access to the resource is restricted, as in (*without access to the minimum vital amount of drinking water*), where the formulation maintains the resource but indicates that it is not available. At the denotative level, (*thirst*) denotes a bodily condition, though its co-occurrence with (*as a weapon*) relocates it inside an instrumental frame that joins state with action. The phrase (*cutting off water and food*) conveys the nature of the resources that are being stripped away, while (*the minimum vital amount of drinking water*) establishes a measurable criterion for life. The phrase (*without access*) indicates the absence of that marker for a clearly demarcated community, and the clause (*This has led to deaths and widespread illness*) introduces the results that stem from that lack. At the connotative level, they constitute a continuous relation to one another between restrictions, effects, and consequences, as if the moment of thirst is never alone but is constructed as a result of an ongoing configuration linking restrictions to resources denied, consequences, and effects of resources denied through the text.

4.2 Destruction of Shelter and Spaces of Safety

In the chosen texts, shelter is provided as a spatial element that undergoes direct action. The section emphasises the representation of spaces of habitation and a continuity between spaces of habitation and their inhabitants in the same textual frame.

4.2.1 Karbala Excerpt (2)

وَحَمَل شَمِرُ بْنُ ذِي الْجَوْشَنِ حَتَّى طَعَنَ فِسطاطَ الْحُسَيْنِ بِرُمَحِهِ، وَنَادَى: عَلَى النَّارِ حَتَّى أَحْرَقَ هَذَا الْبَيْتَ عَلَى أَهْلِهِ؛ قَالَ: فَصَاحَ النِّسَاءُ وَخَرَجْنَ مِنَ الْفِسطاطِ؛ قَالَ: وَصَاحَ بِهِ الْحُسَيْنُ: يَا بْنَ ذِي الْجَوْشَنِ، أَنْتَ تَدْعُو بِالنَّارِ لِتَحْرَقَ بَيْتِي عَلَى أَهْلِي، حَرِّقْكَ اللَّهُ بِالنَّارِ!... عَنْ حُمَيْدِ بْنِ مُسْلِمٍ، قَالَ: قُلْتُ لَشَمْرِ بْنِ ذِي الْجَوْشَنِ: سُبْحَانَ اللَّهِ! إِنْ هَذَا لَا يَصْلُحُ لَكَ، أَتُرِيدُ أَنْ تَجْمَعَ عَلَى نَفْسِكَ خَلَصَتَيْنِ. تَعَذَّبَ بِعَذَابِ اللَّهِ، وَتَقَتَّلَ الْوُلَدَانِ وَالنِّسَاءُ! (الطبري، 1966، ص. 438)

Shamir b. Dhī al-Jawshan came up to al-Ḥusayn's tent. He struck against it and called out, "Bring me fire so that I can burn this tent and the people inside it." The women screamed and rushed out of the tent. Al-Ḥusayn called out to him, "Ibn Dhī al-Jawshan are you calling for fire to burn down my tent and my family? May God burn you in Hell-fire!"... Ḥumayd b. Muslim: I said to Shamir b. Dhī al-Jawshan, "Glory be to God! This is not appropriate for you. Do you want to impose on yourself two evil qualities for which you will be punished by God? You are killing women and children." (Al-Ṭabarī, 1990, p. 141)

The extract displays a shelter as a bounded spatial entity made the focus of an attack and determined in space. The sign is built by a configuration that does not change the relation between the shelter and its occupants in and out of the same frame, such as in (فِسطاطَ الْحُسَيْنِ) and (*al-Ḥusayn's tent*) in combination with (أَحْرَقَ هَذَا الْبَيْتَ عَلَى أَهْلِهِ) and (*burn this tent and the people inside it*), where both the space and its occupants are positioned within the scope of the same action. On the denotative level, the demonstrative (هَذَا) and (*this*) limit the referent to an immediately recognisable entity, and the possessive forms (أَهْلِهِ) and (*the people inside it*) preserve the inhabitants inside that spatial division. The verbal phrase (طَعَنَ فِسطاطَ الْحُسَيْنِ) and (*He struck against it*) encodes straight physical

contact with the shelter, and the imperative (*Bring me fire*) introduces instrument through which action is to take place. In the connotative sense, the repetition of (النار) and (*fire*) across the utterances creates a continuous lexical field which connects both the act of burning the fire itself and the occupants, whereas (*rushed out of the tent*) represents displacement from the same spatial unit, maintaining a relation between space, action and human presence throughout the sequence.

4.2.2 Gaza Excerpt (4)

“We were sleeping and suddenly something exploded, we started looking and found the whole school on fire, the tents here and there were on fire, everything was on fire,” said eyewitness, Um Mohammed al-Hwaiti. “People were shouting and men were carrying people, charred (people), charred children, and were walking and saying: ‘Dear God, dear God, we have no one but you.’ What can we say? Dear God, only,” she said. (Al-Mughrabi & Abu Alkas, 2025, paras. 6–7)

The extract suggests that shelter is displayed as a spatial component that constantly experiences destruction and is located in many geographies. The sign is constructed through a configuration where separate spatial units are kept, but the same condition is imposed on each of them, such as (*the whole school*) and (*the tents here and there*), shared with the frequent predicate (*on fire*), which assigns a uniform state to different referents. At the denotative level, these expressions denote distinct objects in space, while (*everything was on fire*) generalises the same condition for an unrestricted domain. The repetition of (*on fire*) across successive clauses keeps the lexical pattern constant while creating a linkage between these referents in one frame. On the connotative level, this pattern is extended to human participants of (*charred children*), where the identical destructive state moves from spatial structures to bodies, while (*people were shouting*) and (*men were carrying people*) preserve human presence within the same situation. The expressions (*Dear God*) and (*we have no one but you*) maintain the conditions of the same event and promote continuity, thereby maintaining the same referential frame, without creating a new one.

5. Discussion of Results

This analysis focuses on the ways the selected texts from Karbala and Gaza use language to describe children’s suffering and, in particular, the lack, deprivation, or presence of essential resources and a space of safety. The Karbala texts depict water as an available and recognisable resource; on the other hand, they limit access to it for one group. This is evident in the expressions that keep the Euphrates flowing and make it impossible to accept access to Imam al-Husayn and his household. This kind of formulation makes it possible to build deprivation via contrast: the resource is present, but left inaccessible for some agents, while being accessible for other agents, who are in a different group. This contrast has the effect of emphasising the representation of the suffering, as there is a level of availability and denial within the same context.

Furthermore, the Karbala texts provide a strong connection between shelter and its inhabitants. The tent as a whole is presented as a defined spatial unit, and in expressions of burning, there is always a reference to both the burning structure and to persons within it. This means that the impact is not only on space itself, but on the presence of shelter and the people in it, and thus also serves to reinforce representation of exposure and vulnerability in a space where both shelter and occupants are present.

The Gaza texts are different in their depiction of children's suffering. The representation here is directed to the condition of thirst and to its absence from possession of essential resources, such as the cutting off of water and the absence of the minimum needed amount of water. In this instance, deprivation is created by both condition and consequence, not by comparison between participants' groups. The focus on outcomes, like disease and mortality, further compounds this trend by making the absence of resources relatable in a direct way to the illness and death experiences.

Regarding shelter, the Gaza texts amplify the spatial representation of destruction into various scales. Expressions such as *(the whole school)* and *(the tents here and there)*, combined with the repetitive usage of *(on fire)*, spread a destructive condition at various places. This repetition establishes an extended pattern that is not limited to a single space but extends across a series of referents. The representation is further intensified when the same is applied to human bodies, with the implications in reference to children whose bodies are destroyed; there is a direct connection established between the destruction of space and of human bodies.

6. Limitations

This study is restricted to the chosen extracts related to children's suffering in the tragedies of Karbala and Gaza. It does not purport to be an exhaustive list of all kinds of children's suffering in the two contexts. Nevertheless, the selected extracts reveal recurring semiotic patterns in the analysed texts, which support the reliability of the findings derived from the selected data. In future studies, nevertheless, it is significant to continue expanding the textual data to better analyse these patterns in larger textual contexts.

7. Conclusion

According to the results of the analysis, the study concludes that the suffering of children is present in both of the selected texts in the dimension of Karbala and Gaza using linguistic forms related to the limitation of the necessary resources and concomitant destruction of safe spaces, such as those to which the children were exposed in both of the texts. The analysis reveals that water is consistently associated with denied access, and always used to represent thirst, and deprivation can be represented in the same text, either by contrast or by emphasising condition and consequence.

The findings further reveal the relationship between shelter and human presence, manifested in spatial structures that are directly linked to the affected participants, as well as the fact that destruction extends from the spatial elements to the human body in the same representation. Furthermore, the study shows that the suffering of children is linguistically produced in a relation connecting the material part of suffering with its effects, which makes it possible to produce suffering as a condition rather than a discrete occurrence.

Finally, the analysis shows that within the chosen texts, patterns of representation of suffering remain consistent, in which direct meaning and associated meaning are working together to reinforce the relation between resources, space, and affected participants in space and time between and within different context types.

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