

CORONA IN THE MELODIES OF FOLKLORE: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF THE PALESTINIAN FOLK SONG DURING THE PANDEMIC

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Abstract

This study examines the manifestations of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) in Palestinian folk song, addressing how the global health crisis shaped the Palestinian context through sung folklore. As the pandemic spread, Palestinian folk performers developed multiple ways to articulate the crisis in their songs, which were disseminated primarily through social media—especially during periods of home quarantine and lockdown. The study aims to explore the presence of COVID-19 in Palestinian folk song by analyzing lyrics and thematic content that reflect the crisis across political, economic, health, and religious domains. It also highlights linguistic shifts within folk song, including the introduction of new pandemic-related terms such as “quarantine,” “mask,” and “sanitization.” In addition, the study presents the diversity of poetic/performative forms used—such as *dihyeh*, *murabba'* (quatrain), and *dal'ouna*—which characterized Palestinian songs during the crisis. The research further discusses the role of satire and political stances in these songs, particularly in relation to governmental handling of the pandemic and the economic conditions resulting from it. The study concludes that Palestinian folk song functioned as an effective medium for awareness-raising, irony, and the expression of popular emotions in confronting the pandemic.

Keywords: Corona; Palestinian folk song; awareness; colloquial language; politics; economy; satire.

Introduction

The end of 2019 was not a normal ending for the world's inhabitants. In its final month, a virus emerged in the Far East (China) and quickly spread across the globe, turning people's lives upside down and imposing habits and behaviors previously unknown in everyday life. The impact of this illness extended to all aspects of life—political, economic, social, and educational. The entry of populations worldwide into compulsory home quarantine prompted serious reflection on resisting the disease rather than surrendering to it, however difficult the circumstances.

People adopted diverse approaches to confront the disease and its profound effects. Medical specialists worked in laboratories to analyze the virus in search of protection against its health threat. Economists focused on surviving the destructive closures that affected economies and their infrastructures. Educators rushed toward social platforms and technological tools to compensate learners and researchers for the disruption caused by the closure of educational institutions. Artists and writers were no less engaged with the danger of the virus; they too played a role in this major struggle. Cartoonists published awareness-raising and satirical drawings in newspapers, magazines, and social media, while poets competed to compose verses highlighting the danger of the disease, advocating prevention, and describing the conditions people reached because of it. Palestinian folk

song likewise appeared prominently and strikingly in covering the pandemic—through awareness, warning, satire, and depiction of lived realities.

In this study, we follow the ways Palestinian folk song tracked the Corona crisis. We first offer a brief definition of folk song, then examine the crisis's manifestations in the lyrics and lines that accompanied the pandemic from its emergence in China—before it reached Palestine and the Arab countries. We then discuss the study's sources, i.e., the channels through which these folk songs circulated and where they were published. Next, we analyze thematic contents related to Corona—political, social, economic, religious, and others. Finally, we provide a linguistic study of the songs' wording, poetic lexicon, and the patterns/forms in which they were composed.

Research Question

This study seeks to answer the following question: **What are the manifestations of the “Corona” crisis in Palestinian folk song, and how do these songs reflect the social and political effects of the crisis?**

Methodology

The study employs an **investigative–analytical approach**. Palestinian folk songs that address the Corona crisis were collected and analyzed. The research draws on songs circulated on social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube, as well as performances in public events—especially weddings and graduation celebrations—during periods when such gatherings were permitted. The analysis focuses on the songs' political, economic, social, and health-related themes, in addition to examining the language used (colloquial vs. standard Arabic). The study also analyzes the poetic/performative forms on which these songs rely—such as *dihyeh*, *murabba'*, and *dal'ouna*—in order to understand how they were mobilized to express the crisis. The analytical method is the primary tool for interpreting how these songs influenced Palestinian society and the role they played in awareness-raising and informal communication during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Scope and Limitations

This study is limited to analyzing the manifestations of the COVID-19 pandemic in Palestinian folk song in terms of **topic, language, and function**, treating folk song as an oral/sung discourse circulated in public space and reflecting societal responses to crisis. Temporally, it covers the period from **late 2019 through the end of 2020**, when popular discourse around the pandemic took shape and reached its peak, alongside lockdowns and partial reopenings. Spatially, it focuses on the **Palestinian context** (the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and, to the extent permitted by available material, Palestinian communities inside Israel), without expanding into broader Arab or global comparisons. In terms of materials, it relies on a **representative sample** of songs documented and circulated via social media (especially YouTube and Facebook), along with whatever could be observed from performances at weddings and graduation events during permitted intervals—without claiming exhaustive coverage of all pandemic-related musical production. Methodologically, the study remains **descriptive–analytical**, focusing on themes (political, economic, social, religious, health, educational, and romantic), common zajal forms (*dihyeh*, *murabba'*, *dal'ouna*), and linguistic features (colloquial usage, newly emerging lexicon, satire, imitation and adaptation), without conducting statistical audience-reception measurements, detailed musical/makam analysis, or making definitive judgments about the “conspiracy theory” debate, which is addressed here as a discursive representation within the folk product.

Definition of Folk Song

Many scholars of folk literature have sought to define folk song. Dr. Ahmad Mursi defines it as “a song

composed by the folk community spontaneously or intuitively” (Mursi: 26). Dr. Nabila Ibrahim defines it as a sincere expression of the people’s conscience and a literary form through which the people deposit a civilizational value in genuine emotion (Ibrahim 1983: 251).

Palestinian folk song is a sung folk piece, of unknown origin, widespread in Palestinian society. A large number of people participate in composing and performing it, and generations transmit it through oral tradition, expressing the people’s collective sentiment (al-‘Attari: 2008).

Channels for Disseminating Folk Songs During Corona

Palestinian folk performers and zajal poets rushed to incorporate the Corona pandemic into their songs and folk poetry. They did so through multiple channels that facilitated dissemination, in accordance with the epidemiological situation and the lockdown regulations imposed by the Palestinian government to limit the virus’s spread. The main sources include:

1. **Social media:** Social platforms—especially Facebook and YouTube—provided an important outlet for folk performers to publish their songs and reach audiences during home quarantine and comprehensive closures in the first phase of the virus’s arrival. Many recorded these songs at home or in closed offices. An example is a clip recorded by the artist Mu’ayyad al-Bourini on 37/3/2020 (...).
2. **Wedding celebrations:** Corona appeared in late 2019 in China and reached Palestine in early March 2020. During the interim, people talked about the virus and feared it, yet life initially continued normally and weddings were held as usual. At such events, performers spoke about Corona, its dangers, and related matters. This reoccurred when partial reopening began after the first lockdown phase and weddings were allowed again, making these celebrations a renewed space for performers to address Corona more broadly with new themes and ideas. Examples are numerous, including a celebration led by folk performers Shadi al-Bourini, Mu’ayyad al-Bourini, and ‘Issam al-Hindi on 11/06/2020 (...).
3. **University graduation ceremonies:** Some Palestinian universities took advantage of partial reopening to hold annual graduation ceremonies. In these events, folk performers were invited for artistic segments in which Corona appeared in ways suited to the occasion—for example, a celebration held by Al-Quds Open University with the participation of the artist Mu‘in al-A‘sam on 23/07/2020 (...).

Themes of Palestinian Folk Song During the Corona Crisis

By tracing dozens of Palestinian folk songs that addressed Corona, the study finds substantial thematic diversity. The most prominent themes include:

1) Political Theme

The political dimension appears clearly in folk poets’ engagement with Corona, across several axes:

First: The origin of the virus

Folk song addressed the virus’s origin in China and its political connotations. For example, the folk singer ‘Asim al-Jayyousi spoke of the virus’s origin and expressed astonishment at its arrival in Palestine, especially the West Bank:

“Corona is in the land of China—
what brought it to the West Bank?”

Another song accuses China and emphasizes fear due to the virus’s unknown nature:

“A virus came to us from China,
and we don’t know its origin...”

we are afraid of it—
woe to me from Corona.”

Second: Conspiracy theory and economic war

With Corona’s emergence, people and states split between those who saw it as a natural epidemiological development and those who perceived it as a political-economic conspiracy among major powers. This debate appeared in Palestinian folk song. Al-Jayyousi, for instance, explicitly frames the virus as economic warfare between states:

“The virus is calling—
no love and no stubbornness...
they say the whole situation
is an economic war.”

Similarly, the Palestinian folk poet Nu‘man al-Jalmawi describes it as an international conspiracy to manipulate and enslave peoples:

“The virus, my dear,
is an international conspiracy...
to toy with you and me
and enslave the peoples of nations.”

Meanwhile, Suhayb al-Jama‘ini portrays it as a major deception meant to distract people—especially Palestinians engaged in protests against occupation—forcing them to remain at home:

“What is this Corona?
With Corona they fooled us...
they lied to us and entertained us,
and seated us in the guest-room.”

Third: Attitudes toward the government and its measures

From the declaration of the state of emergency in early March 2020, the public initially supported the Palestinian government and joined local emergency committees. Yet as allegations of mismanagement and corruption emerged, distrust resurfaced, accompanied by accusations of inconsistency and double standards. Folk song documented this shift: early praise turned into satire and sharp criticism. For instance, the young singer Fayrouz Salameh published a social-media song praising government measures and the Prime Minister’s instructions about staying home, avoiding handshakes, and keeping hands sanitized:

“Shtayyeh advised you to stay home...
don’t see anyone,
don’t shake hands...
keep your hands sanitized—
that is quarantine, madam.”

Other songs promote compliance with mandatory mask and glove policies, warning of fines:

“Listen to me, O people—
wear a mask...
whoever doesn’t wear a mask,
I fear he’ll pay a fine...”

the mask is obligatory,
and the penalty is five hundred...”

Folk songs also mocked governmental inconsistency in opening and closing policies and highlighted cases of arresting performers for holding events, with repeated references to the prison in Jericho and its reputation, as expressed by the singer Yazan Hamdan and others (examples as cited in the Arabic text).

2) Economic Theme

The global economy was among the sectors most harmed by Corona due to lockdowns and the closure of industrial, tourism, and service facilities. Palestine suffered similarly. Folk singers lamented the cancellation of weddings and folk celebrations—key sources of income for performers—and blamed government measures:

“Corona caused a case—
there is no folk celebration...
it’s not the government’s fault—
it’s Uncle Shtayyeh’s fault.”

Songs also addressed rising prices, unemployment, and the plight of workers employed in Israel (1948 areas) who lost jobs due to the pandemic, as well as traders’ losses, bounced checks, and travel restrictions that harmed livelihoods and state revenues.

3) Religious Theme

Mosques and places of worship were not immune to the pandemic’s consequences. Government decisions to close them were unprecedented for many, and folk song conveyed sorrow over mosque closures:

“This spiteful virus
kept us from the mosques.”

Songs also emphasized supplication to God to remove the affliction, presenting prayer as the ultimate recourse:

“We ask God for help
to keep Corona away from us.”

4) Social Theme

Corona imposed unfamiliar social behaviors, especially restricting visits and physical greetings, which are central in Arab—and particularly Palestinian—social life:

a) Banning handshakes and kissing

Songs stressed that touching spreads infection and advocated distancing:

“Today kissing is forbidden—
lips must not meet...
today greeting is from afar—
two meters away.”

b) Quarantine and staying at home

Songs documented lockdowns and urged compliance, often framing home-staying as a matter of survival:

“The whole world is in homes...
stay at home—
better than going out and dying.”

5) Health/Preventive Theme

Health guidance was among the most prominent song themes: avoiding kissing, caution about sneezing, emphasizing prevention, sanitization, masks, and disinfectant—sometimes with harsh warnings:

“Whoever doesn’t wear a mask—
to the grave, goodbye...
whoever doesn’t use sanitizer—
his head will swell from pain.”

Songs also saluted doctors and healthcare workers for their dedication:

“To doctors, the sweetest greeting—
the one who stays up and doesn’t sleep...
serving his people always—
like the eyebrow above the eye.”

6) Educational Theme

Education suffered greatly: schools and universities closed, and online learning attempted to compensate. Songs described the disruption and the pressures on students—especially high-school seniors—while celebrating achievement despite strict protocols:

“Despite quarantine and Corona,
we succeeded and made the world rejoice.”

7) Romantic Theme

A striking feature was the use of Corona and its imagery for flirtation and romantic boasting—challenging fear and risk:

“This brunette is a balm for our eyes—
even if she has the Corona virus...”

Conversely, some songs used Corona as a curse in the context of betrayal:

“May you love a Chinese man,
and he infect you with Corona.”

Linguistic Phenomena

1) Poetic language

The songs largely rely on simple colloquial dialects used in everyday life, consistent with the folk song’s characteristic accessibility to the general public.

A new lexicon entered folk song due to the pandemic: quarantine, sanitization, virus, Chinese, hygiene, mask, kissing, lockdown, and more.

2) Imitation and adaptation

Some Palestinian artists adapted well-known Arab songs or famous melodies. For example, Fayrouz Salameh reshaped Fairuz’s “Āmrah yā Āmrah” into a Corona-themed Palestinian version. Other groups adapted popular Jordanian and Iraqi tunes to convey messages about Corona.

3) Satire

Satire intensified—targeting the virus itself and governmental policies, including wordplay such as calling the virus “al-ma‘karona” (a pun on “macaroni”) to belittle it, and mocking contradictory regulations and arrests.

4) Diversity of forms

Palestinian folk song during Corona employed multiple forms popular in Palestine:

- **Dihyeh:** a widely practiced tradition often performed in communal events, historically linked to rallying morale and later to celebrations (Khalil al-‘Ali, 2017). It became one of the most prevalent forms addressing Corona.
- **Murabba‘ (quatrain):** a zajal form of four lines, with shared rhyme in the first three and a different rhyme in the fourth.
- **Dal‘ouna:** follows the structure of *‘ataba*; typically four lines with shared rhyme in the first three, and a concluding rhyme often ending with nūn or mīm followed by a long vowel; associated with folk meters and vocal stress patterns.

Findings and Conclusion

The study’s findings indicate that Palestinian folk song did not treat the COVID-19 pandemic as a passing health event, but as a **comprehensive social reality** that reshaped Palestinian daily life. Folk song rapidly absorbed the pandemic and transformed it into a collective discourse combining documentation, interpretation, and influence. The pandemic’s presence was strongly observed from its early stages, intensifying with the first local cases, and adopting new modes of circulation through social media, which became an alternative production and broadcasting space under quarantine.

The study shows that thematic content spread across multiple fields: political (the virus’s origin, debates on conspiracy, criticism of fluctuating official decisions), economic (the suspension of weddings and celebrations as sources of income, inflation, market stagnation, the check crisis), social (the dismantling of greeting and kissing customs, redefining proximity and distance, normalizing quarantine), religious (the shock of mosque closures and intensified prayer), health/awareness (sanitization, masks, warnings against negligence, tribute to medical staff), educational (school closures and redefining “health” as the “greatest certificate”), and even satirical romantic uses demonstrating the folk imagination’s flexibility in recycling pandemic vocabulary into emotional contexts. Linguistic analysis further reveals that colloquial speech remained the primary vehicle of expression, while a new pandemic lexicon entered the repertoire. Imitation and intertextual adaptation of known Arab melodies increased, and satire expanded as a symbolic coping mechanism for anxiety and fear, with *dihyeh* emerging as the most adaptable and widely circulated pattern. Ultimately, the study concludes that folk song played a dual role: it served as a rapidly responsive cultural record that documents transformations and re-frames them socially and ethically, and it functioned as a tool of mobilization and orientation—awareness, critique, and emotional release—confirming that Palestinian oral culture can produce meaning for crisis and reorganize it within familiar rhythmic forms that help sustain communal cohesion in the face of shock.

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Footnotes

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- https://youtu.be/yT08f7Fe_5A
- https://youtu.be/Y4vJ_csZq2w
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