

# UNIVERSAL HUMAN VALUES: INSIGHTS FROM PATRICK MODIANO'S *LA PLACE DEL'ÉTOILE* FOR THE ISRAEL-HAMAS CONFLICT

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## Abstract

The universal human values found in Patrick Modiano's novel *La Place de l'Étoile* could open the eyes of the world to a wonderful realization of the signs of our times. Modiano's story explores ideas like identity, historical pain, and moral confusion, giving deep insights into the struggles of belonging, remembering, and making ethical choices during tough times. By comparing the lasting effects of the Holocaust in the novel with the ongoing trauma of the Israeli-Hamas conflict, the article emphasizes the need for empathy, shared memories, and respect for human dignity and universal human values when dealing with divisions. Literature also demonstrates its potential to foster understanding, facilitate dialogue, and promote peace in highly polarized contexts. Modiano's detailed view of human nature provides important lessons for overcoming differences and finding new ways to achieve peace and coexistence during conflicts especially in the current Israel-Hamas conflict.

**Keywords:** Universal Human Values - Patrick Modiano - *La Place de l'Étoile* - Israel-Hamas Conflict - Empathy and Reconciliation - Historical Trauma - Jewish Identity - Moral Ambiguity - Conflict Resolution - Peacebuilding through Literature

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## Introduction

Patrick Modiano is a famous French writer who won the Nobel Prize in 2014 for his contributions in literature. He is well-known for how he connects history with deep themes like identity, memory, and the Holocaust. Born just after World War II ended, in 1945, Modiano's work is influenced by the grim past of France during the Nazi occupation. His books often look at the lasting impact of trauma, the challenges of Jewish identity and the difficult choices people faced during the period of war, whether to collaborate or to resist. With a simple and thoughtful writing style, Modiano tells stories about people struggling with lost memories and broken identities, making his tales feel both personal and relatable to everyone. Novels like *La Place de l'Étoile* (1968), *Dora Bruder* (1997), and *Missing Person* (1978) showcase his skill in blending personal experiences with historical events. By bringing forgotten stories to light, Modiano has not only enhanced French literature but also created a crucial way to think about shared memories and our responsibilities to history. His talent for stirring emotions and encouraging reflection makes him an important voice in modern literature, especially when addressing the horrors of the past.

His first book, *La Place de l'Étoile*, explores ideas like who we are, what we remember, and the tricky nature of right and wrong. The story takes place in Europe during the mid-20th century and follows a Jewish character named Raphaël Schlemilovitch. Modiano's writing looks at how identity can break down because of painful history, mixing humor and sadness to show the tough choices and self-deceptions caused by anti-Semitism and collaboration during the Holocaust. This complicated journey through identity and history highlights the common human fight to find purpose and respect in a world filled with confusion and bias.

Schlemilovitch's tale is made up of a bunch of disconnected events that mix real history, wild fantasies, and exaggerated characters. He pictures himself in many different and often conflicting roles: as someone who worked with the Nazis, a leader for the Jewish people, a wealthy and reckless noble, and even as a person who suffered during the Holocaust. These changing identities show his inner battles with the discrimination and stereotypes that a harshly anti-Semitic society has placed on him. The book speaks on the one hand; "The Jew is the substance of God; non-Jews are but cattle seed; non-Jews are created to serve Jews." (Modiano, 2015, p. 89) and on the other hand; "THE JEW DOES NOT EXIST...YOU ARE NOT A

JEW, you are a man among other men, that is all.”(Modiano, 2015, p. 140) The title of the novel itself sharply refers to both the Jewish badge (the yellow star) and the famous Place de l'Étoile in Paris, highlighting the struggle between exclusion and assimilation.

The current conflict between Israel and Hamas brings to light significant issues that remain highly relevant in today's society. This conflict is filled with deep human pain, strong political divides, and long-standing historical issues. It raises serious questions about fairness, identity and whether people can co-exist peacefully. “Clearly it has historic aspects, territorial, and for many, ideological aspects, as well as religious sources. For some, the conflict combines all of these, contributing in one form or another over the years to psychological aspects.”(GOLAN, p. 34) Both sides have gone through numerous traumas over the years, and their narratives are deeply connected to history, much like the characters in Modiano's novel.

This paper aims to connect the thoughts on human values in *La Place de l'Étoile* with the current situation of the Israel-Hamas war. By looking at the novel's themes of empathy, memory, and moral complexity, we want to show how universal human values can help us understand and tackle one of the most divisive conflicts today. As Modiano shows, literature not only reflects the complexities of the life of people but also has the power to inspire ways to bring people together and promote shared humanity, even in times of division.

## 1. Universal Human Values in Modiano's Novel

In Patrick Modiano's *La Place de l'Étoile*, the story is built around important human values that are carefully included in a tale going beyond just its historical setting, giving deep thoughts about what it means to be human and the connections we share across different cultures and times.

### 1.1. Themes of Identity and Humanity

In *La Place de l'Étoile*, Patrick Modiano explores the complex issues of Jewish identity and the impact of historical trauma. The main character, Raphaël Schlemilovitch, represents a broken identity influenced by his Jewish background and the lingering effects of the Holocaust. He struggles with feelings of self-hatred and dreams of greatness, showing the challenges of fitting in and the lasting wounds caused by anti-Semitism. Through Schlemilovitch's difficult experiences, Modiano examines the mental strain of living

in a society that often pressures people to hide or change who they really are to get by. “Alfred Dreyfus passionately loved the France of Saint Louis, of Joan of Arc, of Les Chouans. But France, for her part, wanted nothing to do with the Jew Dreyfus.” (Modiano, 2015, p. 3)

The book explores the Jewish experience in a manner that connects it to the larger ideas of human dignity and the desire to belong. Schlemilovitch’s challenges are not just his own; they reflect the shared pain of a section of people dealing with being forced out from their homes, facing persecution, and being forgotten in history: “Diaspora, persecution, the tragic destiny of the Jewish people!..”(Modiano, 2015, p. 122). Modiano highlights the deep human desire for recognition and acceptance, but he also shows the tough truth that these wishes are often blocked by bias and a lack of memory about the past.

By looking at Schlemilovitch’s struggle with his identity, Modiano asks important questions: What does it really mean to belong when society pushes you aside? How can someone connect their personal story with the shared history of their people? As the novel dives into these ideas, it goes beyond its specific time and place, touching on the common human feelings of being left out and the strength to keep going.

But what is a Jew, exactly? That is the question that Raphaël Schlemilovitch struggles with from one end of the novel to the other. He tries on identities like a series of costumes: the anti-Semitic Jew, the collaborationist Jew, the Jewish gangster, the “distinguished” Jew, the snobbish Jew - and through it all, the self-conscious Jew who can never stop being aware of his status as “other,” not even in the Jewish homeland. (SULEIMAN, 2018, p. 68)

### *1.2. Moral Ambiguity and Ethical Choices*

One interesting thing about *La Place de l'Étoile* is how it shows the complicated nature of right and wrong. Modiano does not give us clear heroes or villains; instead, he creates characters who deal with a confusing world influenced by war, cooperation, and the need to survive. Schlemilovitch is a character with many flaws; sometimes he plays a part in his own downfall, while at other times he suffers from things he cannot control. His decisions, which include taking advantage of situations, betraying others, and trying to save himself, reflect the tough moral choices that many people faced during the Holocaust and the Occupation of France. “The title of the work, a symbol of a civilization that is both prestigious and abject, as well as the

antithesis formed by the first and last names of the hero — Raphael, beacon of the West, and Schlemilovitz, a pitiful creature without root or shadow - both announce the ambiguity of the situation of the Jew torn between forgetfulness and memory.” (Wardi, 1985, p. 98)

Modiano shows that working together is not just a political choice; but a deep human reaction to fear and the desire to survive. The Nazis, “they were going to cleanse the world, cure it forever of the Jewish plague.” (Modiano, 2015, p. 133) He uses funny and sometimes strange images to point out different moral choices people take when they are under pressure, while also making us feel for those stuck in tough situations. For instance, Schlemilovitch’s dreams of power and fitting in highlight the way people can feel oppressed when faced with violence. These stories make us think about bigger issues like resistance and complicity, pushing us to face some hard realities about how people act during crises.

These tough moral questions are still important today, not just in the past. In current conflicts like the Israel-Hamas war, people and communities are dealing with issues of loyalty, resistance, and survival. Modiano’s take on these ideas reminds us that human conflicts are complicated, encouraging readers to look beyond simple ideas of right and wrong.

### *1.3. Empathy and Understanding*

One of the strongest aspects of *La Place de l’Étoile* is how it makes readers feel empathy by mixing personal and shared memories. Modiano creates a story that, even though it focuses on Jewish history, connects with everyone. By blending humor, sadness, and reflections on history, the book encourages readers to see the world through the eyes of its main character, feeling the loneliness and hopelessness that he faces. This approach supports readers to gain a better understanding of what means to be human, going beyond different cultures and historical backgrounds.

Modiano’s work demonstrates how stories can connect people and help them understand one another, even if they come from different cultures and backgrounds. He presents the Jewish experience in a way that is genuine and complex, encouraging readers to reflect on their own biases and beliefs. The novel creates a space for conversation, connecting the past with the present and helping us understand ourselves and others better. Its themes of memory and identity speak to anyone who has felt the burden of history or is trying to find their place in the world.

Modiano’s skill in making his characters relatable, despite their

imperfections, highlights the need to recognize the humanity in people who are usually viewed as just stereotypes or numbers. By exploring universal human values, *La Place de l'Étoile* provides a way to promote empathy and understanding, especially in times of hatred and division.

## 2. Connecting the Novel to the Israel-Hamas Conflict

*La Place de l'Étoile*, as it discusses the tragic times of the Jewish persecution, its themes are brought to the current scenario of the conflict in the middle-east.

### 2.1. *Impact of Historical Trauma*

*La Place de l'Étoile* is filled with the heavy impact of the Holocaust, a tragedy that changed Jewish identity and left lasting wounds. The main character, Raphaël Schlemilovitch, carries the burden of this pain, with his thoughts and actions showing the deep effects of past violence and exclusion. This trauma is not just a thing of the past; it echoes through time, shaping how people and communities see themselves and their role in the world. In a similar way, the Israeli-Hamas conflict is also marked by deep-rooted trauma. For Israelis, the Holocaust serves as a constant reminder of their vulnerability and the need for safety, while Palestinians deal with the mass displacement and loss of 1948 as a crucial part of their identity and struggle. "Palestinians and Israelis experience the conflict in different ways, which affects their definition of "peace". Peace and conflict resolution scholars and practitioners often distinguish between "negative" peace (the absence of war or armed violence) and "positive" peace (the presence of freedom, equity, satisfaction of basic needs)." (Hallward, 2011, p. 189)

Both scenarios demonstrate how unresolved issues from the past can cause serious damage. In Modiano's book, we see how terrible events from history can change who people are, both individually and as a group, leading to feelings of isolation and uncertainty. In the Israel-Hamas conflict, this issue appears as a strong struggle to move beyond stories of being a victim or being aggressive, which keeps the fighting going. "Yet the mutual sense of victimhood is real; so is an obsession with and concern over personal safety and national security. Together they serve as serious barriers to understanding or even hearing the voice of the other side." (GOLAN, p. 35) To tackle the problems we face today, it is important to understand these past

traumas. Only by recognizing the sources of fear, distrust, and anger can we start to have conversations and work towards healing.

## *2.2. Dehumanization and Polarization*

One of the key points made in *La Place de l'Étoile* is about how war can strip away people's humanity, especially highlighting the way Jewish lives were treated during the Holocaust. Modiano shows this loss of humanity not just through the actions of those in power, but also through the struggles of victims like Schlemilovitch, who try to understand their identity in a world that is against them. This message is really important today, especially when we look at the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas. People on both sides often use language that turns the other into simple labels—like terrorists, occupiers, or victims—making it hard to see them as real people and ignoring the complicated situations they face.

Polarization leads to ongoing violence because each side thinks their actions are okay by seeing the other side as less than human. Modiano's detailed depiction of how people are dehumanized during war serves as a strong reminder that we need to look past these simple labels. The story encourages us to have empathy and acknowledge our common humanity, even when there are big disagreements—an important message, especially regarding the Israel-Hamas conflict.

## *2.3. Ethics of Resistance and Survival*

Modiano's look at tough moral choices in *La Place de l'Étoile* gives us a great way to understand the decisions people make during the Israel-Hamas war. Schlemilovitch's behavior, driven by the need to survive, fear, and wanting to fit in, shows how complicated it can be to resist or collaborate when things get really tough. Even though some of his choices are questionable, they are still very human reactions to a harsh and cruel situation.

In the same way, people engaged in the Israel-Hamas conflict deal with complicated moral problems that are hard to figure out. For Israelis, finding the right balance between keeping safe and respecting human rights is a constant struggle. For Palestinians, the question is how to resist—whether through peaceful protests or fighting back. Modiano's book highlights that these decisions are not simple and that the background of pain and oppression plays a huge role in shaping them.



When we look at these comparisons, it helps us see the complicated moral issues in the Israel-Hamas war. Modiano's writing pushes us to think about these tough ethical questions with an open mind and kindness, understanding that a lot of such situations happen because people are feeling desperate, not because they hate anyone. This way of thinking is really important for developing a deeper and more caring view of the conflict.

### 3. Universal Human Values: Lessons for Today

Universal values are like guiding lights for all people, encouraging each generation to see their own experiences and understand them in the broader and bigger picture of human history.

#### 3.1. *Empathy Across Divides*

Empathy is really an important but often overlooked tool that we need to tackle the deep divides in the Israel-Hamas conflict. Being able to recognize the humanity in everyone, even those we see as enemies, is crucial for overcoming challenges that feel impossible. "Co-existence efforts focus on humanizing the "Other", and building relationships as the foundation of peace between competing people groups." (Hallward, 2011, p. 195) In Patrick Modiano's *La Place de l'Étoile*, we learn valuable lessons about empathy as it explores the complicated issues of identity, trauma, and moral choices. The main character, Raphaël Schlemilovitch, helps readers understand the struggles of someone affected by prejudice and history. This way of storytelling encourages us to face our own biases and broaden our understanding of what others go through.

In the Israel-Hamas conflict, we need to highlight the importance of empathy, showing that we need to have conversations based on our common humanity. Both Israelis and Palestinians have stories filled with pain, loss, and strength. Acknowledging these experiences does not lessen anyone's own suffering; instead, it opens the door for important discussions. "So, in order to achieve peace, Palestinians and Israelis must move independently and should be prepared to give greater concessions to each other and should also be willing to pay the price. If both do not realize the urgency to solve this vexed issue, generations of Palestinians and Israelis will continue the blood bath and peace will not realize in this land." (Sajedi, 2008, p. 100) Modiano's message teaches us that empathy is more than just a good quality; it is a vital part of stopping the ongoing violence and division.



### 3.2. *The Value of Memory and Reconciliation*

Memory has a complex role in conflicts; it can either keep old wounds open or help people come together. In *La Place de l'Étoile*, Modiano deals with the heavy burden of shared memories, especially how the Holocaust affects Jewish identity and the main character's confused sense of self. The book shows that facing painful pasts is crucial instead of hiding them away. By bringing up historical trauma, Modiano makes it clear that recognizing what happened before is key to understanding today and imagining a brighter future.

This lesson is very important for the Israel-Hamas conflict. Both sides have deep and often conflicting memories that shape who they are and what they do. For peace to happen, these memories need to be respected and understood, not ignored, or used as weapons. Modiano's look at memory shows that healing starts when people and communities face their shared pasts with honesty and kindness. This could mean creating joint historical stories, educational programs, and truth-telling efforts that focus on understanding each other instead of placing blame.

### 3.3. *Human Dignity and Nonviolence*

*La Place de l'Étoile* highlights the importance of human dignity. Even though the main character, Schlemilovitch, makes some bad choices, Modiano shows that every person has value, no matter their struggles or mistakes. The story emphasizes the need to maintain dignity, especially in tough times, which stands in stark contrast to the hatred and violence seen in conflicts like the Israel-Hamas war. "The changing of attitudes on both sides is central to the resumption of any Israeli-Palestinian peace process." (Saunders, 1982, p. 116)

Nonviolence naturally follows from this respect for dignity. "Those engaging in nonviolent action seek to re-arrange powerrelations within society so as to better ensure justice and equality." (Hallward, 2011, p. 195) While Modiano does not directly tell us what to do, his writing encourages us to resist hate by showing the complexity of human nature. It suggests that even when dealing with extreme violence, we should choose actions that respect life and promote justice. In the Israel-Hamas conflict, this means focusing on ways to protect innocent people, follow international laws, and create opportunities for peaceful coexistence. "The human rights and international law approach to peace emphasize the importance of justice in preventing war and violence as well as the use of legal

mechanisms to manage conflict non-violently.” (Hallward, 2011, p. 194)

Modiano’s skill in making his characters relatable, despite their flaws, reminds us that violence takes away humanity from both victims and those who commit it. The novel subtly urges us to seek nonviolent solutions that prioritize conversation, kindness, and respect for one another.

### *3.4. Challenges and Critiques*

Patrick Modiano’s book *La Place de l’Étoile* gives us deep thoughts about important human values. However, using these ideas to understand real-life conflicts, like the Israel-Hamas war, can be tricky. Literature often talks about big ideas and subtle details, while real-world conflicts are based on clear facts, power struggles, historical issues, and cultural differences. This difference can make it hard to apply the moral questions from stories to solving actual conflicts. For instance, Modiano’s focus on identity and memory can help us feel more empathy, but turning that understanding into real actions or peace plans means dealing with complicated issues like diplomacy, security, and long-standing beliefs.

A major challenge is the criticism of universalism in situations where there are strong political and cultural conflicts. Ideas like empathy, reconciliation, and dignity are often seen as too idealistic or even unrealistic in situations where there are major power imbalances and historical wrongs. It can be argued that focusing too much on universalism can overlook the unique experiences and struggles of each side, especially in conflicts like Israel-Hamas, where power and resources are not shared equally. For example, when people call for reconciliation and understanding, it might come off as insensitive to those who feel that their issues and rights are not properly acknowledged or dealt with.

Universalism can sometimes seem like it is forcing outside values onto communities that do not really connect with their everyday lives. Modiano’s writing, which is based on Jewish experiences, explores ideas that go beyond just one culture. But how people respond to these ideas really depends on whether they are open to seeing them in the light of their own backgrounds and identities. In the Israel-Hamas conflict, stories of being a victim and fighting back are so strong that trying to find common ground through the shared humanity might be seen as too simple or not important to the real pain and political goals of the people involved.

Even with these criticisms, Modiano's work remains important because it makes people think and encourages conversations. Literature might not give us clear answers to global issues, but it reflects our common challenges and dreams. To tackle these problems, we need to find a way to connect universal ideas with specific situations, making sure that while we ask for understanding and healing, we also focus on justice and fairness in the real world. Finding this balance is crucial for turning literary ideas into instruments to work towards peace.

### Conclusion

Patrick Modiano's *La Place de l'Étoile* takes a deep look at human values that really connects with the complicated issues in the Israel-Hamas conflict. By exploring ideas like identity, memory, and moral confusion, Modiano highlights the common struggles of belonging, survival, and finding peace. These challenges, while tied to Jewish history during the Holocaust, go beyond just that time and place, helping us understand today's problems. The Israel-Hamas conflict, filled with long-lasting trauma, division, and tough moral choices, reflects themes in Modiano's story, reminding us of our shared humanity even during the toughest situations. "This conflict is remarkably dynamic and develops every day, constantly evolving with new features. And what those features will be tomorrow we do not know - only that we join in the hope that a peace with justice may be found." (Galtung, 1972, p. 63)

Modiano shows that literature can be a strong way to promote understanding and peace. It goes beyond political arguments, creating a space where people can face the complexities of identity and history without being limited by their sides. In *La Place de l'Étoile*, Modiano encourages readers to confront difficult truths and to feel for those affected by circumstances they did not choose. This ability to create empathy and start conversations is especially important in conflicts like Israel-Hamas, where stories are often stripped of their humanity and become divided. Literature's power to humanize and encourage thought is a vital tool for bridging gaps and imagining ways to live together.

The relevance of universal human values is that they help us deal with the tough moral and emotional situations we face during crises. Values like empathy, dignity, and a commitment to nonviolence are not just nice ideas; but are useful tools for creating conversations, healing, and bringing people together. "A peaceful resolution of the

conflict requires honoring the narratives of both peoples and finding a way for justice, security, and recognition for all.” (Hallward, 2011, p. 197) In a world filled with division and strife, the messages from *La Place de l'Étoile* and other literary works remind us of our common humanity and the hope for a kinder future.

By looking at Modiano's take on human values, we are encouraged to think about the past and also to take action now, finding ways to respect everyone's dignity. Literature has the power to shine a light on issues, challenge us, and inspire us, serving as a source of hope that pushes us to seek understanding and peace, even when faced with huge obstacles.

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