

**Gender Roles and Perceptions: The Refugee Experience and Political Agency in Susan Abulhawa's *The Blue Between Sky and Water* and *Against the Loveless World***

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### **Abstract**

The present study analyses the gendered impact of the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine. If conflict has a certain bearing on men, so on women. It offers an insight into the experiences of women during the conflict and beyond, the loss of dignity and independence and how they grapple with all these issues. The study explores the ways Palestinian women are shaped by perpetual patriarchy and political power struggles. It tries to capture their struggle with identity and exile and how they anchor the Palestinian narrative by highlighting the changing roles of women and their engagement in community activism.

*Keywords:* conflict, displacement, exile, gender, identity, settler-colonialism

Women carry society in many ways particularly in situations of conflict, violence and deprivation. They are exposed to heightened risks of violations of their human rights in situations of unrest and instability with fewer resources for protection and survival. Women assume social burden in a profound way by, for example, having the responsibility of providing for their family often at the cost of selling their honour. They are victims not just of the patriarchal capitalist society that exploits and harms women but also of world politics that tends to marginalize them.

The continuing conflict between Israel and Palestine has profound bearings on the social fabric of Palestinian society. It has left Palestinian society fragmented and disintegrated. This reality has an unquantifiable impact on Palestinians. However, the effects of this ongoing occupation cannot be fully comprehended without bearing in mind the impact it has had on the lives of women, as they get the short end of the stick compared to men. There is also the need to consider the fact that the cumulative impact of conflict is compounded by societal norms and perceptions. The proposed research seeks to delineate the gendered impact of the ongoing problem by highlighting the way Palestinian women and their lives have been affected by the conflict in the region.

The conflict's gender dynamics has drawn the attention of both feminist and non-feminist scholars alike, who analysed the matter by employing a wide range of theories, methodologies and genres. Thinking of the seriousness and urgency of the issue, political and human rights activists too have shown their concern. The insights and inputs offered by these stakeholders into the gendered dynamics of the conflict afford an unparalleled view into the lives of Palestinian women under occupation and beyond.

Amal Kavar's *Daughters of Palestine: Leading Women of the Palestinian National Movement* (1996) traces the history of women's involvement in the Palestinian National Movement spanning across many generations and geographical borders. The other related issues discussed by Kavar are women's involvement in politics, their liaison with the male leadership, the impact of crisis and the rise of the Islamist movement. *Three Mothers, Three Daughters: Palestinian Women's Stories* (1996) by Michael Gorkin and Rafiq Othman is a collection of stories about the daily lives and struggles of Palestinian women who have lived and still live through turbulent times. The book is an exceptional account of the authentic and varied voices of women who, historically, have been inadequately portrayed. Gorkin and Othman try to capture the profound changes that have occurred in the lives of these women as a result of the Arab-Israeli conflict. *Gender and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: The Politics of Women's Resistance* (1995) is another important work on the gendered dynamics of Arab-Israeli conflict authored by Simona Sharoni. The book explores the connection between sexism and militarism. Sharoni's work is important in the sense that it provides an important perspective on global politics and gender equality. *Women, Reconciliation and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (2014) by Giulia Daniele provides an important perspective on the political engagement of Palestinian and Israeli women activists and the prospects for reconciliation and resolution. The Norwegian Council's report *Gaza: The Impact of Conflict on Women* (2015) offers insights into the experiences of women during the conflict, and beyond. Besides, documenting their challenges the report also makes suggestions as how to meet these challenges.

Another apposite text is *Palestinian Women under Prolonged Israeli Occupation: The Gendered Impact of Occupation Violence* (2018), a joint submission by Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling

(WCLAC), Community Action Centre (CAC), and The Palestinian Centre for Development and Media Freedoms (MADA). It is a report assessing human rights abuses and violations against Palestinian women and girls. *Gender and Wars in Gaza Untangled: What Past Wars Have Taught Us?* (2021) is an analysis conducted by UNWOMEN to map out the gender-specific risks and vulnerabilities of the confrontation between Israel and Palestine. The analysis emphasizes on the need to prioritise gender specific needs and recognize women's agency and leadership. *The Situation of and Assistance to Palestinian Women*, by Katie Keith (2022), deliberates upon the multitude of effects Palestinian women have suffered as a consequence of this crisis. Keith identifies a number of problems—physical, mental, educational, economic—faced by Palestinian women who find themselves in the midst of the conflict.

The works produced by these authors and agencies do not simply inform readers of the lives and struggles of Palestinian women but also give them visibility by placing them at the centre of the political arena, which traditionally has tended to render women and gender issues as ordinary or inconsequential. The present study foregrounds the significance of gender to understanding the conflict. It emphasizes the need for multiplicity of voices and perspectives to engage with this intractable problem and the prospects of its resolution. The proposed research will engage the following questions:

- What are the significant challenges faced by Palestinian women during the conflict and beyond?
- How do they grapple with issues of identity and exile?
- How do social norms and perceptions degrade women's status and roles in better understanding the conflict and undermine the prospects of its resolution?
- Why engaging women in community activism is so important?
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The Israeli occupation of Palestine has a gruelling impact on Palestinians. The hostile relationship between the two has cost many lives and has inflicted unimaginable human suffering. The extraordinary circumstances created by the conflict in which Palestinians are engaged is sad and disconcerting. While true that the cruelties of occupation are borne by all Palestinians, women are disproportionately affected by this crisis. They are victims not just of the internal patriarchal structure but also of the continued political violence that has exacerbated existing gender inequalities. The idea of gender equality and gender justice in the Palestinian context cannot be fully realized by simply focusing on individual and social gender empowerment, since women's struggle for equal rights is closely linked to their political empowerment.

## Discussion

Abulhawa's *The Blue Between Sky and Water* (2015) and *Against the Loveless World* (2020) looks at the Israel-Palestine conflict through a gendered lens, exploring the questions of occupation, oppression and exile along with with the search for identity and belonging and the issues of cultural preservation and political resistance. The characters in focus are women who are shaped in many ways by perpetual patriarchy and political power struggles. The books speak about the Palestinian experience and struggles under Israeli occupation, told from the women's perspective.

*The Blue Between Sky and Water* is a multigenerational family saga set primarily in Gaza, but also in the United States. The book centres on the traumatic experiences of the Barak family, who are forced to leave their village of Beit Daras after the Israeli invasion. The story covers moving and important topics such as, war, hatred, love, loss, death and rape. Abulhawa writes

about the quotidian sexual abuse and how that trauma saturates the lives of a multitudes of characters. The story begins in the early 1940s before the establishment of the State of Israel and follows this family through the Nakba (the catastrophe), when the family is forced by the newly formed State of Israel to leave their ancestral home in Beit Daras and go into a refugee camp in Gaza. The novel goes through successive generations in that single family against the backdrop of historical events. Following the invasion, the family flees to Gaza but only Nazmiyeh (the oldest daughter) and her brother survive the long journey. Amidst the violence and fragility of the refugee camp, Nazmiyeh builds a family, navigates crises, and nurtures what remains of Beit Daras's community. While her brother continues his exile's journey to America, where, upon his death, his granddaughter Nur grows up alone, experiencing a different kind of exile. Nur's longing for family and roots eventually beckons her to Gaza, where she unites with Nazmiyeh.

This is primarily a woman's story. The principal characters are women of the same family. Nazmiyeh is a matriarchal voice and her niece Nur is a woman who gets lost in the United States, but eventually finds her way back to Gaza. These women navigate their lives through war, through dispossession, love, loss, sexuality, and motherhood. They go through many of the key issues that are so disturbing for people to witness in Palestine and Gaza. Most of these women had ordinary lives, but life made them extraordinary. They face staggering heartbreak, yet they somehow manage to perceive joy and magic in life. Theirs is a life of perpetual loss and grieving, but also of never-ending hope.

Abulhawa explores the legacy of Palestinian dispossession across continents and generations with a devastatingly clear-eyed vision of its political and personal trauma. *The Blue Between Sky and Water* is a story of separation and heartache, endurance and renewal. No Palestinian life is untouched by the ills of occupation. It is deeply felt even by those who live in exile. They feel profoundly touched, affected and violated by the Israeli occupation. This is very much evident in Khaled's description of Nur. "She came with all that American do-gooder enthusiasm that thinks it can fix broken people like me and heal wounded places like Gaza. But she was more shattered than any of us" (Abulhawa, 2016, p. 2).

This brokenness is important because we witness several instances of people suffering from severe mental disorder (Locked-In-Syndrome, Schizophrenia) as a result of trauma. These illnesses are direct results of the occupation and its unspeakable horrors. Abulhawa, in a very remarkable way, interweaves the political, cultural and psychological dimensions of exile that touch all of her characters. Feeling exiled from one's own culture, one's own language and one's own self is recurrent across all of her novels. This reality of exile, displacement and erasure is the stage upon which all Palestinian life is played out.

The book tells us what the loss of connection to family and home does to people. Living in exile is itself a form of violence. Being told that you are not human enough, not worthy enough to inherit your own heritage, to inherit your own homeland, to be able to live in a place where you have a family history and to be told that your white-American Jewish neighbour is more worthy of that history than you are, is deeply hurtful, deeply humiliating. It is a collective wound that all Palestinians live with. But at the same time, it is also the source of their identity, struggle and power. There is exile, famine, loss, violence against women, death as well as pushback. Abulhawa places a magnifier against the occupation by the state of Israel that has led to a massive humanitarian crisis.

While the book depicts the tragic reality of occupation that is lived by the Palestinians, it also captures their firm resilience in the face of utter catastrophe. By portraying the dark crevices of life Abulhawa brings to the forefront the shocking treatment of Palestinians that has thus far been hidden from view. She brings to life the blatant social, cultural and economic pilfering suffered by the Palestinians by describing the Israel-Palestinian conflict in a different light. Through the multi-generational saga of Baraka family, we learn about the contemporary history of Gaza, displaced Palestinians, the continued colonialist aggression of Israel against Palestinians, about hope, sisterhood, love, and the indefatigable Palestinian resistance. “In the abandon of that solitude, we could see how tiny we were, how small and defenceless our earth. And from that terrible dignity, we heard the susurrus of a long-ago old woman’s words: this land will rise again” (Abulhawa, 2016, p. 275).

*The Blue Between Sky and Water* is a story that emphasizes the spiritual and emotional dynamics among women in a country submerged in war and destruction. Abulhawa’s work of is a compelling depiction of female friendship, bravery and resistance. These women live through all sorts of tragedy and heartbreak but keep going on for the sake of their family. They are a resilient, feisty and strong lot who through their grit and determination continue to inspire in times of crisis and difficulty. They provide strength to families and friends, extend support and solidarity to those experiencing war and displacement and give hope in a country submerged in war and destruction. They protect and restore what has been stolen and appropriated and fix what is broken. They break stereotypes, defy gender biases and, in the process, become women with agency.

*Against the Loveless World* tells the story of young a Palestinian woman called Nahr, who recounts the events of her life from solitary confinement. Navigating the world as a woman refusing to be bound by society’s expectations, Nahr documents her life experiences from the Cube, an Israeli high-tech prison cell. Her journey maps across Kuwait, Jordan and Palestine as she is repeatedly displaced by conflict. Resistance and reclamation become central elements of her character with each of her given names – Nahr, Yaqoot and Almas, representing a different dimension of her experience. Abulhawa lays bare the violence of Israeli occupation as well as the resilience of the Palestinian people.

When we first meet young Nahr, she is living in Kuwait, the only home she has ever known. Born to Palestinian immigrants, she learned early and painfully what it means to be a refugee, to be abandoned and detached from your heritage. She grasps that to be a refugee in this world is to find refuge nowhere. “But I know now that going from place to place is just something exiles have to do. Whatever the reason, the earth is never steady beneath our feet” (Abulhawa 2020, 27). It is to live a life at the edge of uncertainties, being pawned in a larger political game in which people have no stake yet they pay the price of never belonging anywhere. The narrative builds around her grief, loss and displacement. The military conflicts, Jewish occupation in Palestine and US invasion in the Middle East marginalize Nahr socially and politically. As she says:

We are not all blessed to receive a good education and inherit what it takes to live with some dignity. To exist on your land, in the bosom of your family and your history. To know where you belong in the world and what you are fighting for. To have some goddamn value. (Abulhawa, 2020, p. 183)

Living with her mother, grandmother and brother, Nahr dreams of living a normal life as, for instance, marrying a man who loves her, having children, and possibly starting her own

business. Her reality is far from what she imagined. She finds herself trapped in a loveless marriage. The man she thinks she loves walks out on her leaving her socially disgraced because she, an abandoned woman, is part of a society that is suspicious about a woman who cannot keep her man. Her family teeters on the brink of poverty. Burdened by the finances of her family she is forced to prostitute herself. She becomes a call girl for wealthy men and uses the money to support her family, thus sacrificing herself for the happiness of those she loves the most. After Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, her family escapes to Jordan, and after passing through another temporary home in Jordan, Nahr lands in Palestine, the land she could barely remember or feel any connection to. However, Palestine turns out to be the land that restores her to herself. Here, through friendship, love and sisterhood, Nahr reconciles with her many identities, finally finding a sense of home and belonging in a country that she never imagined could provide such spiritual comfort. It is in Palestine that she finds true love, a renewed sense of purpose and a cause to fight for. "I was overcome with relief and something akin to belonging when I emerged on the other side of the crossing terminal. Here [Palestine] is where we began. Where our songs were born, our ancestors buried" (Abulhawa 2020, 152).

By the end of the story, we see Nahr as a completely transformed girl. She is part of the resistance and a full-on revolutionary. Abulhawa beautifully weaves together the events of Nahr's life that led to her slow, but complete, transformation. Nahr is a strong-willed, determined individual who carries the weight of providing for her family and the burgeoning drive to fight for her country and her people. *Against the Loveless World* is a coming-of-age story of survival, resilience, belonging and love (for one's culture and for one's family). Nahr, strives for the right to live and love like all of us as she treks as a refugee throughout the Middle East. She takes us on her journey, as a sex worker in a society that shuns "improper or sinful" women living outside the confines imposed by Islam. Her story touches upon many delicate issues like, settler-colonialism, exile, identity, prostitution, marriage, family obligation, abuse of patriarchy, sexual violence, queerness, class, racism, oppression, corrupt prisons, cultural preservation and political resistance. Through Nahr's character, Abulhawa reveals the dark and festering inner layers of Israeli colonial violence and how it impacts everyday people. It is a story just not about Nahr, but of everyone who is forced to leave their country due to political reasons, those who fight for what they believe. It speaks about the Palestinian experience and struggle under Israeli occupation told from the perspective of a woman.

Abulhawa explores what it means to belong, and the emotions felt when individuals are stripped of the place where they have a sense of belonging. And she does it in a way that is heart-breaking and thought-provoking. She poignantly portrays the life and plight of the Palestinians under Israeli colonialism, opening our eyes to the evils of occupation as Palestinians are made stateless, dispossessed and dehumanized. She chronicles the struggles refugees go through when they are deprived of the safety of their community and home. In their lives uncertainty looms large, uncertainty of belonging, uncertainty of incarceration, never knowing if and when you will see your loved ones. This is a tale of tenacity in one woman's journey through what most of the world only understands as headlines; a tale of feminist defiance and universal dignity.

### Conclusion

With *The Blue Between Sky and Water* and *Against the Loveless World* Abulhawa gives an undaunted voice to the Palestinian diaspora, focusing on generations-long pain and suffering. She teaches us the critical importance of belonging, as the characters carry their home in their hearts, as home is a place they know they will never return to. At the forefront is the

Palestinians' experiences and history of oppression, violence, displacement, and generational trauma, as well as their history of resistance, tenacity and hope. The stories are also important in the sense that they educate us and expand our understanding about the conflict, demonstrating the emotional, physical and psychological repercussions it can have on entire generations of women. She makes an earnest effort to humanize the Palestinian condition, to empathize with them and campaign against the inhuman atrocities and injustices that they have experienced for generations. She uses fiction as a decolonial praxis to be harnessed in the struggle against Israeli occupation.

These two books relate the story of occupation, dispossession and dehumanization. They are an unapologetic literary depiction of the issues that surround Palestine. They are the story of Palestine told from the vantage point of its exiles. They are stories of a family struggling to rebuild their lives, their world, after experiencing destruction and dispossession. Both the books centre around female characters who suffer patriarchy and disregard of the world's political players, who tend to exploit their situation at a time of Palestine's inordinate vulnerability. Yet, they are extremely courageous women who refuse to be the victims of colonial patriarchal structures. Using the experiences of female protagonists, the novelist defies the cultural and colonialist expectations that keep women in a subordinate position. Women are critical participants in the indigenous resistance, but they've never received credit. They are also the unacknowledged custodians of culture and history. In the above discussed novels women come through loud and clear. The narratives follow the trajectory of the life of Nahr and Nur, and the discovery of their true selves foreshadows their discovery of Palestine. Abulhawa documents their struggle against exploitative socio-political forces for the right to live a dignified life, wherein they will have agency over their own being.

She also sheds light on issues often ignored in Palestinian culture such as, misogyny, homophobia, sexism and sexual exploitation. She interrogates both the patriarchal capitalist society that exploits and harms women as well as the factors that uphold it. The above discussed novels emphasize the dynamics between women in a country ravaged by war. They are intimate portrayals of relationships, of sisterhood, of feminist resistance to patriarchy as well as they are stories of survival from trauma, from abandonment, from rape, from abuse. Abulhawa uses fiction as a way of processing the individual and collective trauma Palestinians have been subjected to. Through her novels she gives words to the unspoken side of Palestinian history, making the history of Palestinian displacement become a deliberation on the best and worst of the human condition.

Exile is the generative background for all of Abulhawa's works, against which ordinary and extraordinary stories of loss, of love, of reconstruction come alive. She uses these stories to humanize Palestinians and to give power back to the voices who have traditionally been silenced. These stories give the characters agency, visibility and space. Abulhawa uses fiction to acknowledge the Palestinians' humanity, to affirm the reality of their existence and to tell the world that they are not cartoons, terrorists or pitiable victims. They are human beings with dignity and honour, two elements of their identity that must be protected at all costs. Writing fiction helps her become a part of the indigenous resistance to Israeli colonization and to mend what is broken.



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