

# DUAL VICTIMIZATION OF WOMEN IN A COLONIAL CONTEXT: A STUDY OF SUSAN ABULHAWA'S AGAINST THE LOVELESS WORLD

ENAS KAMAL MOHAMED ZAYED

ENGLISH DEPARTMENT, COLLEGE OF SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES, PRINCE SATTAM BIN ABDULAZIZ UNIVERSITY, KSA

ORCID: 0000-0001-8300-1866, EMAIL: e.zayed@psau.edu.sa

## ABSTRACT

The present study aims at exploring the suffering of the colonized, particularly women under a colonial hegemony in Susan Abualhawa's *Against a Loveless World*. In this novel woman are doubly victimized as a result of living in a colonial society and characterized by its male dominance. To make this investigation a purposeful one, the novel will be examined from both a feminist as well as a colonial perspective. The Israeli occupation has a profound impact on Palestinians, especially women. *Against the Loveless World* offers a significant perspective on the lives of Palestinian women, both in their homeland and in exile. For them, the quest for identity is deeply intertwined with their experiences of colonialism. Here, there is a special focus on the challenges faced by colonized women as they strive to reclaim their identities amid oppressive colonial systems and societal expectations. One more objective of the study is to explore how exile affects women's lives, leading to a loss of dignity and independence as they grapple with issues of identity and displacement. The injustices experienced by Nahr, the protagonist, will be explored, illustrating her relentless struggle to maintain her identity amidst constant upheaval.

**Keywords:** Victimization, dual, feminist, colonial, oppression, identity, independence

## INTRODUCTION

Abulhawa, as a female writer, focuses on how women in Palestine are victimized by both political circumstances and patriarchal structures within their society. Also, they are suffering from living as strangers in the exile. This study shed light on critical readings that examine the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a form of colonialism and its impact on the lives of Palestinian women. Various authors, both feminist and non-feminist, have sought to document these experiences in diverse ways. For instance, Amal Kwar's *Daughters of Palestine: Leading Women of the Palestinian National Movement* (1996) traces the history of women's engagement in the conflict, along with the influence of crises and the rise of Islamist movements. Simona Sharoni's *Gender and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: The Politics of Women's Resistance* (1995) explores the relationship between sexism and militarism, shedding light on gender equality within Zionist dispossession of Palestinian land and sovereignty. Contemporary authors like Hala Aylan in *Salt Houses* (2017) and Etan Rum in *A Woman Is No Man* (2019) examine the cultural challenges faced by female Palestinian immigrants in America and their memories of their colonized land. Katie Keith's *The Situation of and Assistance to Palestinian Women* (2022) addresses the various hardships endured by Palestinian women due to the ongoing crisis, highlighting their physical, mental, educational, and economic challenges. These works collectively bring attention to the struggles of Palestinian women, positioning them prominently in a political landscape that often marginalizes gender issues.

As a second-generation female Palestinian immigrant in the U.S., Abulhawa occupies a unique space within literary tradition. Her novels, *Mornings in Jenin* (2010) and *The Blue Between Sky and Water* (2015), chronicle the traumatic experiences of Palestinians during the 1940s and explore the identities of Palestinian migrants worldwide. She poignantly expresses the importance of writing female Palestinian stories, stating, "Stories matter. We are composed of our stories" (Abulhawa, *The Blue Between Sky and Water*, 69). Her 2020 novel *Against the Loveless World* further delves into the lives of female Palestinians following the Naksa of 1967, highlighting their struggles with identity and exile.

Women play a vital role in society, especially during times of conflict. They face heightened risks of human rights violations with limited resources for protection. At the same time, they frequently shoulder significant social burdens, supporting their families at the expense of their own dignity. The Israeli occupation profoundly affects the Palestinian population, leading to immense human suffering and loss. Women are victimized by ongoing political violence that expands gender inequalities. Achieving gender equality in this context is inseparable from women's political empowerment.

The role women played in society is not fixed, it can change according to the political, cultural and economic changes in any society. As Simone de Beauvoir's assertion in *The Second Sex* that woman is not a natural category but a cultural construct is relevant here. Also, Ruth Robbins emphasizes that societal ideas about gender roles, often perceived as natural, can be challenged and "even be changed" (118). The Patriarchal system which the Palestinian females are living under its control viewed them as maternal figures responsible for nurturing future citizens, expected to raise them in service to the state. This adds another challenge for Palestinian women in finding their identity as the patriarchal nationalism assigns them passive roles in nationalist narratives.

The Zionist invasion transformed both the social and familial dimensions of Palestinian identity and reshaped the political landscape. Before the Nakba, Palestinian loyalties were primarily familial and communal rather than nationalistic. While nationalism positions men as protectors of women and the land, it is often women who tend to the land and embody its essence. This duality leaves the Palestinian female psyche deeply "scarred", mirroring the trauma inflicted on the land itself (Abulhawa, *Mornings in Jenin* 29).

Palestinian nationalism is a means of belonging especially to those who are in exile. In "Reflections on Exile," Edward Said asserts that the romanticized notions of exile often mask the profound sorrow of estrangement. He calls for attention to the plight of those who suffer, such as Palestinians, emphasizing that nationalism, particularly Palestinian nationalism, is a means of asserting belonging and resisting the ravages of exile. Exiles experience a fragmented existence, yearning for a connection to "a triumphant ideology or a restored people" (141), as illustrated in *Mornings in Jenin* by a character who expresses a desire for his sister to escape the cycle of refugee existence saying "I will die, if I must, so you do not die a refugee" (99).

The desire to protect land and the bodies of Palestinian women fuels nationalist sentiments among Palestinian men. Israel is acutely aware of this cultural dynamic and exploits it. When it comes to girls and women, "they are vulnerable as females, not just as Palestinians," with sexual aggression used as a tool of intimidation" (Sayigh 7). A mother and her children represent a significant threat to Israel, with their elimination being a critical tactic in the context of genocide. Israel's deep-seated anxiety about being outnumbered by Palestinians drives the central aim of Zionism and Israeli nationalism to limit the population of those deemed "undesirable" (Yuval-Davis, *Woman, Nation, State* 8). The use of rape further compounds the violence, serving to dishonor and humiliate Palestinians. Many Palestinian women have been "tortured or threatened to put pressure on husbands, brothers or sons" who resist Israeli forces (Sayigh 7). The emotional dynamics within families—"love, fear, shame, and protectiveness—are employed" to undermine resistance; the emotional depth of Palestinians becomes both a vulnerability and a weapon against them, with women often bearing the brunt of this conflict (Sayigh 7-8).

In expressing a connection to their homeland, Palestinian women often embody the image of the peasant woman in traditional attire. "Palestine itself was imaged as a peasant woman" who requires protection from Palestinian men (Sherwell 295). This equation between the female body and the land highlights the interdependence of cultural and national identity. Men's roles in safeguarding women in the domestic sphere are linked to "Their commitment to the national struggle," as women are viewed as custodians of Palestinian culture and future generations (Sherwell 296).

To illustrate the sacrifices faced by Palestinian women, Nira Yuval-Davis shares a poignant reflection from one woman, who remarked that a Palestinian woman needs "one son to fight and be killed, one son to go to prison, one son to go to the oil countries to make money, and one son to look after [them] when [they] are old" (Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* 11).

Writing has emerged as a crucial tool for Palestinian women in their quest for identity. The scarcity of Palestinian novels, particularly in English, is notable. Abulhawa reflects in her note at the end of *Morning in Jenin* on Dr. Edward's lament that "the Palestinian narrative was lacking in literature" (252). The colonizer often seeks to rewrite the history of the colonized, effectively erasing their authentic narratives. In the colonial context, the control of both the mind and geopolitical territory is intertwined. Frantz Fanon argues that the colonizer's aim is to "empty [...] the native's brain of form and content" (169). This strategy serves to erase the history of colonized peoples, rendering them as individuals without a past.

Female Palestinian writers often center their narratives around their experiences in their homeland, where colonialism has deeply affected their lives, as well as in exile, where feelings of alienation and displacement persist. They strive to convey their stories in a universal language, such as English, to reach a broader audience. Salaita notes that their English-language works reflect a notable trend in Palestinian literature, emphasizing themes tied to their homeland while originating from "diasporic" contexts. (48) He argues that this literature presents Palestine through a feminized perspective, framing it as an object of desire.

For many years, Israel has propagated its own narrative regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in Western discourse. Joe Cleary highlights the significant role literature plays in chronicling Palestinian history, stating that a primary goal of Palestinian writing is to "offer a Palestinian counter narrative to the more established Israeli version." (192) Palestinian authors create resistant narratives, which Edward Said considers an effective means of challenging imperial narratives. Cleary further emphasizes that one of the enduring aims of Palestinian storytelling is to contest the erasure of Palestinian history and to reintegrate Palestinians into the historical narrative. Their

works seek to expose the injustices faced by Palestinians, emphasizing the loss of land and the atrocities committed against them. Philip Metres adds that Palestinian literature, emerging from experiences of suffering, exile, and occupation, aims to “recover the repressed or lost facts of Palestinian life.” (87)

## DISCUSSION

Susan Abulhawa’s *Against the Loveless World* draws on her experiences as the child of refugees from the 1967 Six-Day Arab-Israeli War. The novel centers on Nahr, a weary woman navigating the upheaval that forces her across various countries—Kuwait, Iraq, Jordan, and Palestine. Through her journey, Nahr grapples with her search for identity and a sense of belonging, embodying the plight of those who are exiled and fragmented, never whole anywhere.

The title of the novel is inspired by James Baldwin’s “A Letter to My Nephew.” Nahr’s Palestinian lover suggests that reading Baldwin requires a contemplative approach, engaging both the mind and heart with the weight of history and the promise of the future. By invoking Baldwin’s work, Abulhawa establishes a connection between the struggles of Palestinians against colonialism and the fight for freedom and identity faced by Black Americans, highlighting the shared nature of these conflicts.

Nahr’s story begins in the Cube, an Israeli prison where she has been confined for years. Struggling to articulate her memoir, she converses with the prison walls until a guard provides her with two pencils and a notebook. She begins to write documenting her life. Her narrative traverses Kuwait, Jordan, and Palestine, illustrating her ongoing displacements due to conflict. Themes of resistance and reclamation are central to her identity as she confronts the alienation of exile and the brutality of the Israeli occupation, yet she perseveres through these challenges.

Nahr begins her writing as an act of resistance and healing, a crucial step in her quest for identity. Through the process of writing, she gains insights into herself, her surroundings, and the broader world, attempting to confront her trauma. Many of her narratives serve as testimonials, echoing the definition provided by Felman and Laub, who describe a testimonial act as “a report of an event that relates what has been lived, recorded, and remembered.” (204) Nahr summons her memories to convey experiences, and to create a connection with a community. In her writing, Nahr finds healing as she articulates the significant aspects of her life, revealing her interests, values, desires, and connections. This self-reflection enables her to acknowledge both her successes and failures and helps her in her struggle to reclaim her identity.

When we first meet young Nahr, she is living in Kuwait. As the daughter of Palestinian immigrants, Nahr was born a refugee. She learns the reality of being a refugee, abandoned and disconnected from her heritage. She understands that being a refugee means never truly finding a place of safety. She reflects, “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, *Against the Loveless World* 27)

During an attempt to dance with her Kuwaiti colleagues in school, she feels the sting of being perceived as a stranger, highlighting her outsider status. This experience marks the beginning of her realization of her position as an exile in Kuwait. Her existence is characterized by uncertainty, caught in a political struggle where she has little agency and yet feels the weight of belonging nowhere. The narrative poignantly captures her grief, loss, and displacement, revealing how military conflicts, the Israeli occupation of Palestine, and the U.S. invasion of the Middle East marginalize her socially and politically. As she reflects on her situation:

“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, *Against the Loveless World* 183)

Regardless of being a refugee Nahr, who is living with her mother, grandmother, and brother, yearns for a typical life for a female—dreaming of love, marriage, children, and business. However, her reality starkly contrasts with these aspirations. She finds herself trapped in a loveless marriage, and when the man she thought she loved leaves her, she faces social disgrace in a patriarchal society that shames abandoned women. With her family drawing close to poverty, she feels compelled to enter prostitution to support them, sacrificing her own well-being for their sake. Um Buraq who coerces Nahr into prostitution in Kuwait is a victim of the patriarchal system herself.

After Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait, Nahr’s family flees to Jordan. She tries to reach Palestine in order to find her husband who left her to obtain divorce. Eventually she arrives in Palestine, a place she can scarcely remember. In Palestine, she couldn’t find her husband but she meets his cousin who is a member of the resistance and she loves him. Nahr joins the resistance, fully aware of the risks involved. She faces arrest, torture, and humiliation, yet through these struggles, she feels a profound sense of belonging and fulfillment for the first time in her turbulent life. Palestine becomes a space for self-discovery. Through friendship, love, and sisterhood, she reconciles her fragmented identities and begins to feel a sense of home in a land that offers her unexpected spiritual comfort. In Palestine, she finds a renewed sense of purpose, as well as a cause worth fighting for. She reflects, “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, *Against the Loveless World* 152)

By the end of her journey, Nahr undergoes a significant transformation, evolving into an active participant in the resistance and a committed revolutionary. Abulhawa deftly weaves together the events that lead to Nahr's complete transformation. She emerges as a determined individual, balancing the responsibilities of caring for her family with a fierce dedication to fighting for her homeland, her identity and her people.

Nahr's narrative tackles a range of sensitive issues, including settler-colonialism, exile, identity, prostitution, familial responsibilities, patriarchal abuse, sexual violence, oppression, corrupt prisons, cultural preservation, and political resistance. Through her character, Abulhawa reveals the deep-seated layers of Israeli colonial violence and its impact on daily lives. While centered on Nahr, the story also represents all those who have been forced to flee their homelands for political reasons and those who stand up for their beliefs. It articulates the Palestinian experience under occupation from a woman's perspective.

This narrative captures the resilience of one woman's journey through colonialism and alienation, embodying a story of feminist defiance and universal dignity. Abulhawa emphasizes how the "everyday experiences of life marked by racism and oppression" shape the identities of displaced Palestinian women. (Lahiri 49) As those who are displaced, the idea of home is tied to their personal and political struggles over belonging.

Abulhawa thoughtfully examines the complexities of navigating multiple identities, presenting a narrative that is both poignant and thought-provoking. She vividly illustrates the struggles of Palestinian females living under Israeli colonialism, highlighting the injustices that leave them stateless and dispossessed. The hardships faced by refugees, especially females—losing the safety of their homes and communities—are depicted in detail, conveying the pervasive uncertainty that defines their lives, including the anxiety of not knowing anymore where they belong.

In Abulhawa's portrayal, “Palestine” transcends mere geography; it becomes a historically lived experience, a place of origin, and a mythic land representing a psychic necessity for displaced individuals. Nahr's story reflects the unique nature of the Palestinian diasporic experience, echoing Hammer's assertion that many Palestinians do not take having a homeland for granted. For them, “moving and living in places other than Palestine,” has been “an important feature” of their existence over the past century. (2) Abulhawa powerfully depicts the turbulent lives of female Palestinian refugees caught in cycles of displacement, grappling with feelings of alienation while searching for home and identity.

## CONCLUSION

In *Against the Loveless World*, Abulhawa employs fiction as a tool for decolonization, contributing to the ongoing struggle against Israeli occupation. The narrative centers on the experiences of Palestinian exiles, particularly a female protagonist who confronts both patriarchal oppression and the neglect of global powers that often exploit her circumstances. Exile serves as the generative backdrop for Abulhawa's novel, bringing to life tales of love, loss, resistance, resilience and hope. Through these stories, she restores power to voices that have been silenced, granting her characters agency and visibility. Abulhawa's writing affirms the humanity of Palestinians women, challenging reductive stereotypes and asserting their dignity. By aligning her work with the indigenous resistance to Israeli colonization, she seeks to heal the fractures of the Palestinian females caused by displacement and conflict.

Abulhawa's work challenges cultural and colonial expectations, showcasing women's essential roles in indigenous resistance—roles that have historically gone unrecognized. The novel gives voice to women, emphasizing their strength and the significance of their contributions as guardians of culture and history. The protagonist, Nahr, embarks on a journey of self-discovery that mirrors her reconnection with Palestine, fighting against socio-political forces in her quest for a dignified life. Despite the challenges she faces, this character embodies courage and rejects the notion of being merely a victim of colonial patriarchy. The novel vividly portrays the emotional, physical, and psychological toll of the conflict on women, aiming to humanize their experiences and foster empathy while highlighting the injustices they have faced for years.

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