

NO WHERE PEOPLE: LOCATING LOST IDENTITY, RETRIEVING MEMORY IN SUSAN ABULHAWA'S NOVEL THE BLUE BETWEEN SKY AND WATER

By

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Abstract

*Literary theory is the body of ideas and methods one use in the practical reading of literature. Literary theory is a description of the underlying principles by which one individual attempts to understand literature. It is literary theory that formulates the relationship between author and work; literary theory develops the significance of race, class, and gender for literary study, both from the standpoint of the biography of the author and an analysis of their thematic presence within texts. Attention to the etymology of the term "theory," from the Greek "theoria," alerts us to the partial nature of theoretical approaches to literature. "Theoria" indicates a view or perspective of the Greek stage. The literature of war has existed since the first literary texts were written. Scholars have been quick to acknowledge that war is a dominant force in the works of the three earliest cultures: the Greeks, the Romans, and the Hebrews. The literature of war takes a wide variety of approaches in its efforts to comprehend the war experience and encompasses scholarship on a number of genres, including poetry, drama, short stories, novels, journals, hi, oral histories, memoirs, and letters. Psychological trauma, its representation in language, and the role of memory in shaping individual and cultural identities are the central concerns that define the field of trauma studies. The present study focuses on the work of Susan Abulhawa; *The Blue between Sky and Water*. Susan Abulhawa's gripping and deeply moving novel tells the story of Palestine after history arrived. In 1948, the formation of the state of Israel and the subsequent wars wrenched this ancient land apart, sending some Palestinians fleeing for the illusory safety of crowded refugee camps in Gaza and scattering many other into exile. The inhuman bloodshed following the occupation of Gaza and the West Bank by Israeli troops is indeed unimaginable yet this powerful politically engaged novel does so with a transformative literary grace. Hence the significance of the study.*

Keywords: *literary theory, etymology, theoria, literature, trauma, psychology*

Introduction

The psychoanalytic theories are often paired with the theoretical frameworks such as structuralism, post structuralism, socio-cultural theory etc. These forms of criticism interprets representations of an extreme

experience and it's effects upon identity and memory. Trauma studies explore the impact of trauma in literature and society by analysing it's psychological, rhetorical and cultural significance. The primary focus is on the traumatic experience and how such an experience shapes and is shaped by the

language. The formal innovations of texts, both print and media that display insights into the ways that identity, the unconscious and remembering are influenced by extreme events thus remain a significant focus of the field. A century of conflict in Palestine and Israel has produced a vast and ever growing historical literature in English as well as in Arabic and Hebrew. There are so many pieces of literature exploring the Isro-Palestinian crisis in occupied land of which the notable or remarkable works are the following: Once upon a country: A Palestinian life by Sari Nusseibeh, In search of Fatima: A Palestinian story by GhadaKarmi, Sacred Landscape: the Buried History of the holy land since 1948 by Meron Benvenisti.

Conceptualizing Trauma Theory

Trauma is the response to a deeply distressing or disturbing event that overwhelms an individual's ability to cope causes feelings of helplessness, diminishes their sense of self and their ability to feel the full range of emotions and experiences. Trauma is defined by the experience of the survivor. But there is a delineation of trauma levels. Broadly described, they can be classified as large 'T' traumas and small 't' traumas. Small 't' traumas are circumstances where one's bodily safety or life is not threatened, but cause symptoms of trauma nonetheless.

Large 'T' traumas are extraordinary experiences that bring about severe distress

and helplessness. The Trauma theory is very much essential to explore the impact of trauma in literature. The complex psychological and social factors influence one's comprehension of a traumatic experience. One's identity, the unconscious and remembering remain a significant focus of the field. Trauma studies first developed in the 1990s and relied on Freudian theory to develop a model of trauma that imagines an extreme experience which challenges the limits of language and even ruptures meaning altogether.

A flood of scholarship in the 1990s arose to examine the concept of trauma and its role in literature and society most prominently by Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Geoffrey Hartman. Defining trauma's effects on identity and memory as an interplay of external and internal forces as well as individual character traits and cultural factors creates a broader appreciation for the links between the singular and collective traumatic experience.

The narrative of traumatic memory thus creates different claims to the past since multiple determinacies of value arise which are not bound to the concept of a speechless absence.

Examining the cultural context of an individual or collective group's experience of trauma enables greater attention to representations of extreme experience such as rape, war, the Holocaust, the Gulag, American slavery, colonial oppression, and

racism. Scholarship in Holocaust studies as well as feminist studies and postcolonial criticism deals with a network of social and cultural factors that influence the linguistic and ethical terms of representing trauma.

The field of trauma studies continues to develop and adapt the foundational post structural approach as well as incorporate new perspectives from post colonialism, feminist theory, ethnic studies, and Eco criticism in scholarship that examines trauma's significance in literature and society. Recent collections such as *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory* and *The Future of Trauma Theory* include further exploration of sociocultural and semiotic implications of trauma in literature. The breadth of current criticism attests to the versatility of trauma studies and its relevance to literary theory.

Exploring Literature of the Exile

Descriptions of the geographic place of traumatic experience and remembrance situate the individual in relation to a larger cultural context that contains social values that influence the recollection of the event and the reconfiguration of the self. The trauma novel demonstrates how a traumatic event disrupts attachments between self and others by challenging fundamental assumptions about moral laws and social relationships that are themselves connected to specific environments. Novels represent this disruption between the self and others by carefully describing the place of trauma

because the physical environment offers the opportunity to examine both the personal and cultural histories imbedded in landscapes that define the character's identity and the meaning of the traumatic experience.

The literature of exile serves many functions. It allows writers in exile to testify to loss and to create something new. It allows readers in exile to hear their own stories told, offering solidarity, comfort, hope, and validation of their experiences. The literature of exile also allows those who are not themselves presently experiencing exile in the literal or geographical sense to better understand and care about those who are.

Signs of Trauma in the Blue between Sky and Water: An Overview

The blue between sky and water is the title of the new book by the Palestinian American bestselling author Susan Abulhawa. With her tried and tested concept of the dramatic family saga, Abulhawa also aims to make the suffering of the Palestinians visible. The setting of the novel is the Nusseirat refugee camp in Gaza. The novel recounts the lives of four generations of a Palestinian family displaced by the nakba or catastrophe of 1948, which marked the birth of a Jewish state of Israel. It signifies the status of Palestine and how the Palestinians are powerless but they have a strong hope that their "land will rise again." The novel is also about four generations of powerful Palestinian women in Gaza. The novel begins

with Um Mamdouh, a widow, and ends with Nur, her great granddaughter. The women in the novel are depicted as resilient and passionate. They put their family first and they aren't afraid to make sacrifices to protect their own people. The main characters in the novel are female characters, Nazmiyeh and Nur. *The Blue between Sky and Water* shows the attempts by colonial regimes to erase the history of indigenous people. The writer chooses to set her novel in Gaza and illustrate the myriad wretched experiences Gazans have had to endure since 1948. The novel ends just before last summer's war in Gaza. Abulhawa through her works shows the condition of women and children who were affected by Israeli raids, struggling of Palestinian men in their daily lives, crisis of Palestinian identity. *The Blue between Sky and Water* tries to give a voice for the voiceless Palestinians, where human conditions are formed, fragmented and dislocated memories and voices. It is all about Abulhawa's experience of her diasporic identity, trying to explore the suffering endured in the lives of Palestinian people. *The Blue between Sky and Water* deals with the forceful creation of the state of Israel by imposing holocaust on the innocent native Palestinians who were displaced from their ancestral home and were forced to live a life of refugees throughout their lives. It's a multigenerational epic set in Palestine, specifically Gaza. The main characters are women, strong but flawed and vulnerable. This novel has many themes such as exile,

resistance, displacement, dispossession, suffering magical realism, political conflict, feminism, Naqba (the catastrophe), hatred, love, trauma, courage, sex, rape, identity, belonging, survival, death, loss, belonging, celebratory dances, partying on the beach, mourning, fear, mysteries, dirty jokes, national heroism, personal freedom, salvation, violence, fragility, separation, heartache, endurance, renewal, friendship, family, emotional strength, etc. It is the story of four generations, beginning from Um Mamdouh, a widow and ending with Nur, her great granddaughter. The story begins in BeitDaras, a rural Palestinian village near Gaza in the year 1947, where Baraka family lived comprising of a widow, Um Mamdouh and her three children, Mamdouh, Nazmiyeh and Mariam. The eldest daughter, Nazmiyeh is a very responsible child who looks after her widowed mother. Her younger sister, Miriam is a day dreamer and fond of reading and writing. Her brother, Mamdouh works at the village bees for their living. Mamdouh was the man of the Baraka house. Before he became the apiarist's apprentice, his family had lived on whatever he could peddle or earn from the small jobs and what charity they got from the mosques. Susan Abulhawa used Magical Realism in *The Blue between Sky and Water*. Abulhawa's use of magical realism underlines the sense of predestination that permeates the book. It offsets the agonies her characters endure, and links members of this family who are separated by geography circumstance and chronological time. Some characters in the

novel can speak with spirits, with jinn, specifically with Sulayman. Nazmiyeh was able to talk to Mariam after Mariam's death "Nazmiyeh tried to gather her sister's body into her arms, even as her apparition continued to speak. "Please leave me here. I do not want to leave BeitDaras," Mariam said. "You must go now. Have a daughter, and named her Alwan. Now go!"(39). The whole village was living in peace, but those golden days of their lives were soon to be perished as a catastrophe came to the village in May 1948 when European Jewish immigrants declared a new state of Israel in place of ancient Palestine which was supported by the British. It was a forceful creation by inflicting holocaust on the Palestinians. These immigrant Jews who came from Europe massacred native people, took away their property and home, making it their own and Palestinians were left to live a life of refugees moving from one place to another and still now their problem is not solved. Though various peace talks have been held, the issue hasn't been resolved. As Um Mamdouh became well-known for people in BeitDaras and surrounding villages, everyone seeks her advice and predictions. In February 1948, five men arrived at the Baraka home. Village elders and chosen Mukhtars each of the main families of BeitDaras. "We have come to seek your help and the help of Sulayman" (23) She asked "You come to learn the intentions of the Jews? They all nodded, so she continued. Our peaceful neighbours' in the Kibbutz are not our friends. They harbour

treacherous plans toward BeitDaras"(23) Um Mamdouh clearly states that:

Our neighbours will come joined by others, and they will spill the blood of Bedrawasis of Beit Daras. BietDaras will be victorious. You will all fight and you will live, but some of your brothers and sons will fall: yet, that will not be the end. More Jews will return and the skies will rain death upon Beit Daras. The big-headed stubborn Bedra is of Beit Daras will not surrender. Time and again they will repel the enemy, but the enemy's fury is great. Native blood will pour from these hills into the river, and the water will be lost...only Allah can know the unknown, but if BietDaras does not surrender, this land will rise again, even if the war is lost. (23-24)

Um Mamdouh's speech becomes true when the Jews attack Beit Daras and they were repelled by the two thousand residents of BeitDaras and their loyal jinni, Sulayman. They came again and again, in March and several times in April of 1948. A small village of farmers and beekeepers couldn't overcome the firepower of the highly trained Haganah, with their mechanized weaponry and fighter planes, which they had smuggled under British noses from Czechoslovakia in preparation for conquer. During last attack in April, fifty women and children from BeitDaras were slaughtered in a single day, after which the men ordered their families to flee to Gaza, while they remained to fight.

The people of BeitDaras had to flee from their lands and homes by force along to Gaza "Without words they walked away from their lives, away from these new conquering soldiers, who were drunk on an ancient virulence that mixed greed and power with God." (32) When the villagers of BeitDaras were fleeing to Gaza for 35 kilometres, Israeli snappers killed and injured many of them. They shot Mamdouh on one of his legs and killed his mother, known in the novel as Um Mamdouh. "Dazed and confused by an unimagined fate, the villagers continued on the thirty-five kilometers to Gaza." (32) Um Mamdouh was carrying her wounded son Mamdouh going to Gaza but the Zionist's Solider interrupted their way. They killed her but Sulayman burnt a group of them. All the present people were astonished at that incident. The pain of leaving one's own ancestral home forcefully is very realistically portrayed by the novelist. This novel is set in Gaza and extends four generations of the Baraka family's experience of the great Palestinian tragedy of the Naqba, past and present. The novel centres on the miseries of the Baraka family, forced to leave their historical idyllic village of BeitDaras in 1948 for a refugee camp near Gaza's southern shores, (The Nusseirat refugee camp). After that, the family scatters. They are living away from their native place and they are not constantly in touch with their land, culture and heritage. Some of the family members remain in the camp, where the majority of the novel takes place, while others travel to the Gulf and then to the US.

When the Israeli-Palestinian conflict increases, Um Mamdouh's children each endure their exile differently: Nazmiyeh becomes a matriarch, reconstructing a sense of BeitDaras in a refugee camp for the next two generations; her brother, Mamdouh, left Palestine for the Gulf countries and, finally, emigrate to America; Mariam, who sees auras from the time she is born, goes permanently into the blue between sky and water when she is killed by Zionists. Two generations later, the Baraka defendants continue along the paths already forced by the choices of their parents, grasping at what makes them whole and what separates them: There will be a homecoming, a jail sentence, a life of piety, and another departure into the blue. In the novel, the protagonist, Nazmiyeh was a young bride when she had to flee away from her village along with her family, relatives, neighbours and many other native people. They left their home, property and other belongings in fear of being killed, raped and looted by the Zionist forces. Though she had to face this nightmare and in search of her sister when she came back to her native village. She was gang- raped by the Israeli soldiers and her sister, Miriam was murdered in front of her by them. This incident haunted her day and night throughout her life as it not only damaged her body but also soul. On the other hand, Nur, granddaughter of Nazmiyeh's brother Mamdouh, was born in America but destiny brought her back to Gaza to meet his family and people living there in worst condition because of the

seizing of the place. Her father died in an accident when she was a child and her mother left her in the care of her grandfather who looks after her very fondly but he also died leaving her alone in an alien country. Nur belonged to the category of those people who though by origin are Palestinians but because of displacement they are far away from their country, culture and heritage. The fictional character Nur shares the plight of many Palestinians living in exile in various parts of the world. She had mismatched eyes like her grandfather's sister, Miriam and so Nazmiyeh had not seen her but believed that Miriam lived in her and she had come back in the form of Nur to serve them. When Gaza was bombed by the Israeli forces then Nazmiyeh's daughter Alwan lost her husband in the bombing and her only son, Khaled went into coma-like condition. He was in such a state that no doctor was able to find his ailment and when Nur saw him and his mother and grandmother being interviewed on TV by foreign correspondent, she felt an urge to see the child and being a psychologists she felt it is her duty to cure the child and this urge also paved her way to Gaza. There she was able to find her roots as her grandmother's sister; Nazmiyeh was able to recognize her by her mismatched eyes. The book deals with the story of brave women of Palestine living in Gaza and sharing and supporting each other, as Abulhawa herself says in the novel: "Mama and Nur found in each other a shared fear of loss, loneliness, and longing for love, and it made sisterhood from there" (251).

Chapter three in the novel was all about Nur and her grandfather Mamdouh in exile in Charlotte, North Carolina, in America. According to *The Blue between Sky and Water*, it happened when Hamas fighters captured an Israeli soldier named Gilad Shalit. Israel broke the ground open looking for him, but they couldn't find him. They killed so many of the Palestinians to get their soldier, but they couldn't. Israelis ruined, wrecked, and shattered Palestinians. But again, they came up empty-handed. Hamas was beyond their violence. "Hamas had won. Gilad Shalit, the captured Israeli soldier, would be exchanged for one thousand Palestinian Political prisoners" (282). Even though war tore these characters apart they were able to find home in each other and the family members shared a strong bond with each other.

In the warm midst of her aunt Nazimiyeh, Alwan, the sisters-in-law, a couple of the brothers, Rhet Shel, neighbours and more children she could count, Nur touched her belly. Laughter and conversations swirled around her. Tea and coffee and various sweets and snacks were passed around. It was the first home coming she had ever had. The first time she had returned to a place that embraced her (278).

The narrative technique of Abulhawa is highly commendable, the way she narrates any incident attracts attention of the readers making it spontaneous and natural. In the

portrayal of characters, she has tried to portray them in a very sensitive way and has justified in her attempt in highlighting the sufferings of the Palestinians through her characters. Her description of the events and incidents seems as realistic because being a Palestinian directly and indirectly she herself had witnessed all these atrocities and emotional traumas which the displaced people go through who have to leave their ancestral home forcefully as their lands were occupied by the migrants coming from Europe which don't belong to the land.

The ways historiography drawn by Abulhawa in her novel corresponds with reality of Palestine today. Her novel is timeless imbued with lyrical prose and insight into the historical afflictions and disorder in Gaza. *The Blue between Sky and Water* narrates the stories of generations and families. All of the sections come together to deliver a satisfying conclusion that resembles the importance of family and the importance of being there for one another. This novel is beautifully written, filled with magical realism to narrate the absurd reality of life in Gaza under Israeli oppression, injustice, and occupation. Abulhawa uses autobiographical elements such as her childhood in exile, the loss of her family, her odyssey through various foster families and homes, and her final

achievement of independence. Her characters are invented but they bear similarity with the Palestinian condition. The narrative is based on the stories of people she's met and largely on her personal experiences and memories. *The blue between sky and water* is a powerful read, a story of Gaza struggling to move into the future, with its imagination haunted but its vitality undiminished.

Conclusion

To conclude Susan Abulhawa succeeds in probing the self of the Palestinians in trying to heal herself and her own people from the cultural and personal trauma the main characters suffer from. She uses narrative memory as a means of resistance to the Palestinian erasure which is forced by the Israeli regime. As a specialist Susan Abulhawa fully understands that trauma must not be left unhealed because it will keep surfacing. Abulhawa excels in Trauma Theory to demonstrate the impact of Israeli policy in Palestine. The healing process of overcoming trauma is tackled through two main concepts that is acting out and working through. The novel explores on how acting out are completely destroyed by trauma while those who try to work through their painful experience succeed in surviving with their destructive memories by changing the traumatic memory into narrative memory.

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To cite this article

Thanisha S. Muhammed. (2021). No Where People: Locating Lost Identity, Retrieving Memory in Susan Abulhawa's Novel *The Blue between Sky and Water*. *Sparkling International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research Studies*, 4(3), 1-9.

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