

In Search of Real Home: Sense of Displacement in Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin*

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ABSTRACT

The nations of contemporary Asia, Latin America, and Africa and politically independent but in many ways are as dominated and dependent as they were ruled directly by the European powers. Recent developments in Arab American literary studies, including the publication of Amal Amireh's and Lisa Suhair Majaj's groundbreaking collection of essays, *Going Global: The Transnational Reception of Third World Women Writers* in 2001, have greatly benefitted from the insights of postcolonial, ethnic, and multicultural studies. Home is often portrayed as a place of alienation and displacement in the Arab women's writings. The mystified notions of Home and family are removed from their romantic, idealized learning and love in complex ways. The complicated notion of home mirrors the problematizing of community, nation, identity that one finds in Arab women's writing. Susan Abulhawa is a Palestinian American novelist who now lives in the USA. She was born in Kuwait to Palestinian parents who were made refugees after the Six-Day War of 1967. There, she studied biomedical science and embraced it as a profession alongside her writing.

The historical and the personal continue to go hand in hand in Abulhawa's narration, where every chapter is headed by a date that chronicles every relevant incident in the Palestinian struggle. The valorization of the site of migration stems from the assumption that the uncertainty that accompanies migration, and the experience of being exposed to two or more different

cultures, ensures a destabilization of the formerly (supposedly) rigid view of identity and a re-creation of meaning.

The bond we forged was molded from an unspoken commitment to our collective survival. It reached through history, continents, spanned wars, and held our collective and individual tragedies and triumphs. (MJ 164)

Domination and inequities of power and wealth are the perennial facts of human society. But in today's global setting they are also interpretable as having something to do with imperialism, its history, its new forms. The nations of contemporary Asia, Latin America, and Africa and politically independent but in many ways are as dominated and dependent as they were ruled directly by the European powers. Recent developments in Arab American literary studies, including the publication of Amal Amireh's and Lisa Suhair Majaj's groundbreaking collection of essays, *Going Global: The Transnational Reception of Third World Women Writers* in 2001, have greatly benefitted from the insights of postcolonial, ethnic, and multicultural studies. Their work epitomizes the usefulness of postcolonial theory for Arab literary studies, demonstrating the value of contemporary multidisciplinary theorizations for the study of third world women writings in western contexts. Utilizing postcolonial, feminist, and multicultural theories, Amireh and Majaj discuss increased academic interest in third world women writers. Their work offers an academic inquiry into and critique of the incorporation of third world women writers into feminist studies and literary studies in the western academy. Benefitting to a large extent from the work done by postcolonial and feminist literary critics like Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and Amy Kaplan, they argue that this incorporation operates as a corrective measure to a predominantly "Eurocentric feminist movement" that had not – in the past – made room for "Third World women" and their experiences (1). In the field of literary studies, the incorporation of third world texts, including the

positive accounts of migratory ethnic experiences, challenges the heavily Euro-centric literary canon.

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Susan Abulhawa, herself born to a family of Palestinian refugees, highlights the two levels of home: one personal, and the other collective. Her novel is about Amal and her quest as a Palestinian woman to attain home in the framework of the Palestinian struggle, as much as it is about the collective Palestinian displacement. This article highlights how Abulhawa's focus on the refugee experience highlights both the personal and the political displacement of the Palestinian characters of the novel. It also sheds light on the experience of Amal as an individual on a quest to find a personal home in the shadow of the Palestinian political struggle. What Susan Abulhawa provides her readers with in *Mornings in Jenin* is a timeline of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict from the perspective of a Palestinian refugee. Jenin is the refugee camp where Amal is born into a condition of statelessness, displacement and uncertainty that contrasts with the earlier account given of her grandparents' and her parents' life. While the earlier account is full of references to

the mundane details of daily lives, adolescent love, plans for arranged marriages between cousins, friendly neighbourly competition and other day-to-day incidents that correspond to those experienced by millions around the world, the account of life in Jenin camp where Amal's birth takes places shortly after 1948 sees this serene and ideal image of life in Palestine shattered. It becomes replaced with news of impending wars, curfews, checkpoints, military restrictions and the loss of the family home.

The narrative of the details of the displacement of 1948 is accorded generous space that highlights the scale of importance of this juncture. Abulhawa realizes this is a contentious issue that defines the Palestinian experience in the past, present and future. Her narrative calls upon actual news sources to give credibility to her account. She writes:

The next morning, July 24, Israel launched a massive artillery and aerial bombardment of the village. The Associated Press reported that Israeli planes and infantry had violated the Palestinian truce by the unprovoked attack, and bombs rained as Dalia ran from shelter to shelter with terror-stricken Yoursef and a screaming baby Ismael. (*MJ* 28).

The archival source from the Associated Press that documents the historical reality of the account of the displacement takes place alongside the unfolding narrative of fiction to achieve the novelist's main aim: to give a full account of the narrative of the Palestinian struggle. The fact that Amal was born a refugee after 1948 meant that she had to journey around different homes. She moves from Jenin after the disappearance of her father, the escape of her brother to join the resistance and the death of her mother, to join the orphanage in Jerusalem, then to the US, then to Shatila camp in Lebanon, only to return once again to the US as a result of another Israeli attack on her home. Literally and figuratively, her home is unsettled by the direct action of the Israeli aggressor. In a passionate text, Amal declares as a new

arrival to Jerusalem after having lived most of her life in the Jenin refugee camp:

"I am a daughter of the land and Jerusalem reassures me of this inalienable title, far more than the yellowed property deeds, the Ottoman land registries, the iron keys to our stolen homes, or UN resolutions and decrees of superpowers could ever do". (MJ 140).

Again, Abulhawa here refers to the rightful claim to the land of Palestine that is legitimized by all the evidence she mentions, as well as to the personal feeling of being at home in Palestine. Home, Abulhawa insists, is at once personal and political. The overlap of the personal and the political continues to gain strength and to forge among the Palestinian people a collective feeling of home, as Amal sums up at the end of one chapter: "Our bond was Palestine. It was a language we dismantled to construct a home" (MJ 165).

As a young woman, Amal stated:

Growing up in a landscape of improvised dreams and abstract national longings, everything felt temporary to me. Nothing could be counted on to endure, neither parents nor siblings nor home. Not even one's body, vulnerable as it was to bullets. I had long since accepted that one day, I would lose everything and everyone... (MJ 156).

Years later, as she studies in the United States, Amal would remember how her Palestinian-ness followed her around like a scar from the past (MJ 171), even as she changes her name from Amal (hopes) to Amy and stops all communication with family and friends from the past. In her words:

I metamorphosed into an unclassified Arab-Western hybrid, unrooted and unknown. I drank alcohol and dated several men... I spun in cultural vicissitude, wandering in and out of the American ethos until I lost my way. I fell in love with Americans and even felt that love reciprocated. I lived in the present, keeping the past hidden away... But sometimes the blink of my eye was a twitch of contrition that brought me face-to-face with the past. (MJ 174).

She experiences how Palestine would rise up uninvited during her time in the US (MJ 175) and she would resist it until her brother Yusuf's phone call reminds her that her "Arabness and Palestine's primal cries were [her] anchors to the world" (MJ 179). Amal's experience of migration from Palestine to the US results in her realization of the role her Palestinian and Arab identities play in anchoring her existence in the world. Her reflections demonstrate how questions of migration and identity cannot be separated from one another: Amal's memory of home shifts from one that is nostalgically restorative to one that is reflective. Although, early on, she draws security from a fixed Palestinian and Arab identity, her experience throughout the rest of the novel develops into a reflective nostalgia that dominates her perception of a home that is dynamic and that is not anchored in a rigid identity or that is geographically determined. This shift from restorative to reflective nostalgia is presented in the novel to coincide with Amal's return trip on which she realizes that the home in memory (the imagined home) no longer corresponds to the home in reality.

In 2002, Abulhawa visited the Jenin refugee camp in the immediate aftermath of the massacre that took place there in April during a massive Israeli military assault. Deeply affected by both experiences, Abulhawa resolved to tell the world what she saw. The result was very different from what Abulhawa intended when she first set pen to paper. She started with a humanitarian objective and she adds that she wanted the world to know what happened in Jenin. But as she wrote, the characters started to come to life, to fill out, and eventually being true to these characters and telling their story honestly became the only focus of Abulhawa.

As Amal, at first, aspired to fit in and belong, she felt as if her appearance and accent was an obstacle to build sustainable relationships with the Americans. When she had stayed in the

US longer she explained how she “selfishly tuned the world out”:

I deliberately avoided political discussions, did not write to the people who loved me, and let myself be known as “Amy” – Amal without the hope. I was a word drained of its meaning. A woman emptied of her past. The truth is that I wanted to be someone else. And that summer at Myrtle Beach, I was Amy in a bathing suit, lounging on the sand as far away from myself as I had ever been. It took me days to find a suitable swimming suit. (MJ 178).

Amal was conflicted and often felt shame for ignoring the customs and traditions which, perhaps, her being rested upon. She was also afraid that being “Amy” as she called her American self, meant she lost track of who she was, that trying to fit in meant that she wasn’t herself but only a façade of who she was. That America left no room for her to be different in the way that she was and she forever belonged to the Palestinian nation where her “Arabness” was her anchors to the world (MJ.179). On her trip to Lebanon to meet her brother and his pregnant wife Fatima, Amal confessed to Fatima about relationships she had had with American men in the United States to which she received the response:

Amal, I believe that most Americans do not love as we do. It is not for any inherent deficiency or superiority in them. They live in the safe, shallow parts that rarely push human emotions into the depths where we dwell. I see your confusion. Consider fear. For us, fear comes where terror comes to others because we are anesthetized to the guns constantly pointed at us. And the terror we have known is something few Westerners ever will. Israeli occupation exposes us very young to the extremes of our own emotions, until we cannot feel except in the extreme. The roots of our grief coil so deeply into loss that death has come to live with us like a family member who makes you happy by avoiding you, but who is still one of the family. Our anger is a rage that Westerners cannot understand. Our sadness can make the stones weep. And the way we love is no exception”. (MJ 193)

The difference between the West and the East is explained as a matter of experience, where the two places have become different worlds because of the way in which the people within them live. In the Middle Eastern world here, tragedy and suffrages explains to affect who they are to the core and change the way they live, regard the world and love. What Amal had learned about classical oriental civilizations was from the storytelling of the old patriarch in the refugee camp, Haj Salem. The former prideful land and beautiful region are in some passages described as decayed. The greens and beauty of the land they had once owned before Israeli invasion, was told to perish and rot by Israeli care.

When Amal passes by Jerusalem for the last time as a child, she thinks to herself:

Every inch of it holds the confidence of ancient civilizations, their deaths and their birthmarks suppressed deep into the city's viscera and onto the rubble of its edges. The deified and the condemned have set their footprints in its sand. It has been conquered, razed, and rebuilt so many times that its stones seem to possess life, bestowed by the audit trail of prayer and blood. Yet somehow, it exhales humility. It sparks an inherent sense of familiarity in me – that doubtless, irrefutable Palestinian certainty that I belong to this land. It possesses me, no matter who conquers it, because its soil is the keeper of my roots, of the bones of my ancestors. Because it knows the private lust that flamed the beds of all my foremothers. Because I am the natural seed of its passionate, tempestuous past. (*MJ* 140)

The present contemporary civilizations are described as decayed, because the people's hopes are. Cities are ruined, humans are killed, joy is taken from them, but in a way Amal's reflections on the civilizations, show that the society is somewhat prideful and eternal, that regardless of the amounts of Palestinians suffrages, what Amal deems once was magnificent is still within them. She experiences how Palestine would rise up uninvited during her time in the US (*Ibid* 175) and she would resist it until her brother Yusuf's phone call reminds her that her

"Arabness and Palestine's primal cries were [her] anchors to the world" (Ibid 179). Amal's experience of migration from Palestine to the US results in her realization of the role her Palestinian and Arab identities play in anchoring her existence in the world. Her reflections demonstrate how questions of migration and identity cannot be separated from one another: Amal's memory of home shifts from one that is nostalgically restorative to one that is reflective. Although, early on, she draws security from a fixed Palestinian and Arab identity, her experience throughout the rest of the novel develops into a reflective nostalgia that dominates her perception of a home that is dynamic and that is not anchored in a rigid identity or that is geographically determined. This shift from restorative to reflective nostalgia is presented in the novel to coincide with Amal's return trip on which she realizes that the home in memory (the imagined home) no longer corresponds to the home in reality.

Return does not guarantee the same sense of home experienced before her departure to the US. Amal exclaims as she goes back to Jerusalem that she does not understand why the dignity of people hinges upon some soil and stones (MJ 290). She goes to Jenin and no longer feels the same sense of home (MJ 294). On that trip, she realizes that home had always been with her (MJ 297) in her daughter Sara in whose arms she dies after being shot by an Israeli soldier (MJ 307). As Amal dies, the Israeli soldier mumbles that he "cannot shoot anymore" (MJ 313). He helps Sara and Huda (Amal's childhood friend) to survive the remaining few days of curfew in Jenin. It is this gesture of humanity that ends the novel and underlines Abulhawa's theme of the power of common humanity to end the conflict. This emphasis on common humanity is a recurring theme in the novel, in a way that is almost straightforward at times. In one chapter, the reader is presented with the image of David/Ismael, the Israeli soldier, holding the wrist of his brother, who is now part of the resistance, and exclaiming that the Arab's wrist has a pulse (MJ 99).

Abulhawa's emphasis, however, on seeing the common suffering and common humanity as the basis of understanding between the Palestinian and the Israeli sides is not to be confused with a call for peace that neglects the suffering on the Palestinian side. The chapter in which Abulhawa covers the events of 1948 becomes marked with the sense of loss of Dalia and Hasan's baby Ismael, who is kidnapped by the Israeli soldier in the midst of the panic of his mother and the rest of the people of the village. From that point onwards, loss changes Dalia and puts her in a state of pain from which she never has a chance to recover until her death. The pain and lament in Abulhawa's words are quite evident as she states:

In the sorrow of a history buried alive, the year 1948 in Palestine fell from the calendar into exile, ceasing to reckon the marching count of days, months, and years, instead becoming an infinite mist of one moment in history. The twelve months of that year rearranged themselves and swirled aimlessly in the heart of Palestine. The old folks of Ein Hod would die refugees in the camp, bequeathing to their heirs the large iron keys to their ancestral homes, the crumbling land registers issued by the Ottomans, the deeds from the British mandate, their memories and love of the land, and the dauntless will not to leave the spirit of forty generations trapped beneath the subversion of thieves. (MJ 35)

The historical and the personal continue to go hand in hand in Abulhawa's narration, where every chapter is headed by a date that chronicles every relevant incident in the Palestinian struggle.

The valorization of the site of migration stems from the assumption that the uncertainty that accompanies migration, and the experience of being exposed to two or more different cultures, ensures a destabilization of the formerly (supposedly) rigid view of identity and a re-creation of meaning. The representation of home in the writings of Palestinian migrants whose experience of migration entails an element of force, if not immediate then historical. The accounts could be described

neither as exilic nor as diasporic. These are terms used to more accurately describe the experience of life away from the country of origin and the nature of adaptation to life in the new country. While the characters of the novel do dwell between the two experiences of home, between exile and diaspora, the accounts themselves are personal stories intertwined with the collective history of the Palestinian struggle. Though the concept of home is personal and is not associated with a physical location in Palestine or elsewhere, Abulhawa has sought to contribute to the memorial site of the 1948 *Nakbah* which started the initial collective experience of displacement. As other Arab women writers Abulhawa assumed the task of remembering and narrating the entire collective experience to save the story of Palestine from oblivion. This however, was not nationalist text; the novel has transcended the polarizations and rejected binaries, but they insisted on addressing the day-to-day struggles of the Palestinian person with occupation and its results. As long as the Palestinians' history of loss remains unrecognized, so will the commemoration of the *Nakbah* in its literature among its generations continue.

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