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EXISTENCE IS RESISTANCE: PALESTINIAN RESISTANCE IN SUSAN ABULHAWA'S *THE BLUE BETWEEN SKY AND WATER*

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Abstract: Palestine has been unjustly occupied for well over half a century-the unpardonable atrocities committed by the state of Israel continues to the present day. The worldwide acknowledgement of the Jewish nation on Palestinian land was a betrayal of humanity. Regardless of their shortcomings compared to Israel and the international support Israel has, Palestinians fight the apartheid state braving all odds. Despite the best efforts of Israel to wipe them off, Palestine, Palestinians and the memory of historic Palestine exist; this mere existence is, many a times, Palestinians' weapon to irk Israel and remind them that Palestine can never be conquered and pushed into oblivion as a mere episode in history. This paper analyses Susan Abulhawa's novel *The Blue Between Sky and Water* to look at the life of Palestinian refugees who resist Israeli oppression with their lives. Life in Palestinian refugee camps is composed of hunger, pain, wounds, tears, deaths, separation, longing, memories, and so on, and yet it is a life of recovery and rebuilding; it is a life of endurance and hope. The main characters of the novel are a bunch of women who are left alone to make ends meet when the men in their families are taken away either by death or by Israel. Their life is their resistance. They keep their devastated nation alive with their breaths.

Keywords: Palestine, Israel, Resistance, Existence, Survival, Susan Abulhawa

Introduction

Palestine has been subjected to unparalleled iniquity for years-thousands of Palestinians became homeless forever when their ancestral land was robbed by Zionists for the establishment of a Jewish nation; Israel, in 1948. Their lives and culture, which were homogenously mixed with the very soil in Palestine, were thwarted forever with the onlooking world's silent consent.

'The occupiers drove nearly one million Palestinians out of my country in 1948,'he said. 'Not only did they take over all the land and property of those who were driven out, but they changed the name of my country to Israel. Those of my people who refused to leave were badly persecuted, and still are, even today.' (Chai 11)

Dr Ang See Chai-Orthopaedic surgeon, author and co-founder of the charity 'Medical Aid for Palestinians' quotes a Palestinian man thus, in her book *From Beirut to Jerusalem*. The crimes committed by Israel cannot be justified by any rational means. However, despite all the favourable conditions they had over the unarmed Palestinians- support of powerful world nations, advanced weapons, control over world media, Israel could not wholly defeat Palestine and her brave children. Equally unparalleled to Israeli savagery is the Palestinian spirit. Generations after generations of Palestinian children pledge to free their country from Israel, and they work towards it with die-hard resolve. They seize every single opportunity to resist the continued occupation which expands every year. From direct armed resistance to merely staying alive, their resistance varies in degrees.

Israel, with the help of western discourses has been successful in tarnishing the image of Palestinians and their struggle for freedom- the world looks upon Palestinians as terrorists. Palestinian writers, with their works, addresses the urgency to justify the cause of their people and their history to counterbalance the colonial narrative. Their role in Palestinian resistance is pivotal as they bring out the true colours of the Israeli occupation, which is otherwise well polished in the devious coverages of mainstream media of the world. "Palestinian writers reclaim their loss and dispossession in miraculous words... Palestinian literature is at the heart of the Palestinian struggle." (Mir 1) The term 'Resistance Literature' was introduced by Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani who urged his readers to resist Israeli oppression through his works. This paper explores the varied forms of Palestinian resistance to Israeli oppression in Susan Abulhawa's novel *The Blue Between Sky and Water* (2016), emphasising the non-violent everyday resistance and women's resistance. Susan Abulhawa is a Palestinian American writer born to Palestinian refugees of the Six days war in 1967; she later ended up in the U.S under foster care. Abulhawa's works sketch the miserable lives of Palestinians under Israeli occupation with photographic clarity. She brings forth the tales of tattered lives crushed under Jewish greed. Her fictionalised accounts of the Palestinian reality bring to light the myriads of poignant emotions veiled by the cold news reports about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Resistance in *The Blue Between Sky and Water*

The Blue Between Sky and Water talks of terrible tales of separation, loss, death, dispossession, and longing, yet it is not a tragic tale. It is a tale of endurance, courage, hope and resistance-narrating the saga of a family's survival. It follows the Baraka family in the village of Beit-Daras through the Nakba of 1948 to the ensuing years in a refugee camp in Gaza. The characters in focus are a bunch of women who lost the men in their lives in one way or the other. The villagers of Beit-Daras did not surrender to the Jews without resisting. They heeded the words of the older woman of their village, Um Mamdouh-one who talked to a djinni called Sulayman, and fought with all their strength. She had said that "if Beit-Daras does not surrender, this land will rise again, even if the war is lost." (Abulhawa 31). When they eventually lost, they were forcefully evacuated from their ancestral land in 1948, like many other Palestinian villages. Only Um Mamdouh's eldest daughter Nazmiyah, her husband Atiyeh, and her brother Mamdouh who was handicapped by an Israeli bullet, made it to the refugee camp. Um Mamdouh and her youngest daughter Mariam were killed by Israeli forces. Nazmiyah, a new bride, was brutally gang-raped by Israeli soldiers while trying to save her young sister Mariyam. Even when she was being savagely ripped open, she thought she could endure it. The incident illustrates the fierce will of the steadfast, sassy Nazmiyah, who would lead her family through unimagined trials and tribulations in the days to come.

The Palestinians thrown out of their villages ended up in refugee camps set up with foreign aid. Their life was utterly shattered and changed forever. Most of them were maimed or orphaned. The distraught refugees spent their initial days in bereavement and confusion. Nevertheless, it is near to impossible to beat the Palestinian resolve. Initially, they had hoped that it was just a matter of days before they returned home to their real land. Even today, many of them keep the keys to their house, which they locked for the last time in 1948, as a symbol of their right to return. Nonetheless, the refugees did not wait idly for their return. They picked up the pieces of their shattered lives gradually. However temporary it was, they started putting life into their days in the makeshift tents.

In time, mud bricks and corrugated metal replaced the cloth tents and the refugee camps gave rise to a subculture marked by adamant pride, defiance, and an unwavering insistence on the dignity of home, no matter how long it took or how high the price. (52)

Abulhawa paints the picture poignantly through the characters in the novel. With her ever-cheerful attitude, the beekeeper's widow awoke her fellow refugees who initially succumbed to shock and grief. She started planting a small garden within weeks of moving into the camp. With the aroma of her unbeatable cooking, she stirred the camp to life.

The beekeeper's widow began to suffuse the air with the smell of normality. She inspired other women to invest themselves in their makeshift dwellings and it was not long before women began to gather as they always had, to wash their laundry, gossip, roll grape leaves, sift through rice to remove rocks and rice bugs...In the congestion of national upheaval and a collective sorrow that would deepen to the roots of history and expand through multiple generations, the refugees of Beit Daras went back to their jokes and scandals. (53)

The Palestinian society was basically agrarian before the Nakba; most of them made a living from Olives and other crops. Once the Jews snatched their years of toil from them, they were left with absolutely nothing. The refugees had to find alternate means of earning a living. They never relied entirely on the UNRWA rations; they found it humiliating to be living just on those. Mamdouh, who was now the official head of the family, found work with a local blacksmith. Atiyeh took to the sea to fish out a living from its abundance; later, his sons joined him. Over time, Israel imposed land, sea, and air blockades and transformed Gaza into an open-air prison in order to make Palestinians hungry, but not starving. However, Palestinians were not the lot to let go; they found new ways of making a livelihood. Their attempts to keep on living were their means of fighting the Israeli occupation. Nazmiyeh's son in law Abdel Kader's chicken coop is an example. Abdel Kader, who used to be a fisherman, could not return to the sea after a humiliating attack by the Jewish soldiers. Once stuck to the land, he found it embarrassing to provide for his family by the UNRWA rations and fixed up a chicken coop in his house to eke out a living. Each and every small endeavour counts in the Palestinian situation as anything that gives a Palestinian the opportunity to stand on his legs is a blow to Israel's face.

Women in the refugee camps play a vital role in the community's survival. With Atiyeh's death and Abdel Kader being killed in an attack by Israeli forces, Nazmiyeh and daughter Alwan did not wait to be fed by Nazmiyeh's sons. Despite her physical ailments and emotional struggles, Alwan worked at a women's co-op, which embroidered traditional Palestinian thobes and the like to be smuggled through the underground tunnels to be sold in the world outside. The beekeeper's widow had her unique means of earning a livelihood. She was never idle and would barter the yield from her garden and other goods in exchange for what she needed. Her secret garden right under the nose of Israel, from which she finds medicine for Alwan's breast cancer, is an excellent exemplar of the Palestinian resolve.

The garden was located near the western edge of Gaza that was somewhat dangerous to till due to landmines and proximity to Israeli posts, but the beekeeper's widow had done so for years. Nur opened the gate and was stunned to find rows and rows of various plants, manicured and nurtured. (236)

Palestinians are used to defeats but not being destroyed. When Israel sealed off the tiny Mediterranean strip, the people of Palestine found their way out through the tunnels they dug underground.

When the sky, land, and sea were barricaded, we burrowed our bodies into the earth, like rodents, so we didn't die. The tunnels spread under our feet, like story lines that history wrote, erased and rewrote. (141)

The tunnels became the lifeline, economic means, and connection to the outer world for the people of the Gaza strip. They smuggled an extensive list of banned items through the tunnels ranging from diapers to medical equipment. The undefeatable young minds of Palestine transformed bane into boons. Once when Israel convinced the U.S. and Egypt to seal off the tunnels with impenetrable steel walls along the Rafah border, Palestinian boys went to work right after its installation. They cut through the high-grade steel and recycled it to make other useful materials. The tunnels, which gradually became the vascular system of the tiny strip of land sealed off from the world, are not only the means of finding sustenance for Palestinians but also their proclamation of defiance to the Zionists and their supporters and the hallmark of their unquenched zeal.

Life in Palestinian refugee camps is not only about recovering once after the initial shock of dispossession; it is a pain of collecting the torn pieces and starting anew every time after recurrent attacks by the Israeli forces. Israel never receded from making life more and more difficult for Palestinians, and neither did the world do anything practical to stop them altogether. But the repeated attacks and atrocities could never kill the Palestinian spirit; they rebuilt their lives from rubbles with renewed vigour. The whole community came together to put things back in order after each attack. "The women worked alongside the men, cleaning rubble, repairing, and building anew. They cleaned and cooked and baked and organising the children's chores." (154) They rose from the ashes and found reasons to be living again; they buried the dead ones and however slowly started tending to the rest of the lives waiting for them.

Slowly, people returned to themselves, salvaging life. Hajje Nazmiyeh collected some of her pots, random papers flying about that could be used for schoolwork, broken pencils that might still be of use...For some children... the rummaging was turned in to games and contests. (153)

The refugees did not fret and mourn forever, and life shot up again from under the debris. They did not succumb to grief over what the Zionists snatched from them. Israel's arrogance could not erase the smile on their faces and hope from their hearts. Their life in the refugee camps was not survival with the bare minimum like what Israelis had expected it to be, but they managed to be content with whatever little they had, never forgetting to fight for their rights at the same time. They had get-togethers, family picnics and parties and found enjoyment in whatever they had. "We find our own ways to freedom. Zionist sons of Satan cannot imprison our joy," (226) Nazmiyeh held her family together through thick and thin. Her strong will and audacity helped those around her recover from their sorrows. She acted according to the demand of the situation, and reminded everyone around her that they cannot be defeated unless they decide so. She would say "... life is magical and gives us second chances that should be celebrated." (226)

Nazmiyeh and the other matriarchs in the camp had their own gatherings, and they guided, supported, and chided the young when needed. They kept the memory of their bygone days in unoccupied Palestine alive in the camps. They made the second-generation refugees who had never had a real sense of home proud of their Palestinian identity. They used their memories as weapons to keep the essence of historic Palestine alive, lest they forget their real roots. They kept the Palestinian tradition thriving and kept Friday ghadas and other religious and cultural traditions going on. Even the Palestinians under exile kept their nation alive within themselves and their families' memory. Nazmiyeh's brother Mamdouh who migrated to the U.S., narrated the tales of his homeland to his granddaughter Nur in such a manner that she always had Palestine as her real home in her mind. The sisterhood and comradeship of the Nazmiyeh and the beekeeper's wife suffused the air with normality in the abnormal situation they lived in. Their jokes, lewd comments and crazy chit chats made life lighter for Alwan and Nur, who had been fighting demons of their own apart from Israel.

Although armed resistance is not given a primary role in the novel's plotline, Abulhawa has not overlooked its role in Palestinian resistance. Nazmiyeh's first born, Mazen, is part of a group organising armed resistance against Israeli forces. After getting to know about his mother being brutally raped by Jewish soldiers, he sought revenge for his country's as well as his mother's anguish from Israel. The author amends the usual representation of Palestinians as terrorists through her novel. Intricately following the life of Palestinians and recording their emotions immaculately, she justifies their means of resistance.

Hope and faith are the driving forces for Palestinians. Their faith in God imparts them the strength to get up every time. They invoke Allah and navigate through the thick and thin. "Say *alhamdulillah* and welcome whatever Allah brings into our lives". (170) The violation of Israeli occupation and atrocities which

followed did not tire their minds. They did not succumb to grief and hopelessness. Many developed nations are indirectly funding the racist project of Israel even after it is labelled as an 'apartheid state' and is committing heinous crimes according to international law. But all the support Israel receives from the rest of the world does not kill the Palestinian spirit; they fight for their rights and hope to free Palestine one day. "Hope is not a topic, It's not a theory. It's a talent." (167). Wherever in the world they are, they strive to free their motherland from the racist clutches of Zionists.

Conclusion

Injustice in Palestine is not just history; it has continued unhindered over the decades following 1948 and is still going on. Palestinians worldwide resist the unjustified, inhuman occupation of Israel by all means possible. They find defiance in every single move against Israel and those supporting them. Susan Abulhawa's *The Blue Between Sky and Water* sketches the lives of distraught Palestinian refugees in the Gaza strip. Amidst the horrors of frequent wars and the siege enforced by Israel, the inhabitants of refugee camp in Gaza strip navigate their daily lives with much difficulty. Nevertheless, they do not let Israel wipe them out-keeping alive the spirit of freedom and homeland in their hearts and never letting the world forget. Enduring the hardest to exist, their lives are the Palestinians' defence against the Zionist dream of an Arab free nation. When unable to defeat Israel by other means, their existence is their loudest resistance to one of world's gravest injustice.

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