

Book Review of Susan Abualhawa's *The Blue Between the Sky and Water*

قراءة في رواية سوزان أبو الهوى "الأزرق بين السماء و الماء".

Dr. Shamenaz Bano<sup>1</sup>

Susan Abulhawa is a Palestinian American writer; known for her best- selling novel, *Mornings in Jenin* has now come up with another masterpiece novel, *The Blue Between the Sky and Water*, which deals with the same theme as in her previous novel; the forceful creation of the State of Israel by inflicting holocaust on the innocent native Palestinians who were displaced from their ancestral home and were compelled to live a life of refugees throughout their lives. The novel is the story of four generations, beginning from Um Mamdouh, a widow and ending with Nur, her great granddaughter. The story begins in Beit Daras, a rural Palestinian village near Gaza in the year 1947, where Baraka family lived comprising of a widow, Um Mamdouh and her three children. The eldest daughter, Nazmiyah 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 tends to the village bees for their living. The family was living a happy life in the village before the tragedy broke on their village, as the following lines in the novel indicate:

*Those were perhaps the happiest days of the Baraka's lives together.*

*Um Mamdouh was respected, Mamdouh was happy in his job of keeping bees, and Nazmiyah became dreamy, looking prettier than ever. (21)*

But these 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 Britishers. It was a forceful creation by inflicting holocaust on the Palestinians. These immigrants Jews which came from Europe and do not belong to the land 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 but the issue has been not resolved. The pain of leaving one's own ancestral home forcefully is very realistically portrayed by the novelist.

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In the novel, the protagonist, Nazmeyah was a young bride when she had to flee away from her village along with her family, relatives, neighbours and many other native people leaving 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 killed 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. Once when she got a call from her brother from Kuwait who told her that he was moving to North Carolina, America and one of her son was already engaged and was planning to go to Saudi Arabia for work. In this way, her family was dispersing in various places as in the same was her country, Palestine was also dispersing.

On the other hand, Nur, granddaughter of Nazmeyah's brother, Mamdouh who was born in America but destiny brings 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 nicely 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; disposed and disinherited and living away from their native place they are not constantly in touch with their land, culture and heritage. Abulhawa herself is a fine example of such kind of people but still Palestine lives in the heart of many such people and they are always ready to serve their motherland in any form.

Nur falls in love with a married who later ditched him and she followed him to Gaza but at the same with the motive to serve her people there. She had mismatched eyes like her grandfather's sister, Miriam and so Nazmeyah 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 Nazmeyeh daughter's 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 an 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; Nazmeyeh was able to recognize her by her mismatched eyes.

So, the central characters of the novel are two strong female characters Nazmeyeh, a young bride who has to leave her village BeitDaras and flee to Gaza where she lived her entire life looking after her family as a matriarch and her American immigrant brother's granddaughter Nur Valdez, who visited Gaza though for humanitarian cause but discovered her roots there. Though the story of the novel revolves around Nazmeyah and Nur but there are many other minor female characters

in the novels who have exhibited their courage in living in a place which is called as “world’s biggest open air prison”. 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)

Indeed it is their courage, which is their unifying force to fight in such an adverse circumstance of being displaced from their own soil because of the Zionist colonial settler who called themselves as “God chosen People”. So the novel tells the story of the exiled Palestinians who had to flee from their family and ancestral home due to political and other reasons. Their invisible physical scars are penned down by the Abulhawa in the form of novel.

In the Prologue of the book, Abulhawa has also discussed about the rise of Islamist groups in the late 1970s and ‘80s in the political scene of Palestine as a counterweight on Yassir Arafat and his Fateh party as it was very well supported by Israel. This was done with a motive to weaken the freedom movement of Palestine launched by Arafat as he had a fairly secular vision. This Islamist group is now known as Hamas and which is radical in nature sticking to religion as a primary motive concerned. The novel in a sense also discusses political views of Abulhawa concerning her country.

The narrative technique of Abulhawa is highly praiseworthy, the way she narrate any incident attracts attention of the readers making it spontaneous and natural. She also draws her women characters in all novels very strongly, be it *Mornings in Jenin* or *The Blue Between the Sky and Water*. This novel proves that Abulhawa is becoming master in the art of narrative with novel by novel. This is the greatness of Susan Abulhawa’s narrative technique and characterization and which is displayed in all her novels whether it is *Mornings in Jenin* or *The Blue Between the Sky and Water*. She is becoming master in the art of narrative with novel by novel as compare to her previous novel; in this novel we see everything in a more clear way.

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 are being occupied by migrants coming from Europe which don’t belong to the land.

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