



Art as Symbolic Resistance in Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin*

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Abstract

This article examines Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin* (2010) through the lens of cultural resistance. It argues that Abulhawa utilizes the novel as a medium to counter the systematic erasure of Palestinian identity by positioning storytelling, iconography, and artistic preservation as subversive political tools. By analyzing the roles of oral history, poetic discourse, and material culture, this study demonstrates how artistic expression functions as a primary mode of survival—a concept defined as *Sumud*—against geopolitical displacement. The study concludes that Abulhawa's narrative reclamation serves as a "virtual homeland" that persists despite physical occupation.

Keywords: Palestinian Literature, Cultural Resistance, Susan Abulhawa, Memory Studies, Post-colonialism, Gendered Resistance.

Introduction

The artistic expression in conflict zones serves as a powerful medium for documenting trauma, preserving collective memory, and resisting oppression through literature, visual arts, performance, and music, artists from war affected regions transforms personal and collective suffering into narratives that challenge dominant historical discourses to provide psychological healing and foster social and political activism. By analysing the interplay between art and trauma in conflict zone narratives, this study highlights the role of creative expression as both a coping mechanism and a form of resistance shaping how societies remember, process, and respond to violence.

In the discourse of geopolitical conflict, the struggle for land is inextricably tied to what Edward Said famously termed the "permission to narrate" (Said 27). Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin* (2010) functions as a sophisticated literary intervention in this war of narratives. Spanning four generations of the Abulheja family, the novel moves from the agrarian peace of Ein Hod to the claustrophobic resilience of the Jenin refugee camp. This article explores how Abulhawa's characters utilize art—not merely as an aesthetic pursuit, but as a mode of "active memory" that challenges official state histories and asserts a continuous cultural presence.

This study utilizes the concept of **Narrative Sovereignty**, suggesting that for marginalized populations, the act of telling one's own story is a foundational step in decolonization.

- **Mnemonic Resistance:** Drawing on the works of Frantz Fanon, this paper examines how reclaiming the "image of the self" through art counters the dehumanization inherent in colonial structures (Fanon 210).
- **The Concept of *Sumud*:** Central to the analysis is the Palestinian concept of *Sumud* (steadfastness), which Abulhawa elevates from political endurance to an artistic practice.

Modalities of Artistic Resistance

1. The Oral Archive: Storytelling as Genealogy

In the refugee camp, the Abulheja family maintains a "living archive" through speech. Because physical records were destroyed during the 1948 *Nakba*, the spoken word becomes the only indestructible deed to the land.

- **The Patriarch's Legacy:** Yehya's insistence on recounting the history of the olive groves anchors the family's identity to the soil. As the narrator notes, "the history of the land was written in the scars on his hands" (Abulhawa 14).
- **Bedtime Stories as Cartography:** The novel posits that storytelling creates a mental map for the dispossessed: "The story of Ein Hod was the bedtime story of every child... We inhaled the scent of lemons through our parents' words before we ever touched the earth" (Abulhawa 52).

2. The Iconography of the Olive Tree

Abulhawa treats the olive tree not merely as flora, but as a central artistic motif representing Palestinian longevity. The meticulous care provided to the groves is presented as a ritualized performance of belonging. When the trees are uprooted, Abulhawa depicts it as a "cultural massacre," suggesting that the destruction of the tree is an attempt to erase the "visual art" of the Palestinian landscape.

3. Material Culture: *Tatreez* and the Domestic Arts

Resistance in the novel is frequently feminized through the preservation of material culture.

- **Embroidery as Text:** Traditional embroidery (*Tatreez*) serves as a visual language. Each stitch represents a specific village and history, acting as a wearable archive of identity that survives exile (Abulhawa 112).

Ritual as Art: Abulhawa describes the morning coffee ritual and the maintenance of a clean home amidst the rubble of Jenin as a "sacred defiance" (88). Beauty, in this context, is a refusal to be reduced to the status of a "refugee." **The Art of *Tatreez* (Embroidery):**

Abulhawa utilizes the *thobe* (traditional dress) as a canvas of resistance. For the character Dalia, the patterns are not decorative; they are a coded language of geography. As scholar Hanadi Al-Samman notes, Palestinian women's embroidery serves as a "topographic map of a lost landscape" (Al-Samman 45). Abulhawa writes:

"Each stitch was a defiance. Dalia's needle moved with the precision of a surgeon, recreating the cypress trees and the grapes of Hebron on a piece of fabric. If they took the land, she would wear the land on her chest" (Abulhawa 112).

Linguistic Resistance: The Untranslatable and the Poetic

A critical layer of resistance in the novel is Abulhawa's use of language. While written in English, the novel breathes through an Arabic rhythmic structure, creating a "hybridized aesthetic."

The Refusal of Translation:

By maintaining terms like *Nakba*, *Sumud*, and *Habibi* without immediate over-explanation, Abulhawa forces the non-Arab reader into a position of "cultural humility." This mirrors what post-colonial theorist Ashcroft calls "metonymic resistance," where the language itself refuses to be fully consumed by the colonizer's tongue (Ashcroft 52).

The Influence of Mahmoud Darwish:

The novel's prose often functions as a long-form poem, echoing the motifs of the Palestinian National Poet, Mahmoud Darwish. Abulhawa's descriptions of the "morning" in Jenin reflect Darwish's insistence that "the poem is a tool of return." When Amal reflects on her father's disappearance, the prose shifts into a lyrical mourning:

"He was a man made of soil and poetry, and when they took him, the earth in Jenin turned to ash. We did not just lose a father; we lost the rhythm of our songs" (Abulhawa 156).

The Visual Record: Photography and the "Crisis of Truth"

Abulhawa explores how the visual arts—specifically photography—can be manipulated or reclaimed. The character of David/Ismael, the "lost son" raised as an Israeli, represents a fracture in the visual record.

- **The Stolen Image:** David's identity is a "retouched photograph." His biological history is erased to fit a different national narrative.
- **The Photographic Proof:** Later in the novel, when photographs of the original Abulheja family are produced, they function as "indictments." The art of the photograph becomes a courtroom of memory, proving that the Palestinian presence was not a "mirage" but a documented reality.

Gendered Resistance: The Domestic as a Political Site

Resistance is often conceptualized as a masculine, public act (protests, strikes, militancy). However, Abulhawa redefines resistance through the "art of the domestic."

The Morning Ritual:

The title *Mornings in Jenin* refers to the shared morning coffee between Yehya and his sons. Abulhawa frames this ritual as a performance:

"The smell of cardamom was our first flag. Before the soldiers woke, before the sirens began, the steam from the coffee pot was our silent declaration that we were still here, still breathing, still human" (Abulhawa 88).

By aestheticizing the mundane, Abulhawa argues that maintaining a sense of "home" in a refugee camp is the ultimate creative act of defiance.

The Semiotics of Displacement: Material Art as Evidence

In *Mornings in Jenin*, physical objects are elevated to the status of sacred artifacts. Abulhawa uses the "art of the object" to ground a displaced people in a tangible history. The protagonist, Amal, represents the ultimate synthesis of art and resistance. Her journey from a traumatized orphan to a writer in the United States signifies the transition from passive suffering to active testimony. Her writing becomes the "bridge" between the localized pain of Jenin and the global consciousness. She reflects: "I wrote because the world was deaf, and ink was the only way to make a sound that wouldn't dissipate in the wind" (Abulhawa 218). This meta-narrative suggests that the novel itself is the artifact of resistance it describes.

Conclusion

Mornings in Jenin demonstrates that while military force can occupy physical space, it cannot occupy the "imaginative space" of a people. Through the reclamation of history, the sanctification of the land's icons, and the formalization of trauma into text, Abulhawa proves that art is the ultimate fortress. The novel asserts that as long as the story is told, the "morning" of the title remains a possibility rather than a memory. Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin* concludes that the most effective form of resistance is the refusal to be silenced. Through the interweaving of oral history, material iconography, and poetic prose, she constructs a "literary Intifada." The novel itself becomes the "Key" for the next generation—a way to unlock a history that political borders seek to keep closed. As Amal finally realizes, "the story is the only thing the bulldozers cannot reach" (Abulhawa 312).

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