

GENDERED VIOLENCE, COLONIAL TRAUMA, AND FEMALE RESILIENCE IN SUSAN ABULHAWA'S *THE BLUE BETWEEN SKY AND WATER*

Diana Singnarpi

Assistant Professor

Dept of English

Rabindranath Tagore University, Hojai, Assam

dianasingnarpi@gmail.com

Dr. Shreyashi Mukherjee

Assistant Professor

Dept of English

Assam University Diphu Campus, Assam

Abstract

Susan Abulhawa's *The Blue Between Sky and Water* (2015) is a stunning portrayal of Palestinian history through the lives of four generations of women influenced by relocation, occupation, and exile. While the novel has been widely analyzed in terms of memory, identity, and the Palestinian Nakba, its examination of gendered violence warrants further scholarly investigation. This study investigates how Abulhawa portrays violence against women as a multifaceted problem involving colonial dominance, military occupation, sexual assault, displacement, domestic oppression, and psychological trauma. Drawing on postcolonial feminist theories by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and Cynthia Enloe, the study contends that the novel illustrates the connection of patriarchy and settler colonialism in the production of women's suffering. At the same time, Abulhawa questions victim-centered narratives by portraying women as active agents of survival, cultural preservation, and resistance. The novel reveals via characters such as Nazmiyeh, Nur, and Alwan that female fortitude emerges not in the face of violence, but rather through the translation of pain into memory, solidarity, and collective endurance. Finally, *The Blue Between Sky and Water* reimagines resistance via ordinary acts of caregiving, storytelling, and survival, highlighting women as essential protagonists in Palestinian cultural and political history.

Keywords: Gendered Violence, Postcolonial Feminism, Female Agency, Colonial Trauma, Resistance

Introduction

Contemporary Palestinian literature has increasingly foregrounded the experiences of women as essential to understanding the social and political consequences of displacement and occupation. Among contemporary Palestinian writers, Susan Abulhawa occupies a significant position for her nuanced portrayal of Palestinian history through intimate family narratives. Her second novel, *The Blue Between Sky and Water*, traces the experiences of the Baraka family from the destruction of Beit Daras during the Nakba of 1948 to contemporary Gaza and the Palestinian diaspora. The novel depicts the devastating consequences of colonial violence while simultaneously exploring the lives, desires, fears, and resilience of Palestinian women. The narrative is fundamentally centered on women, presenting their experiences not as peripheral to history but as the primary lens through which history is remembered and transmitted. The novel has been widely recognized as a multigenerational story of Palestinian women and survival.

One of the most significant themes in the novel is gendered violence. Abulhawa demonstrates that violence against women cannot be separated from the broader realities of colonial occupation and displacement. Women

experience violence in multiple forms: sexual assault, forced displacement, poverty, social restrictions, emotional suffering, and intergenerational trauma. However, the novel also reveals how women transform these experiences into forms of resistance and cultural continuity. This paper investigates the representation of gendered violence in *The Blue Between Sky and Water* through a postcolonial feminist framework. It argues that the novel portrays Palestinian women as subjects who experience a double colonization—one produced by settler colonial violence and another by patriarchal social structures. Yet Abulhawa simultaneously challenges narratives of female victimhood by emphasizing women's agency, resilience, and collective strength.

Review of Literature

Bell hooks' *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* are a collection of essays that explores the intersections of race, gender, class, identity, and cultural resistance. Hooks examines how marginalized communities resist systems of domination through cultural practices, memory, storytelling, and the creation of alternative spaces of belonging. The book challenges dominant narratives that silence oppressed voices and argues that culture can function as a powerful site of resistance and transformation. Through bell hooks's concept of homeplace, *The Blue Between Sky and Water* reveals how Palestinian women transform domestic and familial spaces into sites of cultural preservation and resistance. The Baraka women sustain collective memory, nurture communal bonds, and resist the erasure of Palestinian identity, demonstrating that home survives not only in geography but also in memory, storytelling, and intergenerational care.

Chanda Talpade Mohanty's *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* is a landmark work in transnational feminist theory. In this book, Mohanty critiques Western feminist representations of women in the Global South and advocates for a feminist politics based on solidarity, historical specificity, and social justice rather than universal assumptions about women's experiences. Through Chandra Talpade Mohanty's decolonial feminist framework, *The Blue Between Sky and Water* presents Palestinian women not as passive victims of conflict but as active agents who preserve memory, sustain communities, and resist colonial erasure. The novel demonstrates that gendered resistance emerges through everyday acts of survival, caregiving, storytelling, and cultural preservation, thereby challenging homogenizing representations of Third World women.

Liyana Kayali's *Palestinian Women and Popular Resistance* explores Palestinian women's views of popular resistance in the West Bank and examines factors shaping the nature and extent of their involvement. Despite the signing of the Oslo peace accords in 1993 and 1995, the Occupied Palestinian Territories in the contemporary period have experienced tightened Israeli occupational control and worsening political, humanitarian, security, and economic conditions. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted with women in the West Bank, this book looks at how Palestinian women in the post-Oslo period perceive, negotiate, and enact resistance. It demonstrates that, far from being 'apathetic', as some observers have charged, Palestinian women remain deeply committed to the goals of national liberation and wish to contribute to an effective popular resistance movement. Yet many Palestinian women feel alienated from prevailing forms of collective popular resistance in the OPT due to the low levels of legitimacy they accord them. This alienation has been made stark by the gendered and intersecting impacts of expanding settler-colonialism, tightening spatial control, a professionalised and depoliticised civil society, reinforced patriarchal constraints, Israeli and Palestinian Authority (PA) repression and violence, and a deteriorating economy - all of which have raised the barriers Palestinian women face to active participation.

Sanabil Mohsin, Prof Dr Mazhar Hayat and Saira Akhter's A Study of Transgenerational Trauma in Abulhawa's *The Blue Between Sky and Water* examines the concept of **transgenerational trauma** within Susan Abulhawa's novel, *The Blue between Sky and Water*. By applying Meera Atkinson's theoretical framework, the authors explore how the **catastrophic events of the 1948 Nakba** created enduring psychological wounds that are inherited by subsequent Palestinian generations. The study analyzes the **Baraka**

family's experiences across four generations, highlighting how displacement, violence, and exile manifest as persistent collective suffering. The researchers conclude that the narrative serves as a testament to **Palestinian resilience** and the ongoing struggle for autonomy amidst systemic oppression. Ultimately, the source argues that literature effectively illustrates how **historical grievances** and cultural circumstances shape the mental well-being of descendants of war-torn nations.

Theoretical Framework: Postcolonial Feminism and Gendered Violence

Postcolonial feminist theory provides an important framework for understanding the intersection of gender, colonialism, and power. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues that the voices of colonized women are frequently marginalized within both colonial and nationalist discourses. Chandra Talpade Mohanty similarly critiques homogenized representations of Third World women as passive victims, emphasizing the need to understand women's experiences within specific historical and political contexts.

In the context of Palestine, gendered violence emerges through the convergence of military occupation and patriarchal structures. Cynthia Enloe observes that women's bodies often become symbolic sites upon which political conflicts are enacted. Sexual violence, displacement, and social control become mechanisms through which power is exercised over colonized populations. Abulhawa's novel exemplifies these theoretical concerns by illustrating how Palestinian women navigate both colonial violence and gendered expectations. The novel demonstrates that women's experiences cannot be understood solely through the categories of nationalism or feminism; rather, they emerge at the intersection of both.

Psychological Violence and Childhood Trauma

While *The Blue Between Sky and Water* vividly depicts the physical violence inflicted upon Palestinian women under settler colonialism, Susan Abulhawa also exposes the less visible yet equally devastating forms of psychological violence. Through the character of Nur, the novel demonstrates that violence extends beyond bodily injury into emotional neglect, manipulation, abandonment, and childhood sexual abuse. Abulhawa reveals that psychological violence functions as an enduring mechanism of domination because it destroys a child's sense of trust, identity, and emotional security long before physical wounds become visible. As feminist scholars argue, violence against women and children is not confined to physical assault but also includes emotional abuse, coercive control, neglect, and psychological intimidation that shape the victim's subjectivity (Enloe 142; Mohanty 78).

Nur's childhood is defined by repeated experiences of abandonment and emotional instability. After the deaths of her father Muhammad and grandfather Mamdouh, she is placed in foster care while social services attempt to locate her biological mother. The novel emphasizes that Nur is denied the opportunity to process grief because the adults around her withhold the truth. She continues praying for her grandfather's recovery until another foster child bluntly tells her, "Your grandfather is dead. He ain't getting better, stupid. Grow up!... And the mean girl's words would echo forever in Nur's heart" (Abulhawa 78). This moment illustrates what trauma theorist Cathy Caruth describes as the delayed recognition of traumatic experience. Trauma is not experienced fully at the moment of loss but returns later through repeated psychological disturbances because the original event exceeds the child's capacity for comprehension (Caruth 4–5). Nur's inability to mourn properly leaves her suspended between hope and grief, creating an emotional vacuum that continues throughout her childhood. Abulhawa further demonstrates that institutional care cannot compensate for emotional deprivation. Although the foster system provides physical shelter, Nur experiences isolation, humiliation, and insecurity. Sharing a room with older foster children, she becomes vulnerable to emotional abuse, waking to discover that "twice she woke up to find writing all over her body" (81). Such episodes symbolize the absence of bodily autonomy and personal dignity, foreshadowing the more severe violations she later endures. Childhood trauma studies emphasize that repeated experiences of insecurity undermine the development of self-worth and trust, making children particularly susceptible to subsequent exploitation.

The psychological neglect intensifies after Nur is reunited with her biological mother. Rather than providing emotional protection, her mother repeatedly invalidates her feelings and needs. Abulhawa carefully portrays emotional abuse through ordinary domestic interactions rather than spectacular acts of violence. Nur learns of her mother's pregnancy and impending marriage indirectly by "plucking bits from conversations" (83), revealing her exclusion from decisions that directly affect her life. Even seemingly trivial incidents become psychologically significant. When Nur carefully selects only four inexpensive items from a clothing catalogue because she fears appearing "greedy," her mother purchases numerous items for herself and the unborn child while claiming that Nur's selections are unavailable. When Nur expresses disappointment, her mother dismisses her emotions by calling her a "crybaby" (85). Such behaviour exemplifies emotional invalidation, a form of psychological violence in which the victim's emotions are systematically denied or ridiculed. Over time, this process convinces Nur that her emotional needs are illegitimate.

Abulhawa also employs the recurring image of Nur's "bellyache" to illustrate the psychosomatic consequences of childhood trauma. Unable to articulate her emotional suffering, Nur experiences physical pain that repeatedly manifests as headaches, stomach aches, and fever. She pleads, "Mommy, my stomach and my head hurt really bad" (85), yet her mother's response is one of irritation rather than concern. Trauma scholars have observed that children frequently express psychological distress through bodily symptoms because traumatic experiences often remain beyond linguistic expression (Caruth 4). Nur's body therefore becomes the site where unspoken trauma is registered, transforming psychological violence into physical suffering.

One of the novel's most disturbing representations of psychological violence appears in Sam's grooming of Nur. Abulhawa demonstrates that sexual abuse rarely begins with physical assault alone but is preceded by emotional manipulation and calculated psychological control. Sam deliberately exploits Nur's emotional deprivation by presenting himself as the only adult who understands her. After purchasing the clothes her mother refused to buy, he establishes a relationship based upon secrecy, asking whether she is "a tattler or a secret keeper" (86). Proudly identifying herself as "the best secret keeper," Nur unknowingly internalizes the silence that enables continued abuse. Feminist analyses of child sexual abuse consistently demonstrate that perpetrators manipulate children's desire for affection, approval, and belonging before initiating physical exploitation. Sam's manipulation illustrates how emotional neglect creates conditions in which abuse becomes possible.

The novel further explores the internalization of shame through Nur's private notebook, *Jiddo and Me*. Initially conceived as a record of qualities that would make her worthy of love, the notebook gradually becomes a catalogue of self-condemnation. Following repeated abuse, Nur adds the words "Dirty" and "Bad" beneath the survival rules "Never Tattle" and "Never Squeal" (88). These entries reveal the psychological success of coercive abuse: Nur no longer identifies Sam as the source of wrongdoing but instead accepts responsibility herself. Trauma psychologists note that abused children frequently internalize guilt because self-blame offers the illusion of control in situations where genuine agency is absent. Abulhawa portrays this tragic psychological transformation with remarkable subtlety, demonstrating that emotional violence reshapes identity itself.

Nur's mother's behaviour further compounds this trauma through systematic emotional cruelty. When Nur develops a high fever and the school nurse requests that she be taken home, her mother publicly expresses concern but privately accuses her of seeking attention. Gripping the child's arm violently, she declares, "There's nothing you won't do for attention!... THIS IS MY FUCKING WEDDING. I WILL NOT ALLOW YOU TO MAKE IT ALL ABOUT YOU!" (89). Rather than recognizing signs of illness or abuse, she interprets Nur's suffering as manipulation. Such responses exemplify what psychologists describe as emotional neglect, whereby caregivers consistently fail to respond appropriately to a child's emotional and physical needs. The result is profound psychological insecurity, as the child learns that expressions of pain will be met not with comfort but with punishment.

Abulhawa also depicts how trauma isolates children from potential sources of rescue. The arrival of Tío Santiago represents one of the few moments in which Nur experiences genuine affection, described as a "vibrant blue moment" (91). Yet her trauma prevents disclosure. When Santiago gently asks whether anyone has hurt her, Nur remains silent because she has completely internalized her identity as the "Keeper of Seekrets." The novel thereby illustrates how grooming transforms silence into a survival strategy. The psychological barriers constructed by abuse become more effective than physical imprisonment because they prevent victims from seeking help even when opportunities arise.

Nur's eventual rescue occurs only after her physical condition becomes life-threatening. Medical examination reveals not only a severe kidney infection but also evidence that "her vagina was bruised inside" (96). Significantly, Abulhawa portrays disclosure not through verbal testimony alone but through drawing. Unable to articulate her experiences verbally, Nur communicates the abuse visually, believing she must draw "what she had done to Sam," a misunderstanding that causes her social worker Nzinga to cry (96). This heartbreaking episode demonstrates the extent to which psychological manipulation has reversed moral responsibility in the child's mind. Instead of recognizing herself as the victim, Nur perceives herself as the perpetrator. Such inversion represents one of the most destructive consequences of childhood sexual abuse.

Beyond Nur's individual experience, Abulhawa situates psychological violence within the broader framework of Palestinian historical trauma. The novel suggests that colonial violence does not end with displacement or military occupation but continues through intergenerational emotional inheritance. The Baraka women transmit memories of exile, bereavement, and dispossession alongside stories of survival. As Marianne Hirsch argues in her concept of postmemory, descendants often inherit the emotional consequences of traumatic events they did not directly experience, creating identities shaped by memories that are both personal and collective (Hirsch 5). Although Nur grows up in the United States, her emotional world remains inseparable from the history of Palestine, illustrating how displacement produces transnational forms of psychological trauma.

From a postcolonial feminist perspective, Abulhawa reveals that women perform the invisible emotional labour of preserving family memory while simultaneously carrying the psychological burden of violence. Their suffering is rarely acknowledged within nationalist narratives that privilege military conflict over domestic trauma. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues, feminist analysis must recognize the interconnected structures of colonial domination and patriarchy that shape women's lived experiences (Mohanty 67–80). Similarly, Cynthia Enloe demonstrates that militarized societies normalize forms of emotional and domestic violence that remain politically invisible (Enloe 139–146). Abulhawa extends these insights by showing that the most enduring wounds of occupation are often psychological rather than physical.

Ultimately, *The Blue Between Sky and Water* redefines violence as an emotional, psychological, and intergenerational phenomenon. Through Nur's childhood, Abulhawa demonstrates that trauma is transmitted through abandonment, silence, manipulation, emotional neglect, and sexual abuse, leaving scars that persist long after visible injuries disappear. By foregrounding psychological violence alongside colonial oppression, the novel challenges conventional representations of conflict that privilege public acts of warfare while overlooking the intimate suffering experienced by women and children. Abulhawa thus offers a profoundly feminist critique of violence, revealing that the struggle for Palestinian survival is fought not only in contested territories but also within memory, family relationships, and the wounded interior lives of children.

Gendered Discrimination and Abuse

Susan Abulhawa exposes the intersection of gender discrimination, economic precarity, and colonial violence through Alwan's experience of infertility and marital abuse, demonstrating how patriarchal norms intensify women's suffering during conditions of occupation. Although Alwan's repeated miscarriages result from circumstances beyond her control, her reproductive capacity becomes the primary measure of her value as a wife. Internalizing patriarchal expectations, she even permits Abdel Qader to marry a second wife provided he

does not divorce her, revealing how deeply social constructions of womanhood equate female identity with motherhood. Her decision to conceal the onset of labor—"She refused to go to the hospital, insisting on privacy in another hour of misfortune" (Abulhawa 123)—reflects not merely personal grief but also the anticipation of communal judgment and marital disappointment. Abulhawa thereby illustrates how reproductive failure becomes a source of psychological isolation for women, who are expected to bear emotional suffering silently. As Cynthia Enloe observes, **"women become the symbolic bearers of the nation and the reproducers of the community"** (Enloe 165). Militarized societies frequently reinforce conservative gender ideologies in which women are valued primarily through their reproductive and domestic roles, making the female body a site upon which national, familial, and patriarchal anxieties converge. Under such conditions, infertility ceases to be understood as a medical issue and instead becomes a moral and social failure attributed exclusively to women. Similarly, Deniz Kandiyoti argues that women often negotiate patriarchal systems through what she terms the **"patriarchal bargain,"** adapting to oppressive gender norms in order to secure limited social protection and acceptance (Kandiyoti 275). Alwan's willingness to accept a second wife rather than risk divorce exemplifies such a patriarchal bargain, exposing the internalization of gendered expectations that reduce women's worth to motherhood.

The novel further demonstrates how colonial occupation exacerbates domestic gender inequality by transforming masculine humiliation into violence against women. Israel's blockade and restrictions on Gaza's fishing industry deprive Abdel Qader of his livelihood, forcing him to stand in humiliating UN food-ration queues that challenge his socially constructed identity as the family's provider. Rather than recognizing the structural violence responsible for his economic dispossession, he redirects his frustration toward Alwan, whose perceived reproductive "failure" becomes the explanation for his wounded masculinity. Abulhawa observes that "His shame shape-shifted to anger, and Alwan was the easiest target. Her weakness and inability to deliver healthy children sooner was to blame" (135). Abdel Qader's reasoning reflects the patriarchal logic that defines women primarily through fertility while absolving men of reproductive responsibility, despite his earlier suspicion that "his seed, not Alwan's womb, might be the problem" (122). His resentment culminates in verbal abuse, emotional neglect, and the expectation that his pregnant wife carry heavy sacks of food despite her history of miscarriages, exposing how domestic labor remains feminized even under conditions of physical vulnerability. Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues that feminist scholarship must examine women's lives **"through the complex interconnections between first- and third-world economies and the profound effect of this on the lives of women"** (Mohanty 231). Likewise, she warns against reducing women to passive victims and instead emphasizes the structural conditions that shape gendered oppression (Mohanty 30–31). Alwan's silent endurance of physical pain while protecting her unborn child illustrates this gendered expectation of self-sacrifice.

Abulhawa also reveals how patriarchal violence operates through emotional coercion rather than only physical assault. Abdel Qader's humiliation extends beyond his treatment of Alwan to his son Khaled, whom he strikes for listening to Western music, suggesting that colonial power simultaneously destabilizes masculine authority within the household. Unable to challenge Israeli military domination, he reasserts control over the only sphere where authority remains available—the family. Yet the novel complicates a simplistic portrayal of male brutality by exposing Abdel Qader's internal conflict. After contemplating suicide at sea, he returns overwhelmed by shame and unable to reconcile his sense of failure with his responsibilities as husband and father. Nevertheless, this psychological suffering does not excuse the violence inflicted upon Alwan; instead, it demonstrates how colonial domination and patriarchy become mutually reinforcing systems. The emotional climax occurs when Alwan, fully aware that her husband blames her for his degradation, approaches him with extraordinary humility: "Years into their marriage, with one child and too many miscarriages to show for it, Alwan understood that her husband blamed her for the degradation he felt" (137). She apologizes for circumstances beyond her control and pleads, "Hit me if you want...but don't turn away from me," revealing

the extent to which patriarchal abuse conditions women to seek emotional acceptance even through self-sacrifice. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak famously argues that **"the subaltern cannot speak"** because the voices of colonized women are repeatedly mediated and erased by dominant structures of power (Spivak 308). Alwan's silence and willingness to absorb blame illustrate how patriarchal discourse compels women to negotiate oppression by accommodating rather than openly resisting dominant structures. Likewise, bell hooks reminds us that **"domination is most effective when the dominated are taught to internalize the values of the dominant"** (hooks 15). Abulhawa exposes precisely this process as Alwan comes to believe that she is personally responsible for her husband's suffering despite being herself a victim of both colonial and patriarchal oppression.

The novel also resonates with Rosemary Sayigh, who observes that Palestinian women's lives have historically been shaped by the dual burden of national struggle and domestic responsibility, requiring them to sustain family and community even under conditions of displacement and occupation (Sayigh 147). Rather than presenting Alwan as merely a passive victim, Abulhawa exposes the tragic social conditions that normalize such submission, compelling readers to recognize that domestic abuse in the novel emerges not solely from individual cruelty but from the convergence of settler-colonial dispossession, economic collapse, and deeply entrenched patriarchal ideologies. Through Alwan's experience, *The Blue Between Sky and Water* demonstrates that gendered violence is sustained by both private familial hierarchies and broader political structures, making women's bodies the primary sites where colonial oppression and patriarchy intersect.

Gendered Deception and Female Vulnerability

Susan Abulhawa's *The Blue Between Sky and Water* demonstrates that violence against women is not confined to physical assault or military occupation but also extends into intimate relationships through emotional manipulation, deception, and unequal gendered power. Nur's relationship with Dr. Jamal Musmar reveals how patriarchal privilege enables men to manipulate women's emotions while protecting their own social respectability. Unlike the overt brutality experienced by earlier generations of Palestinian women, Nur becomes a victim of psychological and emotional violence disguised as love. Abulhawa thereby expands the understanding of gendered violence by illustrating that deception itself functions as a form of patriarchal domination, particularly when men exploit women's emotional vulnerability without accepting responsibility for the consequences.

The relationship begins through calculated concealment. At the Palestine Children's Relief Fund fundraiser in the United States, Jamal deliberately introduces himself simply as "Jamal" instead of revealing that he is the renowned psychologist Dr. Musmar, the keynote speaker whom Nur has admired professionally. His concealment immediately creates an unequal relationship based upon incomplete information. Nur believes she is speaking casually with another volunteer, unaware that he already possesses knowledge about her professional interests and admiration. Only when the committee president publicly addresses him does Nur realize his true identity, leaving her embarrassed and emotionally exposed. Jamal later apologizes through email, writing, "I want to apologize, sincerely, for not telling you immediately who I was" (Abulhawa 168). His apology appears sincere, yet it simultaneously initiates deeper emotional intimacy. By presenting himself as humble and remorseful, Jamal transforms deception into an opportunity for emotional closeness rather than accountability. Cynthia Enloe reminds us that "the personal is international" because intimate relationships are shaped by broader political and patriarchal power structures (Enloe 3). Jamal's deliberate concealment of his identity demonstrates how unequal power relations infiltrate private relationships, allowing male authority to manipulate female trust.

The subsequent correspondence further illustrates emotional grooming through carefully chosen language. Jamal reassures Nur, "Please call me Jamal and please do not feel embarrassed. You were delightful and charming. Truly, I can't tell you how happy I was to have met you" (Abulhawa 169). Such statements cultivate emotional dependency by validating Nur's feelings while encouraging romantic expectations. Importantly,

Jamal never establishes clear emotional boundaries despite being a married man. His affectionate language creates the illusion of availability, encouraging Nur to imagine a future that he never explicitly promises yet consistently implies. Abulhawa thereby exposes how emotional manipulation often depends less upon direct lies than upon strategic omissions and calculated ambiguity.

Nur's arrival in Gaza exposes another layer of gendered deception. Waiting for her at the Rafah crossing, Jamal initially appears transformed, prompting Nur to remark upon his changed appearance. His casual response that his wife dislikes his untidy habits abruptly introduces the existence of his marriage into a relationship that had become emotionally intimate through months of correspondence. For Nur, "The word wife stepped gently into the space that Nur had made from letters and longings" (Abulhawa 170). The metaphor demonstrates how one revelation dismantles an emotional world painstakingly constructed through hope and imagination. Jamal's failure to disclose his marriage earlier represents not merely personal dishonesty but a gendered abuse of emotional trust, permitting Nur to invest emotionally in a relationship whose fundamental limitations he already understood. Deniz Kandiyoti observes that women often negotiate within "patriarchal bargains" that constrain their choices while rewarding male privilege (Kandiyoti 275). Nur unknowingly enters such a bargain, investing emotionally in a relationship whose terms Jamal alone controls.

The visit to Jamal's luxurious home further intensifies Nur's emotional humiliation. His elegant wife, Maisa, embodies social confidence and domestic legitimacy, while Nur becomes painfully conscious of her own perceived inadequacies. Abulhawa notes that Nur "managed to eke out a fake smile," while Hajje Nazmiyeh observed "insecurity and apology creep into Nur's posture." Faced with Maisa, "Nur was trying to shrink her tall, big woman self" (Abulhawa 186). The contrast reflects the internalized pressures women experience under patriarchal beauty standards and marital expectations. Nur instinctively compares herself with the socially legitimate wife, reinforcing her own sense of exclusion and emotional failure.

Significantly, Hajje Nazmiyeh immediately recognizes the unspoken dynamics operating beneath the surface. Drawing upon decades of lived experience, she interprets the invitation not as hospitality but as surveillance. She tells Nur, "That man was in love with you, and it is obvious his wife knows it... She wanted to check you out and make sure you saw how happy they are together" (Abulhawa 190). Nazmiyeh's insight reveals the gendered consequences of patriarchal relationships: rather than confronting her husband's emotional betrayal directly, Maisa assesses the perceived rival, while Nur becomes trapped within a competition she never consciously entered. Abulhawa thus demonstrates how patriarchal systems frequently position women against one another while leaving male authority fundamentally unchallenged.

The emotional manipulation reaches its climax when Jamal invites Nur to meet him secretly by the sea. His message that he is leaving his wife transforms long-suppressed hope into apparent certainty. Abulhawa writes that "The sudden intimacy of his words terrified and thrilled her" (Abulhawa 218). This emotional contradiction captures Nur's vulnerability. She recognizes the moral complexity of the situation yet cannot resist the promise of reciprocated love. Jamal's declaration functions as emotional coercion because it persuades Nur that their relationship possesses a legitimate future. Their subsequent intimacy is therefore founded not upon mutual transparency but upon promises that Jamal ultimately abandons.

Immediately after their encounter, Jamal withdraws emotionally, illustrating a classic pattern of manipulation. "The doctor had started to avoid her and would not write or return her calls" (Abulhawa 222). His silence inflicts psychological violence more devastating than direct rejection because it leaves Nur suspended between hope and abandonment. Emotional neglect becomes another instrument of patriarchal control, allowing Jamal to dictate the relationship's terms while denying Nur the dignity of honest communication.

Once again, Hajje Nazmiyeh serves as the novel's moral voice, warning Nur that emotional love cannot erase structural inequalities. She tells her, "You might love him, and he might love you, but he will break your life" (Abulhawa 228). Her warning reflects an understanding that patriarchal societies frequently judge women far more harshly than men for identical behavior. Jamal risks little beyond personal discomfort, whereas Nur risks

social reputation, professional credibility, emotional wellbeing, and ultimately motherhood. Nazmiyeh further emphasizes cultural realities by observing that Jamal's wife "will cut off his dick before she'd leave him or take another wife. Those people are not like us" (Abulhawa 228). Her remark highlights differences in class, family expectations, and social codes while underscoring that Jamal possesses privileges unavailable to Nur.

Despite these warnings, Nur continues the relationship, illustrating the powerful effects of emotional dependency. She deceives her family by claiming she is visiting patients in southern Gaza while secretly spending nights with Jamal in an apartment he has arranged. Abulhawa writes, "He said he wanted to wake up next to her, but they never slept and he left while the moon still reigned over a dark sky" (Abulhawa 232). The imagery symbolizes the transient nature of their relationship. Jamal enjoys emotional and sexual intimacy without accepting public responsibility, while Nur sacrifices honesty, family trust, and personal dignity for promises that remain unfulfilled.

Jamal's final letter exposes the profound asymmetry underlying the relationship. Declaring, "I am married to the only woman I have ever truly loved and am committing myself to rebuilding my relationship with her in the wake of my betrayal of her love and the family we created together" (Abulhawa 248), he reframes Nur not as a beloved partner but as a regrettable mistake. His language restores his identity as devoted husband while erasing the emotional reality he previously cultivated with Nur. Even more cruelly, he requests that she collect her belongings only during hours when he is absent and "home with his wife," reducing their shared intimacy to an administrative inconvenience. His emotional withdrawal demonstrates how patriarchal privilege enables men to rewrite narratives in ways that preserve their social respectability while abandoning women to bear the consequences alone. Judith Butler argues that lives become precarious when social structures fail to recognize vulnerability equally, leaving some individuals more exposed to abandonment and suffering than others (Butler 23). Jamal's disappearance exemplifies this unequal distribution of vulnerability, as he preserves his social position while Nur bears the emotional consequences alone.

Nur's response reveals the devastating psychological impact of gendered deception. She repeatedly rereads the letter, describing the need "to stab herself with every word... She needed to bleed to stop from calling or writing to him" (Abulhawa 248). Emotional pain becomes self-inflicted punishment, reflecting internalized blame rather than anger toward Jamal's deception. Discovering her missed menstrual period intensifies her despair, linking emotional betrayal with reproductive anxiety. Instead of receiving compassion or responsibility from Jamal, she receives complete silence. His refusal to respond transforms abandonment into psychological violence. The most devastating consequence appears in Nur's internal dialogue: "What a fool she was. How could she expect a man to love her when her own mother could not? ... There was nothing to love" (Abulhawa 255). Jamal's betrayal reactivates childhood wounds of maternal rejection, demonstrating how emotional violence often intersects with earlier trauma. Rather than merely ending a romantic relationship, his deception destroys Nur's fragile sense of self-worth. Through this psychological collapse, Abulhawa illustrates that emotional abuse extends beyond immediate heartbreak to reshape a woman's entire understanding of her own value.

Desperate for closure, Nur discovers that Jamal and his family have emigrated to Canada after celebrating a farewell party. He leaves Gaza—and Nur—without explanation, apology, or accountability. His disappearance symbolizes the privilege of masculine mobility, allowing him to escape the consequences of his actions while Nur remains trapped within emotional devastation. Abulhawa thereby reveals that gendered deception operates as a subtle yet powerful form of violence, one sustained not through physical force but through emotional exploitation, unequal social expectations, and patriarchal structures that protect male reputation while exposing women to shame, isolation, and psychological trauma. Susan Slyomovics and Suad Joseph observe that patriarchal systems frequently regulate women's emotional and familial lives while granting men greater social mobility and authority (Joseph and Slyomovics 8). Jamal's ability to leave Gaza, rebuild his marriage, and erase his relationship with Nur illustrates this gendered imbalance of accountability.

GENDERED VIOLENCE, COLONIAL TRAUMA, AND FEMALE RESILIENCE IN SUSAN ABULHAWA'S *THE BLUE BETWEEN SKY AND WATER*

Viewed through a postcolonial feminist framework, Nur's experience illustrates what Chandra Talpade Mohanty identifies as the intersection of gendered power and social structures, where women's agency is constrained by institutional and cultural inequalities. Likewise, Cynthia Enloe argues that intimate relationships are deeply political because patriarchal systems normalize unequal distributions of power and responsibility. Abulhawa's portrayal of Nur confirms these insights by demonstrating that emotional manipulation is not simply a private moral failure but a manifestation of broader gendered hierarchies. Consequently, *The Blue Between Sky and Water* broadens the discourse on gendered violence by showing that deception, abandonment, and emotional exploitation can wound women as profoundly as physical violence, leaving lasting scars upon identity, self-worth, and psychological wellbeing.

Conclusion

Susan Abulhawa's *The Blue Between Sky and Water* offers a profound exploration of gendered violence by revealing how settler colonialism, militarization, and patriarchy intersect to shape the lives of Palestinian women across generations. Rather than presenting violence as a series of isolated incidents, the novel demonstrates that sexual assault, psychological abuse, forced displacement, childhood trauma, and emotional deprivation are interconnected mechanisms through which colonial power seeks to dominate both bodies and memory. Women's suffering is therefore inseparable from the broader history of the Palestinian Nakba and its continuing legacy of dispossession and exile.

Through the experiences of Nazmiyeh, Nur, Mariam, the Beekeeper's Widow, and other women of the Baraka family, Abulhawa exposes the multiple dimensions of violence that remain overlooked in conventional narratives of political conflict. Sexual violence is portrayed as a deliberate strategy of humiliation and colonial domination, while psychological trauma emerges as an equally destructive consequence of displacement, abandonment, silence, and abuse. The novel demonstrates that the effects of violence extend far beyond the moment of physical injury, shaping identities, relationships, and memories across successive generations.

At the same time, Abulhawa refuses to reduce Palestinian women to passive victims. Drawing upon networks of care, familial affection, storytelling, motherhood, and communal solidarity, the women transform vulnerability into resilience. Their everyday acts of caregiving, remembrance, and emotional support become powerful forms of resistance against colonial fragmentation. Domestic spaces, interpersonal relationships, and cultural practices function as repositories of collective memory through which Palestinian identity survives despite exile and historical erasure. In this way, the novel expands the meaning of resistance beyond armed struggle to include the ordinary yet transformative labour of sustaining life, dignity, and hope.

Viewed through the theoretical perspectives of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Judith Butler, Cynthia Enloe, Cathy Caruth, Marianne Hirsch, and bell hooks, *The Blue Between Sky and Water* demonstrates that colonial violence operates simultaneously upon territory, the body, memory, and intimate social relationships. Yet it also reveals that resistance is equally multidimensional, emerging through women's agency, emotional endurance, and the preservation of cultural memory. The Baraka women become custodians of Palestinian history, ensuring that displacement cannot erase identity or belonging.

Ultimately, Abulhawa's novel makes a significant contribution to Palestinian literature, postcolonial feminist criticism, trauma studies, and gender studies by foregrounding women's lived experiences at the centre of the Palestinian struggle. It challenges dominant historical narratives that privilege military conflict while overlooking the intimate consequences of occupation on women's bodies, minds, and communities. By affirming the resilience of women who continue to nurture family, memory, and hope amidst profound violence, *The Blue Between Sky and Water* redefines resistance as an enduring practice of survival, remembrance, and cultural continuity.

Works Cited

Abulhawa, Susan. *The Blue Between Sky and Water*. Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation Publishing, 2015.
Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. Verso, 2004.

*GENDERED VIOLENCE, COLONIAL TRAUMA, AND FEMALE RESILIENCE IN SUSAN ABULHAWA'S
THE BLUE BETWEEN SKY AND WATER*

- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.
- Enloe, Cynthia. *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women's Lives*. U of California P, 2000.
- Hirsch, Marianne. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*. Columbia UP, 2012.
- hooks, bell. *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. South End Press, 1990.
- Joseph, Suad, and Susan Slyomovics, editors. *Women and Power in the Middle East*. U of Pennsylvania P, 2001.
- Kandiyoti, Deniz. "Bargaining with Patriarchy." *Gender and Society*, vol. 2, no. 3, 1988, pp. 274–290.
- LaCapra, Dominick. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Johns Hopkins UP, 2014.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Duke UP, 2003.
- Sayigh, Rosemary. *Palestinians: From Peasants to Revolutionaries*. Zed Books, 1979.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, U of Illinois P, 1988, pp. 271–313