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## Loss and Exile: Refugees' Experiences in Susan Abulhawa's Mornings in Jenin

Payel Pal



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## **Abstract**

Susan Abulhawa's debut novel *Mornings in Jenin* (2006) intricately captures the traumatic vicissitudes of the Palestinian refugees against the historical backdrop of the incessant Israel-Palestine political conflict. Delineating the pathetic turmoil of a Palestinian family across four-generations, this novel lays bare nuancedly the brutal histories of the Jewish occupation of the land of Palestine. This paper seeks to study how in portraying the horrific devastations of Israeli forces that led to the uprooting of thousands of Palestinian families since 1948, Abulhawa insightfully uncovers the harrowing experiences of displacement, dispossession and exile that have haunted and paralyzed the Palestinian lives down the decades. Through Amal, the female protagonist, Abulhawa focusses the profound longing for home, belongingness and stability that perpetually distress the refugees. Keeping in view the critical observations made by contemporary writers and thinkers, this paper will analyze how Abulhawa not only brings to foreground the Palestinian people's problems of homelessness and deprivation but more significantly depicts their interminable desire to return to a homeland of their own, either physically or psychologically. Ironically, Abulhawa portrays that this mourning for the homeland becomes more poignant for the later generations with the loss of territorial/ geographical entity of Palestine. Pertinently, this paper will elucidate how Abulhawa's novel can thus be regarded as a crucial intervention in the contemporary diaspora studies, serving as a compulsive reminder to the global community to humanely address and alleviate the predicament of Palestinian people who survive rootless and estranged in different corners of the world.

Keywords: Israel-Palestinian conflict, displacement, belongingness, homeland, rehabilitation

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Statement: All the views expressed in the paper are of the author(s).

# Loss and Exile: Refugees' Experiences in Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin*

Payel Pal

Susan Abulhawa's debut novel *Mornings in Jenin* (2006) produces a compelling picture of the Israel-Palestinian conflict. Recounting the experiences of four-generations of a Palestinian family, *Mornings in Jenin* brings to foreground the traumatic experiences of exile that have been haunting the Palestinian community since the later half of the twentieth-century. Beginning as early as the 1940s, the story chronicles the atrocities perpetrated by the Jewish forces on the Palestinian masses, resulting in the uprooting and displacement of thousands of families from their land. Abulhawa's novel not only depicts the brutalities of the Israeli forces but more significantly lays bare the horrendous psycho-social repressions of the Palestinians. Thus, narrating the other-side of the Israel-Palestinian story, Abulhawa portrays the harrowing experiences of the Palestinian migrants. Most of the Palestinians, as Abulhawa's novel delineates, still live segregated from their families and land as refugees. In studying the truncated lives of Abulhawa's protagonists, this paper seeks to unravel the social and political marginalization of the Palestinian people in a global context. Arguably, the paper will show how the diasporic Palestinians are pathetically entrapped in their memories of and an interminable longing for the homeland. In keeping with this view, this paper will eventually posit that Abulhawa's novel crucially represents the crisis of humanity vis-à-vis the predicament of the Palestinian refugees as an alarming issue in contemporary global politics.

*Mornings in Jenin* dramatizes the perennial exile of the Palestinians since the Jewish encroachment in the middle-east in 1947. Amal, a girl born in a refugee camp though remains the central protagonist, yet the novel gains significance from the intimate representation of various psychic, social and cultural deprivation that have paralyzed the Palestinian community down the years. Beginning at a time, when the Palestinians

enjoyed a free life in their land, the narrative depicts how suddenly they were attacked, defeated and forcibly expelled by the Jewish people. Unlike most of the communal conflicts, the Jewish-Palestinian one got sparked with the occupation of land. While the Arabs were the original inhabitants, the Jewish people in the later-half of the twentieth century marched forward to establish their authority over Palestine. Following the anti-Semitic waves of WWII, the Jewish people who had fled from different corners of Europe forcefully sought to occupy the land of Palestine, declaring it to be their religious right as promised by Moses. As witnessed in the novel, the Jewish people calling themselves as:

Freedom Fighters, Soldiers of God . . . set about getting rid of the non-Jewish population—first the British, through lynchings and bombings, then the Arabs, through massacres, terror, and expulsion. Their numbers were not large, but the fear they provoked made the year 1947 quake with menace, injecting it with warnings of coming history. (Abulhawa, 2010, p. 25)

After that, combat between the "heavily armed, well organized, and well-trained" Jewish forces and the helpless Palestinian natives continued till the latter were mercilessly usurped of their homes and belongings. The situation deteriorated with the intervention of the Western powers who decided to divide the land arbitrarily without any regard to the sovereign rights of the Palestinian people. The territory of Palestine, which once had been the home of many thousands of Arabs, then got partitioned by the United Nations into Israel, West Bank and Gaza. The area of Jerusalem and Bethlehem was declared an international zone. Then in 1948, the British evacuated Palestine and Zionist leaders proclaimed the independent existence of the state of Israel. In the narrative, Yehya, Amal's grandfather mourns the historic tragedy of the Palestinian-Arabs: Yehya tallied forty generations of living, now stolen.

Forty generations of childbirth and funerals, weddings and dance, prayer and scraped knees. Forty generations of sin and charity, of cooking, toiling, and idling, of friendships and animosities and pacts, of rain and love-making. Forty generations with their imprinted memories, secrets, and scandals. All carried away by the notion of entitlement of another people, who would settle in the vacancy and proclaim it all—all that was left in the way of architecture, orchards, wells, flowers, and charm—as the heritage of Jewish foreigners arriving from Europe, Russia, the United States, and other corners of the globe. . .

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. (Abulhawa, 2010, p. 35)

What persisted thereafter was the disastrous processes of de-Arabizing. Dumped as refugees, the Palestinians were gradually stripped of their human rights. Neither could they go back to their land nor were they properly relocated. Besides this, the Jewish forces went on physically brutalizing and disparaging the Palestinian men and women. Yousef, Amal's elder brother was victimized and publicly harassed by the Jewish soldiers. While "Yousef had endured torture and random beatings that had marked nearly every part of his body, he had been forced to strip before women and his students [and] made to kiss the feet of a soldier who had threatened to beat a small boy if Yousef did not kneel" (Abulhawa, 2010, p. 108), Abulhawa evidences that such has been the fate of "[m]ost men [who] had endured such treatment . . . [and] had returned from the humiliation with violent tempers aimed at their wives or sisters or children" (Abulhawa, 2010, p. 108). Sadly, these people could never overcome their experiences of horrendous victimization, with the consequence that they passed on their traumas to posterity. One such pitiable example is Dalia, Amal's mother. Witness to the violent dispossession and coercion of her native people and family by the foreigners, Dalia dwindles into a world of nostalgia and terror. She builds around her a shell of lifeless rigidity refusing forever to participate in life. After her newborn son is snatched by a Jewish soldier, Dalia almost lives a comatose life, disassociating herself even from her children Amal and Yousef.

Dalia exiles psychically and socially so much that after she dies, Amal pathetically mulls:

My eyes vented quiet tears. I cried, not for this woman's death, but for my mother, who had departed that body years before. I cried with a bittersweet relief that she was finally and completely rid of the whorehouse world that had deflowered her spirit. I cried for the blunt impact of guilt that I could not, had not saved her somehow. I cried because, hard I tried, I could not find in the small pale body the woman whose womb had given me life. (Abulhawa, 2010, p. 127)

Abulhawa depicts the Palestinian dispossession as one of the grimmest events of the middle-east history. Pitting the history of Palestinian diaspora against that of the Jewish, the author drives home the fact how majority of the Palestinian population were left unsheltered and their hopes of resettlement smothered. More pathetically, their wish to return to their own land also got perpetually stymied as Palestine's territoriality was itself a matter of international debate. In fact, Abulhawa's novel points out the uniqueness of Palestinian refugee status. For the Palestinian-Arabs the question of re-settlement was as much problematic as their desire to return. Susan M. Akram (2002) in her study observes that the 1951 Refugee Convention followed by the 1967 Refugee Protocol were trying to probe the rights and issues of refugees across the world. She states:

The Refugee Convention brought about a number of significant changes in the substantive definition of "refugee" and in the manner in which the international community dealt with refugee flows. One of the most significant of these was the adoption of an individualized definition of "refugee," as opposed to the group or category approach that had been used until then. A second major change involved a shift in emphasis from returning refugees to their places of origin to the principle of non-refoulement (nonreturn) against a refugee's wishes, as well as a new emphasis on resettlement in third states. Finally, instead of addressing refugee problems in an ad hoc fashion involving only the states directly affected, the new approach viewed these problems as being the responsibility of the entire world community. (p. 36)

However, while the global community took it up as a collective responsibility to assuage the refugee problems, yet the Palestinians were ignored and left to a liminal predicament. Abbas Shibliak (1996) in his study on the residential crisis of the Palestinian refugees rightly

analyzes this position.

Three durable solutions to refugee situations are widely recognized worldwide: repatriation to the country of origin, rehabilitation in the country of first asylum, and resettlement in a third country having the capacity and willingness to absorb the refugees. In the case of the Palestinians, the largest single refugee group, none of these options is available. Given Israel's refusal to comply with UN Resolution 194 of 1948, which established the principle of repatriation and/or compensation, and the Arab states' unwillingness to accept the permanence of the status quo involving hundreds of thousands of refugees on their soil, the Palestinian refugees have been left in limbo for some fifty years. (p. 36)

The wariness with settlement and return continued and even special agencies such as UNCCP and UNRWA failed to pacify and alleviate the critical situation. United Nations Conciliation Commission on Palestine was set up in 1948 with the noble aim of protecting the refugees and generating feasible solutions for their problems. Following this, United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees started functioning in 1949, that provided direct relief and endeavored to concretize a full-fledged work programme for the Palestinian refugee crisis. However, these served to be temporary arrangements and failed to subjugate the rising waves of discontent among the Palestinians. For the Palestinians, their expulsion and exodus had cultivated a unique situation for them. Unable to accept their status as secondary citizens in the neighboring countries, the right to return became predominant in the Palestinian-Arabs. Akram (2002) justly put this as:

The right of return, most commonly articulated in the language of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,<sup>25</sup> also is included in many draft declarations, constitutions, laws, and jurisprudence of states. Aside from the significant support existing in international conventions for the right of return, the right not to be expelled, the right to a nationality, and the right not to be denationalized on an arbitrary or discriminatory basis, a large body of declaratory law has developed through UN Resolutions affirming the right of return specifically in the Palestinian context, Resolution 194 (III) being the most important one. (p. 41)

The Palestinian refugees conceived that their forceful accommodation in the countries would undermine their demand for an independent national identity and subju-

gate their claims of self-determination. They were to be beneficiaries of a special regime to ensure their protection, when the main prongs of that regime failed, they were left without even the minimal protections afforded all other refugees under the international burden-sharing system (Akram, 2002, p. 42). Fragmented and segregated, the Palestinians right to return was crucially juxtaposed with their nationalist demand. This finally gave rise to the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organization) in the late 1960s that protested the political discrepancies of the international organizations and fought for emancipation of the Palestinians.

In the novel, Abulhawa depicts this unmitigable urge to return through most of her characters. Sometimes through imaginings and at other times through memories, Abulhawa's protagonists outpour their deep entrenched desire to reunify in their homeland. Yehya, Amal's grandfather, "makes his way back to Ein Hod, undetected by the soldiers" (Abulhawa, 2010, p. 43) crying out "'That terrain is in my blood'. . . 'I know every tree and every bird. The soldiers do not'" (Abulhawa, 2010, p. 44). Abulhawa describes the grandeur with which "roamed his fields, greeting his carob and fig trees" as the "excitement of a man reuniting with his family" (Abulhawa, 2010, p. 44). Interestingly, Yehya's attachment to the land becomes a transgenerational cultural memory. As in the narrative, "almost thirty years later, and with the same curled moustache as his grandfather, Yousef would recall the yellow clay across Yehya's teeth on the day he came from his sixteen days in the paradise of realized nostalgia. . . Despite [Yehya's] vagabond appearance, he came invested with euphoria and the people lifted him to heights of esteem befitting the only man among them who had outwitted a ruthless military and had done what five great nations could not effectuate" (Abulhawa, 2010, p. 44). The story of Yehya's reaching the village and then coming back retains down the decades as an event of pride and heroism. He revived the indomitable spirit of nationalism of the Palestinian Arabs who by then were growing "weary of the promises of the United Nations and lethargic with the humiliation of 1948" (Abulhawa, 2010, p. 44). No surprise, "in the happiest days of his life, some thirty years after Yehya made his daring journey, Yousef would tell his sister Amal about their grandfather, whom she had never known" (Abulhawa, 2010, p. 44). To continue, Amal also recapitulates about others such as:

Abu Sameeh . . . a refugee who had started life over after 1948. [The] Israeli campaign had taken the lives of his father and four brothers. He had married in the refugee camp, raised children, and supported his two widowed sisters. Like the rest of us, he looked forward to the return, when we would all go home. But in the end, the original injustice came to him again and took his entire family once more. There could be no starting over a third time. Nothing more of life was left to live. (Abulhawa, 2010, p. 70).

Significantly thus, the Palestinian diaspora is a communal deprivation characterized by longing for land and establishment of sovereign identity.

Raised up hearing to stories of her ancestors who had once lived with reverence and loved the land, Palestine vis-à-vis her village recurrently appears in different forms in Amal's imaginary world. Unlike her forefathers, Amal is the second-generation Palestinian for whom the homeland is merely a psychological construct. Naturally, she envisages her homeland in bits and pieces: "I conjured all the places of the home that had been built up in my young mind, one tree, one rosebush, one story at a time. I thought of the water and sandy beaches of the Mediterranean— "The Bride of Palestine," Baba called it—which I had visited only in my dreams" (Abulhawa, 2010, p. 64). Born in a refugee camp named Jenin, Amal represents the struggles, challenges, and unending dreams of those who never could physically return but only reconstruct their homeland through imagination. She has heard the stories of Palestinian exodus and perceived the long-lasting trauma through her parents and companions.

However, Abulhawa's novel also underscores the bonding and camaraderie that kept the Palestinian refugees together even in moments of hardest turmoil. As sometimes, Amal remembers all the warm loving moments that she had with her father, her childhood confidante Huda and her brother Ismael, Amal's story evinces one that is as much as of losses and denials as of indomitable hope of restoration. Like the other members of her community, Amal comes to understand that they could no more go back to their villages nor stay united with their families. Predominantly, they have been cursed with psychical and psychological exile for the rest of their lives. Amal, being a bright and academically promising student gets the opportunity to travel to America and pursue her career. Over the years as she makes an independent living there, she also tries to re-

locate her husband and her brother. To her bad luck, her husband is killed in a bomb-blast and her brother dies fighting for his country's cause. Estranged from her kith and kin, Amal though rehabilitates herself in a foreign land but can never amalgamate with its culture. Living as an immigrant, she remains lonely only with the flickering hope of reintegrating with her family. Consequently, she is always stuck in an "in-between" status. Condemning the country for its violence, she muses about her undetachable associations with it. In short, with its history of strife, displacement, mayhem and massacre, the picture of homeland triggered in Amal, like it did in many other refugees, a disturbing world of re-imaginings and re-constructions. Salman Rushdie, one of the most acclaimed contemporary writers, recounting his diasporic experience in *Imaginary Homelands* (1992) observes:

It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge—which gives rise to profound uncertainties—that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but the invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind. (p. 10)

Notably, Abulhawa through Amal represents a similar case, though here she is also the victim of collective trauma. Amal's passionate attachment and simultaneously her wariness for the lost land is well recorded when she admits:

I have always found it difficult not to be moved by Jerusalem, even when I hated it—and God knows I have hated it for the sheer human cost of it. But the sight of it, from afar or inside the labyrinth of its walls, softens me. Every inch of it holds the confidence of ancient civilizations, their deaths and their birthmarks pressed 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 adult 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 forefathers. Because I am the natural seed of its passionate, tempestuous past. 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 registers, the iron keys to our stolen homes, or UN resolutions and decrees of superpowers could ever do. (p. 140)

Amal's tragedy is a communal one, a betrayal that curtailed the dignity of the whole race of the Palestinians who "[became] confused in the rank eternity of waiting, pining at abstract international resolutions, resistance, and struggle" (Abulhawa, 2010, p. 48). If Amal's love for her land pushes her to the periphery of conflictual imaginations, then displacement for many other Arab-Palestinians aggravated a vicious cycle of vengeance and coercion. Profound sense of betrayal and incessant dehumanization at the hands of the Jewish people incited most of the Palestinian to violent retaliation. In the novel, Amal's elder brother Yousef becomes the leader of the Palestinian liberation organization (PLO) and gives up his life for restoring the native Arabs. While PLO was accused for propagating terrorism and crime, Abulhawa's novel unmistakably lays bare the insidious politics that led to its formation. Reduced to bare anomalies, the Palestinian-Arabs thus down the decades either remained piteously incarcerated in camps or detained in prisons. Inspired by nationalist zeal to retrieve Arab sovereignty, Palestinians combated all odds. Narrating the turbulences in the lives of Yousef, Fatima, Huda and Amal, the author shows how each of them confronted and braved the challenges in their own ways. While Amal could make her way to America, her childhood confidante Huda stays back and spends rest of her life in camps. Stripped of all that they possessed, these people miserably survived amidst of terror, dread, and victimization preserving and rebuilding hopes of reintegration in land of their own. Pertinently, Abulhawa's injects a message of humanity through the wobbly existences of her characters. Despite being torn and tattered, rootless and oppressed, these refugees for generations went on rejuvenating each other's lives through stories of Palestine and warm memories of nice times. Years of cruelty neither have been able to eradicate the nostalgia nor repress their protest for rights of self-determination.

Significantly, in dramatizing the ramifications of the

Palestinian diaspora, Abulhawa puts forward a humane approach. Though, she condemns the jingoist nationalism of the Israelites that have peripheralized the Arabs and undermined their citizenry, but Abulhawa also brings to foreground the heinousness of Nazi persecution. The depiction of Jolanta's tragedy is a case in the point. Jolanta, a Jewish woman is "ravaged by Nazis who had forced her to spend her late teens serving the physical appetites of the SS" (Abulhawa, 2010, p. 36). Victim of the genocidal violence, Jolanta "lost every member of her family in death camps and had sailed alone to Palestine at the end of Second World War. She knew nothing of Palestine or Palestinians, following only the lure of Zionism and the lush promises of milk and honey. She wanted refuge" (Abulhawa, 2010, p. 36). Jolanta's escape to Palestine represents the hapless journey of many "orphaned, widowed [and] devastated Jews" (Abulhawa, 2010, p. 36). Through Jolanta, Abulhawa depicts the problem of the Jewish and Palestinian refugees as a humanitarian crisis. Particularly, this is evidenced when Moshe, Jolanta's husband, snatches an infant from an Arab woman to gift to Jolanta who suffering the horrors of genocide could not "bear a child" (Abulhawa, 2010, p. 36). This child who grows up as David is Amal's younger brother. Ironically, David nurtures deep hatred for the Palestinians. Unaware of his real identity, he later detains and brutally tortures Yousef, his real elder brother. By juxtaposing the fates of the two brothers and chronicling their stories of vindictiveness, Abulhawa shows the intolerance and dehumanizing climate that Israel-Palestinian conflict has led to.

To conclude, Abulhawa's novel underscores the failure of global organizations in resolving the Israel-Palestinian conflict. Unfortunately, most of the Palestinians are still fighting for their right to independent nationhood and rest are scattered in different parts of the world. Spending their lives in camps and as immigrants in neighboring Arab countries, it is only through stories and memories that the Palestinians have unabashedly protected their love for their homeland. Through Amal's abiding connection to her land which finally turns out to be fatal, Abulhawa testifies to the helpless destinies of the Palestinian-Arabs. Denying to accept minority citizenship in other countries and fierce in their nationalist pride, the Palestinian race faced one of the biggest turmoil in the history of world refugees. Indeed, their predicament is still undefined. Abulhawa's novel thus

unravels the pathetic undersides of Jewish relocation in the middle-east. While the Nazi persecution of the Jews has been horrific, Mornings in Jenin delineates that what befall the Palestinian-Arabs was no less hideous. Abulhawa's novel brings to spotlight a humane account of the conflict unfolding the insidiousness of the unending political ambiguities. The author turns the attention of the international readership to the personal and communal trauma of the Palestinians, that hardly been spoken about. It is the burdensome history of a race that she picturizes in turn claiming to re-envision the Palestinian refugee issue with empathy and comprehension.

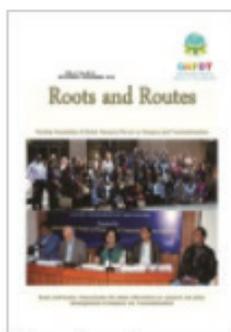
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# GRFDT NEWSLETTER

***Roots and Routes* disseminates the latest information on research and policy developments in Diaspora and trans**

## Newsletters



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*Roots and Routes* is a monthly newsletter of the Global Research Forum on Diaspora and Transnationalism (GRFDT). It is inclusive of articles, book reviews and news analysis, which help in disseminating latest information on research and policy development in Diaspora and Transnationalism. The newsletter enjoys readership of academicians, policy experts, diaspora think tanks etc.

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- 3. News analysis** : consisting of analyzing current news in about 1000-1500 words
- 4. Book reviews** : 1000-1500 words.

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Global Research Forum on Diaspora and Transnationalism (GRFDT) is a consortium of researchers and policy makers drawn from national and international universities, institutes and organizations. GRFDT is presently based in India and is shaping as the largest such group focusing specifically on the issues related to diaspora and transnationalism.

The GRFDT works as an academic and policy think tank by engaging national and international experts from academics, practitioners and policy makers in a broad range of areas such as migration policies, transnational linkages of development, human rights, culture, gender to mention a few. In the changing global environment of academic research and policy making, the role of GRFDT will be of immense help to the various stakeholders. Many developing countries cannot afford to miss the opportunity to harness the knowledge revolution of the present era. The engagement of diaspora with various platform need to be reassessed in the present context to engage them in the best possible manner for the development human societies by providing policy in-put at the national and global context.