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Memory, Displacement, and Resistance: Abulhawa's *Against the Loveless World*

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Abstract

Displacement is a traumatic experience for the victims, especially the displacement caused by colonial expansion leading to forced uprooting of the victims from their motherland. Violent displacement is common in conflict areas, such as Palestine-Israel conflict area, which has led to thousands of Palestinians being displaced from their homeland and forced to seek shelter as refugees here and there. The present study is based on a close reading of Susan Abulhawa's fictional work *Against the Loveless World* in which the story revolves around the life of a girl born to refugee parents. As a child she leads a happy life unaware of her status as a refugee in the host country, but as she grows up, she began facing the harsh realities of the circumstances of her life and grows bitter against the colonizers of her homeland. Memory- her own memory in the form of intergenerational trauma and the memories of the homeland handed down to her by her parents - plays an important role in shaping her being as the child of refugees. The present paper is an interpretation of the selected fictional work making use of theoretical tenets from memory studies, feminist literary theory, and postcolonial literary theory. The research findings show that the collective memory of displacement is intertwined with colonial experience and identity crisis, and the traumatic experience propels the protagonist to employ public discourse on memory as a weapon of resistance against colonial aggression. The protagonist in the novel, Nahr, is determined to bring her victim status to public discourse as she believes that it is the only way to begin dismantling the structures of violence around her and thus dismantle the violence itself. Nahr shows that the victims of forced displacement do not lose their agency or identity merely because they suffered violence against themselves under conditions beyond their control.

Keywords: Memory; Displacement; Violence; Colonial expansion; Palestinian resistance.

الذاكرة والنزوح والمقاومة: رواية أبو الهوى ضد العالم الخالي من الحب

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خلاصة:

النزوح تجربة مؤلمة للضحايا، وخاصة النزوح الناجم عن التوسع الاستعماري الذي أدى إلى اقتلاع الضحايا قسراً من وطنهم الأم. والنزوح شائع في مناطق الصراع، مثل منطقة الصراع بين فلسطين وإسرائيل، مما أدى إلى نزوح الآلاف من الفلسطينيين من وطنهم وإجبارهم على البحث عن مأوى كلاجئين هنا وهناك. تستند الدراسة الحالية إلى قراءة لرواية سوزان أبو الهوى ضد العالم الخالي من الحب حيث تدور القصة حول حياة فتاة ولدت لوالدين لاجئين. كطفلة تعيش حياة سعيدة غير مدركة لوضعها كلاجئة في البلد المضيف، ولكن عندما تكبر، بدأت تواجه الحقائق القاسية لحياتها وتشعر بمرارة ضد مستعمري وطنها. تلعب الذاكرة - ذاكرتها الخاصة في شكل صدمة بين الأجيال وذاكرات الوطن التي ورثتها من والديها - دوراً مهماً في تشكيل كيانها كطفلة لاجئة. الدراسة الحالية هي تفسير للعمل

الروائي المختار مستقيماً من المبادئ النظرية من دراسات الذاكرة ونظرية الأدب النسوي ونظرية الأدب ما بعد الاستعماري. تظهر نتائج البحث أن الذاكرة الجماعية للنزوح متشابكة مع التجربة الاستعمارية وأزمة الهوية، وأن التجربة المؤلمة تدفع البطلة إلى استخدام الخطاب العام حول الذاكرة كسلاح مقاومة ضد العدوان الاستعماري. بطلة الرواية، نهر، عازمة على إيصال حالتها كضحية إلى الخطاب العام لأنها تعتقد أن هذه هي الطريقة الوحيدة للقضاء على العنف من حولها. تُظهر نهر أن ضحايا النزوح القسري لا يفقدون هويتهم لمجرد أنهم عانوا من العنف في ظل ظروف خارجة عن إرادتهم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الذاكرة، النزوح، العنف، التوسع الاستعماري، المقاومة الفلسطينية.

1.0 Introduction

Susan Abulhawa, a Palestinian-American novelist, is a renowned writer known for her advocacy of the Palestinian cause. Abulhawa has been an active contributor to the field of literature for a long time and her earliest writings were poems in Arabic, later published in English as *My Voice Sought The Wind*, a poetry collection (2013), though prior to this publication she had already attained the status of a strong voice in Palestinian fiction as her novel *Mornings in Jenin* published in 2010 received wide acclaim. *The Blue Between Sky And Water* (2015) was her second novel. *Against the Loveless World* (2020) is her latest novel, which is a semi-autobiographical fiction work. *Against the Loveless World* is the story of a Palestinian girl, Nahr, who lived most of her life in exile. She was born in Kuwait, to refugee parents. The young girl was happy and loved Kuwait because her family felt integrated within the sizable population of Palestinian refugees living in Kuwait as temporary residents. She was not aware of the fact though that they were treated as an underclass in Kuwait. The family was forced to flee to Jordan because of the Gulf war in 1991 due to the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) chairman, Yasser Arafat, had declared his allegiance to Iraq, and as a result, after Kuwait was liberated through the US intervention, Palestinians were persecuted in Kuwait. From Jordan Nahr finally travels to her homeland, Palestine, and instantly falls in love with the land. She feels connected to her ancestors and her history, and soon got involved in the Palestinian resistance movement. The Israeli army was quick to notice her incorporation into the revolution and arrested her. She was jailed and put into a cell which she calls “the cube” and from where she writes her story for the world to know.

In *Against the Loveless World* memory in various forms plays a crucial role, and its impact on the identity [crisis] of the protagonist is felt all through the narrative. Violence against women, at home and outside, and the way it shapes the identity of a woman is another important issue in the novel; it leaves Nahr in a precarious situation as she is always under threat of violence, and of course, she faces violence and harassment now and then. However, such incidents in her life do not break her will to fight for her country, and she realizes that silence on the issue would only add to the woes of her community.

2.0 *Against the Loveless World*: A Brief Overview

Nahr narrates her story mostly in flashback, although the story alternates between the present and past days as Nahr reflects upon the events that led to her arrest in Palestine, her homeland where she has spent very little time and knows the country the least. All her life she has faced only atrocities, like forced evictions, separation from her loved ones, and physical and verbal abuse at the hands of the powerful. She narrates her lived experiences in three different countries – Kuwait, Jordan, and Palestine. Living in Kuwait, Nahr married a young man named Mhammad, a refugee in Kuwait and known as a Palestinian revolutionary, recently released from Israeli prison. But it turns out that he was imprisoned not because of his fight for his homeland but for very personal reasons. Nahr's marriage to Mhammad lasted only for a short time and Mhammad left Nahr hurt, angered and ashamed of herself since being abandoned by her spouse was shameful in her culture. At this point Nahr got acquainted with a middle-aged woman named, Um Buraq, who ran flesh trade in Kuwait. Um Buraq helped Nahr earn some money, but she was once

again ashamed of herself for being powerless to move out of the influence of Um Buraq who always blackmailed her. In any case, she used this income for the higher education of her brother. However, the Gulf war frees her from both, the clutches of Um Buraq and Kuwait. Her family flees to Jordan. But Nahr feels unhappy and lost in Jordan. It was at this point that the Oslo Accord was signed, and the Israeli authorities began allowing the diasporic Palestinians to return home. Nahr goes to her ancestral land, Palestine. There she falls in love with Bilal, her brother-in-law and a resistance fighter. Bilal introduces her to the secret world of resistance fighters. Nahr marries Bilal and together they carry out a series of anti-government and anti-military operations. However, soon their hideout was raided. Bilal escaped but Nahr was taken prisoner by the Israeli army. After a brief trial on the charges of terrorism, Nahr was sentenced to 16 years in prison and transferred to “the cube,” where she began writing her story. Eventually, she was freed, and she returns to Jordan to live with her mother. Soon, she receives a message from Bilal, and as the novel ends, the two are planning to meet and Nahr is looking forward to seeing Bilal soon.

3.0 Research Problem

A preliminary review of literature shows that there is very little research (Blend, 2023; Mahnoor and Khan, 2024; Salam, 2021) on the significant connection between memory and resistance in Abulhawa’s fictional work *Against the Loveless World* and its impact on the lives of Palestinian people, especially women, living in the occupied territory. *Against the Loveless World*, as mentioned above, is largely narrated in flashback mode in which past and present merge blurring the thin line between the memory of life lived and the life going on at present suggesting that, to the narrator, there is not much difference between what *was* and what *is*. The depiction, thus, uncovers the continuum of violence and abuse and the inner struggles of the protagonist, which also represent the daily struggles of average Palestinians presently living in the occupied territories, and the struggles their ancestors had faced ever since the Israeli occupation of Palestine (Madar, 2023). Palestinian fiction based on true, historical events and life-stories, such as *Against the Loveless World*, depict Israeli soldiers’ assaults against Palestinian men and women. The subject is generally overlooked and sometimes even erased from public discourse. The point is that direct and indirect colonialism, in control of media and dissemination channels, possesses the power to mold public opinion and present a revisited history. Memory as lived history, on the other hand, subverts such attempts, and if channelized into public discourse, challenges the forced silence. However, as I have noted above, there is a scarcity of research studies on memory and its complex relationship with resistance depicted in fictional narratives. My attempt in the present research has been to examine the relationship between memory, displacement, and Palestinian resistance struggle as portrayed in *Against the Loveless World*, and in the process contribute to the growing body of literature on Palestinian fiction as well as the literature on memory studies.

4.0 Research Objectives

The primary objective of the present research was to examine the portrayal of the intricate relationship between displacement, memory and resistance in Susan Abulhawa’s novel *Against the Loveless World*. The objective was to see how Abulhawa, through a fictional character, Nahr, makes a case to bring private memories to public discourse and turns the past into a weapon to fight oppression of Palestinians under Israeli occupation. The secondary objective of the study was to contribute to the growing body of literature on memory studies, particularly dealing with the effects of colonialism on memory and displacement.

5.0 Literature Review

Susan Abulhawa's fiction is resistance literature, in line with the works of other Palestinian resistance artists and writers, such as Naji Al Ali, Mahmoud Darwish, and Ghassan Kanafani. In fact, the influence of Kanafani's fiction is clearly visible on Abulhawa. Hamdi (2011) notes that a common thread between Abulhawa's works and the works of other resistance writers mentioned above is the use of the concept of bearing witness in their works. The concept of bearing witness is well incorporated in *Against the Loveless World*, which helps not only in revisiting the past as memories and recording past tragedies, but it also brings to life a complex repertoire of strategies. The writers and artists like Abulhawa interrogate the past, recreate it and forge resistance against the assassination of liberation itself in their works. Thus, tragedy in their creations becomes a tool of resistance and an instrument to guard against the idea of liberation dying under the pressure of aggressive forces. Hamdi (2011) argues that Israel has used assassination as a means of extinguishing the will of the Palestinian people to resist, but writers like Mahmoud Darwish, Ghassan Kanafani, and Susan Abulhawa have kept the spirit of resistance alive in their fictional/non-fictional writings.

In the following sub-sections is presented a brief review of the most relevant previous research studies on the topic.

5.1 Research on the Fiction of Abulhawa

Abulhawa's fiction has attracted researchers' attention, mainly for two features, that is, representation of Palestinian life and struggles highlighted in her novels, and the central role of women in her fiction. Bibi et al. (2022) note these features in Abulhawa's fiction clearly as the researchers state that it is Israeli Palestinian conflict and Palestinian peoples' experience of homelessness that inspires Susan Abulhawa to work on the concept of Palestinian women's identity shift in her fiction. Abulhawa's first novel, *Mornings in Jenin* (2010) is a historical fiction that relates the life of common people in Palestine after 1948. It is the story of Palestinian resistance, particularly of women, against forced eviction from their lands, settler violence, and inhuman conditions of their living created by Israeli forces. The Palestinian enclave of Gaza, for example, has been under an air, land and sea blockade since 2007, and the region has been morphed into a giant open-air prison where the residents are constantly confined, surveilled and disciplined. Her second fictional work, *The Blue Between Sky And Water* (2015) is the story of three generations of Palestinian women as they navigate their harsh lives under Israeli occupation. And her third novel, *Against the Loveless World* (2020), under investigation in the present study, is again the story of a Palestinian woman who lives a hard life in exile because of Israeli occupation of Palestine. Since both these features are political issues, her fiction has been studied from various political angles.

Ahmad (2022), for instance, has analyzed two of Abulhawa's novels, *The Blue Between Sky and Water* and *Against the Loveless World*, from the perspective of gender roles in refugee experience and political agency. The analysis is focused on the differing impacts of the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine on the lives of men and women. The conflict affects both Palestinian men and women, albeit differently. For men, the risks are grave, such as loss of employment, incarceration, and ultimately loss of life. Whereas, for women also the risks are no less grave, though they are different in measure, such as loss of freedom, loss of dignity, and loss of identity (oPt Protection Analysis Update, 2022). When their kins are in prison, women are forced to grapple with the problems of daily life like providing for the family, education for the children, and fighting for the release of their kins. In the process, they continually come in close contact with Israeli soldiers and police who inadvertently mistreat them. The experiences continually shape their being and propel some of them to activism as well. In fact, Ahmad (2022) suggests that Palestinian women are victims of not only their own patriarchal society that exploits and harms them, but also of world politics that is geared to marginalize them.

The study by Al Issa and Beck (2021) also explores Palestinian women's difficulties in negotiating the needs of their daily living under Israeli seize, though the study is primarily focused on Palestinian women's experiences with harassment by Israeli prison personnel as they go to visit their jailed kith and kin. The researchers report that at present (i.e., in 2021) there were about 4,500 Palestinians detained in Israeli prisons and jails. Nineteen out of the twenty women [who visited their relatives in jails] interviewed by the researchers reported that they were subjected to some or other kind of verbal and nonverbal unwanted comments or gestures, forced touching by prison personnel. In an interview with Rosenberg (2021), Abulhawa admits that the starting point for *Against the Loveless World* was the undeserved violence women face in Palestine. Abulhawa claims that bodily assault is something that the vast majority of women throughout the world have experienced (and/or will experience) to varying degrees, that she has personally endured bodily violence at various stages of her life. It is her firm belief that it is only through public conversations that this particular form of violence can be dismantled.

5.2 Memory, Displacement, and Resistance

Researchers, such as Blend (2023), Mahnoor and Khan (2024), and Salam (2021) have interpreted *Against the Loveless World* from the perspective of memory studies as well. In the selected work, memory intertwines with the characters' postcolonial condition, displacement, resistance, and hope. Blend (2023) reads Abulhawa's work as a way to deal with trauma of displacement, homelessness, and to assert resistance to oppression. In the words of Blend, Abulhawa's work contributes to a broader understanding of Palestinians, like her fictional character, Nahr, who have been forced to flee to other Arabic-speaking countries for survival. Nahr's problems and memories are shared by other Palestinians in Kuwait and Jordan, and that's how she connects with them. However, Nahr's memories are also unique because she carries them as the collective memories of three generations of women in her family. The significance of this history in memory lies in its power to preserve traditions and culture, self-identity, and associative strength. Palestinians had no right of return to their homeland and their progeny had no guarantee of admission to another country. So, it was essential to keep the institutions of family and memory and to refuse to be erased by official history. That is exactly what Susan Abulhawa does through her writing. Mahnoor and Khan (2024), on the other hand, have studied the role of magical realism, which, according to the researchers, has been employed in *Against the Loveless World* to blur the thin line between past and present to the effect that it highlights the elements of political and personal wars the protagonist, Nahr, has witnessed by enfolding and unfolding her personal memory, on paper, in her solitary confinement in Israel. Nahr's memory is also concerned about the traumatic experiences she had undergone as a refugee in two different counties, and of Bilal who became her associate in political resistance in Palestine.

Salam (2021), who has studied Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin* with reference to memory, is concerned about the act of remembering a traumatic past, that, in the researcher's view, has become one of the strategies for Palestinians to counter-assert settler colonial efforts who try to deny Palestinians the right of return and obstruct their reclamation of memory. The researcher finds that *Mornings in Jenin* presents memory, individual as well as collective, as a non-violent resistance against the oppressor. The memory for Palestinians also serves as an affirmation of their national identity. The researcher writes that Palestinian memories are characterized by compulsion to repeat; however, this compulsive behavior is bound to moral, political and ethical responsibilities. Salam (2021) also reads Abulhawa's fictional works (and other literary works by Palestinian writers) in line with trauma theory and claims that such a reading decolonizes the trauma theory and extends its analysis to events happening in the global South, especially in the Middle East troubled by its poor colonial past and oil-rich present.

5.3 Violence in Palestine

One of the main focal points in the fictional works of Abulhawa, whether it be *Mornings in Jenin* or *The Blue Between Sky And Water* or *Against the Loveless World*, is violence in Palestine perpetrated by Israeli settlers. Although her writing is fictional, yet Abulhawa portrays real-life physical harassment and violence against women prevalent in Palestine, and her victimized protagonists say that the experiences harm them in many ways, and they have to struggle mentally and devise psychological strategies to overcome the bad experiences. Nahr in *Against the Loveless World*, for example, adopts the strategy of writing when she is confined to her prison cell. Boesten (2017) argues that conflict-related violence, such that women in Palestine face, cannot be understood properly without including both quantitative and qualitative analyses, as well as analysis of comparative and contextual data since mere quantitative analysis of conflict-related violence feeds into its exceptionalization and thus leads to the segregation of such violence from more contextualized gender analyses. Alodaat (2017) also endorses the point of harassment of Palestinian women by Israeli soldiers, and raises a different concern close at home in the lives of Palestinian women living in Jerusalem, who find themselves in double bind. Owing to strong patriarchal social norms, women may face violence at home too. But, says Alodaat (2017), the victim cannot seek justice from Israeli authorities for the fear of being transferred forcibly out of Jerusalem and thus losing the custody of her children. They may even lose their fundamental rights, like the right to work and movement. One may wonder why there is no noticeable protest on international stage against Israeli atrocities committed to Palestinian women. Medien (2021) has critically analyzed the issue in her article and observes that Palestine/Israel is often altogether missing from international reports and scholarly narratives on physical violence in conflict zones. The attention there is increasingly focused on non-state actors. The scholar argues that this omission serves two significant purposes. First, it obscures Israeli settler violence in the occupied territories and second, it portrays Israel as a modern liberal democracy in conflict with terrorists. On the international political stage, in media, and in political scholarships Israeli state's action is, thus, described as humanitarian and Israel is seen as at war with a hostile Palestinian population. There is a strong relationship between identification and documentation of violence in the conflict zone and its portrayal by the actor state as liberal warfare. For the same reason, Medien (2021) advocates for the necessity of incorporating anti-imperial and anti-colonial politics into feminist studies as well.

Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation and settler violence has been studied from various perspectives, and one of the perspectives is to investigate how common people cope with the stress of daily survival strategies under harsh circumstances where even their mobility in their own territories is severely affected. Contributors to a volume edited by Taraki (2006) titled *Living Palestine* offer glimpses to the lives of individuals, families, and entire households in Occupied Palestine, and how they achieve personal and social goals. The essays in the volume are invaluable to understand Palestine as these contributor-researchers raise critical questions about centuries old Palestinian traditions associated with beliefs, such as kin-based marriage, fertility decisions, children's education, and living arrangements, etc. in the context of modernity and changing lifestyles. Taraki (2006) says that traditional Palestinian social values cannot be fully grasped by an outsider unless they are studied in the context of traumas of the past and worries of the present. The contributors have carried out extensive research drawn from an expansive research project of the Institute for Women's Studies at Birzeit University through a survey of two thousand households in nineteen communities.

The consequences of conflict-related violence against women go beyond mere mental and physical level of their existence. Brison (2019) has examined bodily assaults on women from the perspective of a

survivor and the idea led the researcher to exhort philosophers and social science critics to take the related issues, such as the effects of violence on the victims' personal identity, the role of denial, the political implications on gender equality, victim blaming, and so on, more seriously. I feel Abulhawa's portrayal of physical violence victims among Palestinian women serves the same purpose. Another researcher who has raised serious concerns towards lack of clear policies, research studies as well as awareness-raising for violence against women in the occupied Palestinian territories is Baldi (2018). The researcher laments that there is also a lack of a shared framework at international-regional level to address the issue. The researcher's opinion echoes well with the depiction of women's condition in Abulhawa's fictional works. One of the difficult issues to tackle at the local level is the uncertainty and diversity at individual local-level jurisdictions. However, in the opinion of Baldi (2018), the Istanbul Convention can prove to be the right tool to propose a uniform regulation on the issue of violence against Palestinian women.

Memory plays a very important role in strengthening the bonds between people in exile and their homeland. Collective and individual memories of the diaspora population are crucial in dealing with the trauma of homelessness and then assert for their independence and put up resistance against oppression, as does the individual memory of Nahr in *Against the Loveless World*. Blend's (2023) research work pinpoints this aspect in Abulhawa's novel as the researcher analyzes how individual and collective memories are conceptualized and then applies the theoretical perspective to *Against the Loveless World* in order to get a broader understanding of Palestinians, like Nahr, whose family were forced to flee to other Arabic-speaking countries, like Kuwait and Jordan. In addition, Blend (2023) also examines the other factors contributing to the existing condition of Palestinian refugees, factors such as gender, class, ethnicity, and colonialism. In a sense, colonialism has been the originary factor in uprooting the Palestinians from their homeland.

5.4 Violence and Power Politics

There has been a theoretical shift regarding conflict-related violence against women as observed by some scholars in their writings (Bos, 2006; Buss, 2009; Farwell, 2004). Wartime violence against civilian population is increasingly recognized as a weapon of war, a crime against humanity like genocide. For example, citing Rwandan and Yugoslav Tribunals where physical abuse was prosecuted as a crime against humanity, Buss (2009) comments that the ruling has provided a way to articulate the abuse, that has been called as a 'by-product' of war, rather as an integral aspect of war, and therefore, to categorize abusive violence as a systematic, pervasive, and orchestrated activity in conflict-zones. This recognition bears direct legal and political significance for Palestinian women, who, as portrayed by Abulhawa in her fiction, live under constant threat of physical violence in occupied territories. Nahr in *Against the Loveless World* is presented by Abulhawa as one such character, immaterial of whatever claims Israel may make about the non-involvement of Israel soldiers in physical violence in occupied territories and the ostensibly higher moral caliber of the Israeli army (Medien, 2021), especially in the context of prevalence of physical abuse by soldiers from other armies (Buss, 2009; Farwell, 2004). Madar (2023), for instance, observes that Israeli claims must be examined in the larger context of colonialism. Colonial military rule essentially requires paying attention to the different aspects of colonization to safeguard the interests of settler-colonialism. Madar (2023) insists that Israeli claims are just an attempt to impose a reductionist and universal frame of analysis on a larger issue. Farwell (2004) also writes on the new conceptualization of violence against civilian population in conflict zones in international law as a weapon and strategy of war, and presents a critique of feminist social workers who address the dynamics of conflict zone violence within the complex nexus of policies that lead to wars and border conflicts. The researcher also examines the factors, such as gender, patriarchy, militarism, and ethnic, religious, and political identities that affect physical violence against women in war zones and counts them as part of a

continuum of violence against women that exists everywhere. Interestingly, like Abulhawa, the researcher insists that women's responses to bodily violence in war zones and making their experiences public is important to survivors, practitioners, and policy makers who seek to address the causes and effects of such incidents. Madar (2023) is highly critical of the commonly adopted methods to analyze violence against women in Palestine where researchers focus merely on armed actors, men as the only perpetrators and women as the only victims; where silence is not taken into consideration as a significant indicator of power, and where qualitative analysis of violence is not prioritized. Madar (2023) suggests that it is required that the factors contributing to the perpetuation of colonial military rule are also brought in focus in an analysis of violence in Palestine. Parpart (2020), for instance, opines that silence should not be taken as a sign of disempowerment, but silence needs to be understood as a powerful force that bears the potential to be used in several ways. The researcher even recommends that the Global North needs to learn the value of silence; instead of that silence is often underestimated.

Rooney's (2014) article deals with different kinds of prison writing and art in an attempt to reflect on the Palestinian experience of imprisonment, because imprisonment is used as an instrument of criminalization of the population which is then extended to systematically thwart any resistance. Rooney (2014) further explores the nexus between the literality of imprisonment and imagination as the researcher sees it as a question of collective consciousness of a community. Sharoni (1999) is a feminist scholar who has turned her attention to investigating the Palestinian-Israeli conflict through a feminist lens. Her book, *Gender in Conflict* explores the complex relationship between sexist attitudes and militaristic regimes. Her work is not only significant from Palestinian-Israeli conflict perspective but also for the fact that Sharoni looks at the issues faced by Palestinian women from global political and gender equality point of view. It is interesting to note how easily we assume that the perpetrators of violence against women are always men, and how wrong this assumption is. Sjoberg (2016) in her scholarly book argues that it is essential to recognize women as perpetrators of violence in conflict zones. It is also essential to understand what exactly wartime violence is, what the purpose of the violence is, when and in what contexts the violence occurs, and keeping all these points in view, how it should be addressed. It is obvious that these ideas and situations can be complicated since the prevalent view is that women are non-violent creatures. It is important to remember in this context that violence in conflict is used as a weapon of war to feminize and devalorize the direct victims as well as the communities those victims come from. Weber (2017) has reviewed Sjoberg's book and observes that the author carefully builds the argument that bodily violence is a gendered crime as women are also potential perpetrators of the act, "which is primarily oriented towards power dynamics" (p. 171). The victims are feminized and those feminized can be men, while those subordinating can be women. However, since access to the "tools of gender subordination are not equally distributed" (p. 144), it is common to place women more often at the subordinated side.

5.5 *Against the Loveless World* and the Plight of Women

Although *Against the Loveless World* is a comparatively recent work by Abulhawa, the novel is well received and quite a few research studies have already been conducted on the novel. To Mami (2021), the protagonist Nahr is a revolutionary without being aware that her actions and inactions in the story incarnate a revolution. Nahr doesn't have a manifesto or script for a revolution and yet her very being develops into a concept of the potential revolution. So, in a sense, Palestinian characters like Nahr are at the forefront of a Palestinian revolution in the making. To that effect, Kavar's (1996) work on the history of women's involvement in the Palestinian National Movement spanning across many generations and geographical borders is a valuable account. Kavar (1996) also discusses Palestinian women's involvement in local politics, their liaison with the male leadership which is of great help to them, the

impact of conflict and crisis in their lives, and the rise of the Islamist movement in Palestine. Abulhawa says that Palestinian women have been historically largely misrepresented and inadequately portrayed, especially in the West. Their authentic and first-hand representations to set the records straight are scanty. In this connection, Gorkin and Othman's (1996) *Three Mothers, Three Daughters: Palestinian Women's Stories* serves the purpose well and is a commendable collection of stories focused on the daily lives and struggles of Palestinian women. The stories faithfully capture the lives of Palestinian women accustomed to living through turbulent times resulting from the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The authors have taken great care to present the authentic and varied voices of women living in the war zone, camps, and exile. Keith (2022) is another writer who has brought to light the numerous effects of the Palestine-Israel crisis on the physical, mental, educational, and economic well-being of Palestinian people, especially women, in his book-length report, *The situation of and assistance to Palestinian women on the prevailing conditions in Palestine*.

Abulhawa's fiction, especially highlighting the plight of women in Palestine, may at times be in conflict with the predominant Palestinian narrative in which atrocities on women are suppressed for various reasons, such as acknowledgement of such atrocities might weaken the male power and authority, shame, family honor, the need to protect female purity, and so on. Women are, therefore, hardly at the center of political discourse, unless their inclusion in the discourse serves the national agenda. Even in the so-called "Western emancipatory" narratives Arab women go unnoticed unless they are useful in building up a particular narrative. For example, Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2004) draws readers' attention to the fact that Arab women's stories are non-stories unless they serve the interest of the powerful. For instance, the emancipation of Afghani women becomes a US concern if it serves the political interests of the States, to justify their war against Afghanistan. Similarly, before the invasion of Iraq, oppression of Iraqi women became a top story in the US media as the States was preparing the American public for the war on Iraq. And interestingly, no one heard such stories or saw the faces of Iraqi women after the war, and nobody talks about the raping of Iraqi women following the occupation.

To sum up, the research studies on Abulhawa's fictional works reviewed above are commonly focused on the representation of several issues plaguing the Palestinian nation portrayed by the author, but there is a general lack of research studies unraveling the complex relationship between displacement, memory, and Palestinian resistance portrayed in Abulhawa's works, particularly her novel *Against the Loveless World*, selected for study in the present research. Therefore, keeping in view the lack of research literature on the topic, the present research has been primarily guided by questions like, how an individual's memory of violence against women in occupied Palestinian territories is presented in *Against the Loveless World* and how individual memory becomes collective memory as a force of resistance of women in Palestine? To be precise, the present research seeks an answer to the question: How does Abulhawa in *Against the Loveless World* depict the impact of displacement on Palestinians, and the memory of the homeland, on their psyche, and how does it impact their attempts to reclaim the history that is distorted by colonial forces?

6.0 Discussion

At the outset, as well as at its heart, *Against the Loveless World* is a love story, however, as the story progresses and the protagonist Nahr moves deeper into the events of her life, one realizes that the novel is woven around violence, memory, displacement, exile, and suffering, though love still plays a big role in the narrative. Nahr, for example, clandestinely receives a note from her erstwhile workmate, Jumana, warning her against responding to reporters because Israel was using her and selling her story that Muslim men abused her entire life, then forced her to join a terrorist group. Israel claimed that they saved

her and that prison had given her a better life. Nahr was disappointed not to find any information on her lover, Bilal, in the note:

I wish she had written something about Bilal. Some news. Or just his name. Or simply the first letter of his name. *B is alive and well. B sends his love. Or just B. (Against the Loveless World, p. 9)*

However, the memory of violence by Israeli forces against Palestinians in various forms is the main thrust of the novel. Abulhawa is deeply concerned about the memory of Palestine. The protagonist, Nahr, has spent only a minor part of her life in Palestine, and yet Palestine is part and parcel of her inner life. Her parents were exiled from Palestine in 1967, yet Nahr feels it was her own displacement and exile from Palestine, and she instantly feels a connection when she returns to the long-lost homeland. The sources of her woes are Israeli colonialism and colonial expansion into the areas of Palestine since 1948. As a result of Israeli colonial expansion, an endless number of Palestinian families are being displaced and forcibly evicted from their ancestral lands and homes. Nahr's political consciousness is concerned with the encroaching Israeli settlements. The "Cube," which Nahr is confined to, represents her actual condition, and the condition of all the Palestinians who live in a giant prison under Israeli surveillance. The "Cube," in the words of Abulhawa, was "devoid of time. It contains, instead, a yawning stretch of something unnamed, without present, future or past, which I fill with imagined or remembered life" (*Against the Loveless World, p. 4*).

Her political consciousness is reflected in her memories. Memory in the novel takes various forms, and therefore, suggest a myriad of possibilities. For instance, Nahr's memory in *Against the Loveless World* is history, particularly Palestinian history. It is the history of a people who have lived in Palestine since time immemorial and who were the ancestors of the present-day Palestinians, who should have been rightfully living in their land. But that history was ruptured by Israeli occupation and the rightful owners became refugees, and those who opposed the oppressor became terrorists. The rupture also gave the conquerors the opportunity to distort that history by disinherit the coming generations. The present generation, to which Nahr belongs, has to reclaim the history of their ancestors since to them it is a question of survival. To survive, they have to know their history, to know the pains and hardships of their ancestors to make such a glorious history they love. Abulhawa borrows the title of her novel from James Baldwin's *A Letter to My Nephew* (1962)ⁱ, and it wouldn't be out of place here to quote her for her reference to her love of history, love for her ancestors:

I think in saying 'loved each other,' Baldwin doesn't just mean the living. To survive by loving each other means to love our ancestors too. To know their pain, struggles, and joys. It means to love our collective memory, who we are, where we come from. (*Against the Loveless World, p. 299*)

Baldwin puts a very high emphasis on love for each other for the survival of a community in a hostile land, and so does Abulhawa in her fictional works.

Memory in *Against the Loveless World* is also the home and the land. It is the land where the protagonist belongs. It is the land that has nurtured her and her parents, her parents' parents, a long line of ancestors dating back to antiquity. Loss of memory is loss of home and land. So, one has to fight tooth and nail, even putting one's life at stake, to save the memory, to save this land, from encroachment and subjugation. If we look at it from the material perspective, in reality, Nahr and her family are dispossessed of this land and thus lost any claims and title to the land; Nahr's family faced forced eviction from their home/land.

But the home/land continued to be their home and land in their memories, in the celebration of continuity of the traditions and culture of the land, and it was what helped Nahr bridge the gap between displacement and the home/land she forged in her birthright homeland. Thus, memory is the culture and tradition of the land. For the loss of home/land, she never felt complete in any place, wherever it was, Kuwait, or Jordan. For loss of memory, she was exiled and disinherited. Nahr's life began in a two-room apartment in Hawalli, where Palestinian refugees settled after Nakba. And as she writes, "Although I grew up hearing stories of Palestine, I didn't get the politics, nor did I care to learn" (*Against the Loveless World*, p. 3), there always lurks the danger of amnesia, particularly for children who grow up far away from their home/land, and to them the home may become a distant place of the previous generations. Nahr pens down her memories sensing exactly this danger for her generation and for the future generations of the Palestinian people. Amnesia leads to non-realization of the self and leads to mental confinement.

Memroy is family life, and memory is also happiness, as there is happiness in the form of material objects, such as her mother's black and white photographs of her life in Haifa. Family life binds people together, which is essential for nation-building, and also to save the nation from foreign occupation in need. In exile in Kuwait, Nahr's family is comprised of three generations living together in a two-room set— her paternal grandmother, her parents, Nahr and her brother. There were occasions when bitterness arose among family members, like Nahr was bitter towards her grandmother, and in turn her mother thrashed her for being disrespectful towards her elder. And there were moments of sweetness too. These emotional outbursts were like fodder for a stronger bond among the family members, and they loved each other— a formula for survival. In the words of Nahr, her grandmother bored them, the children, with the tales of her childhood, "She bored us with the tales of her childhood and about people we didn't know. She was sure we would return someday" (*Against the Loveless World*, p. 14). Although her grandmother was most of the times against Nahr's behavior as a girl growing up without manners, yet when her Egyptian classmate, Gameela, called Palestinians stupid, "Palestinians are stupid. That's why the Jews stole your country" (*Against the Loveless World*, p. 13) she said, and Nahr beat up that girl, her grandmother was proud of her because she would not tolerate misrepresentation of history, of memory. Misrepresentation is dislocation, displacement, and disinheritance.

Memory in *Against the Loveless World* is also resistance and non-violent struggle for freedom, like the struggle Nahr puts up in the courtroom, "I colonized the colonizer's space of authority. I made myself free in chains and held that courtroom captive to my freedom." (*Against the Loveless World*, p. 333). To Nahr, Memory, displacement and resistance are inextricably linked. Memory of displacement should always lead to resistance, as soon as possible, before the trauma of forced displacement wears you out and you give up fighting for freedom and live only for survival. The struggle has to continue, the lessons from the memory have to be learned, as Nahr puts it, "Palestinians learned the first time in 1948 that leaving to save your life meant you would lose everything and could never go back" (*Against the Loveless World*, p. 20). And that is precisely the reason why it amazes Nahr to see some refugees settling down comfortably as refugees in their adopted land:

It amazed me to see how quickly they got comfortable in the new apartment and settled into a routine, as if their lives had simply been excised and replaced elsewhere, intact, with just a dusting of grief they shook off before returning to the business of living. Maybe it was easier because the trauma of forced displacement was already well-known to them, and they understood how idleness and purposelessness could dull the mind, droop the eyelids, and seep too much sleep and despair into the day. They were experienced refugees, better equipped to handle recurring generational trauma. (*Against the Loveless World*, p.114-115)

Memories are painful too, and sometimes one doesn't want to talk about them. The Western woman who interviewed Nahr in the prison wants to raise the issue of her bad experiences, but Nahr insists on talking of her good memories like her childhood days when she was in school and her brother was a brilliant student, not of the bad memories in Kuwait. Memory in *Against the Loveless World* is ultimately the torch of a revolution that is to be handed down to posterity to carry on the struggle till they achieve freedom for their homeland. In this function, memory is the link between displacement and their home and land for which they need to go on fighting. In fact, displacement and homelessness are colonial/neo-colonial legacy and memory, preservation of culture, tradition and true history are essential to decolonize the mind and the land. Abulhawa's *Against the Loveless World* achieves that objective successfully.

The overlaps between memory and colonialism are ubiquitous. Postcolonial fiction, such as *Against the Loveless World*, is concerned with the cultural and political legacies of the past in the present. The study of memory in such works is significant to make meaning of the memories and legacies shaped primarily by colonial/postcolonial experience. Mechkarini et al. (2023), for instance, observe that the objects looted by colonizers from erstwhile colonies are more than just precious objects. They evoke a history that has been complicated and conflicted, the history that reminds the colonized of the expropriation of their land, plunder of economic resources, and systemic oppression of the indigenous population. I feel that the same argument applies to the material objects and memories the refugees carry with themselves to their land of shelters, such as Nahr's mother carried with her a box of old, black and white photographs of her life in Haifa, Palestine. They evoke a complicated history of plunder. The confluence of memory and colonial displacement provides a productive site of overlap between them. It has also been helpful to visualize Nahr's fragmented consciousness from the perspective of trauma studies. Caruth (2014) views trauma as an event leading to the fragmentation of consciousness and preventing direct linguistic representation. Experience of trauma damages Nahr's psyche, and as a result, at times she needs a different source for its outlet. She takes recourse to writing.

Nahr's memory mediated as her narrative is inextricably linked to the legacies of Israeli colonialism. Her narrative provides a deep history of Palestine, and as Kennedy and Silverstein (2023) argue that studies of deep history in conjunction with cultural memory might offer ways of reconsidering the possibilities of a decolonizing future, we have a glimpse of those possibilities in *Against the Loveless World*. The other point closely linked to memory and displacement is experience as colonial subjects. *Against the Loveless World* makes the reader aware of the dangers of Israeli colonialism absorbing and subsuming the colonized Palestinians as slaves without identity. To overcome that danger, the Palestinian people rely on individual and collective memories to preserve the self, identity, freedom, and above all, equality (Fanon, 1967). Palestinians have been colonial subjects on two fronts, as Arab Muslims, and as colonized by Israel. Their experience as colonial subjects of Israel is the memories of the first-generation refugees who pass it down to their next generation as stories of the home, and *Against the Loveless World* is one such story. Such stories are highly significant since, being colonial subjects, the story of the Palestinian homeland is prone to be turned into a myth to be perpetuated by colonial storytellers, dramatists, poets and even historians and anthropologists. Yet another significant point to note at this juncture is that under Israeli colonial rule, the people of Palestine are prone to be categorized as scientifically backward, socially degenerate, uncivilized, and mentally retarded (Said, 1978, p. 207) against the 'forward-looking, scientifically advanced, socially advanced, civilized and mentally strong' colonizers. This ideological mythology is always part of the colonizers' scheme for the justification of their presence in Palestine since, as Edward Said observes, "almost all colonial schemes begin with an assumption of native backwardness and general inadequacy to be independent, 'equal' and fit" (Said, 1994, p. 80). The same ideological mythology achieves the Israeli objectives in Palestine, and a new myth, 'terrorist' has been appended to the description of the colonial subject.

It is important to note that Nahr began penning down the narrative of her life when she was living in Israeli captivity in the “cube.” It is not coincidental since it is primarily her experience in Palestine and the brutality of Israeli forces she herself witnessed and was a witness to other Palestinian women’s experiences that prompted her to talk of the factors Israeli forces implied in violence against Palestinian men and women. It was this intent in mind that she created the character of Nahr whose life is intertwined with displacement, exile, and violence, and thus, only she could be the authentic voice on these issues. Her narrative underscores the asymmetry between the two sides. It is not a conflict between two equals, but physical and moral suppression of the powerless by the powerful. However, the asymmetry in the power of the two sides is not present in public discourse. What dominates the Palestine/Israel political discourse is “conflict,” which is far from the truth. Conflict takes place between equals, not between asymmetric sides. It is aggression of a heavily armed state against an unarmed population. The central point in the novel is that land and colonial expansion are closely related aspects of what goes on in the occupied Palestinian territories. Abulhawa believes that in Israel-Palestine relationship the idea of “conflict” justifies Israeli violence in the so-called “self-defense” against a “terrorist” population, whereas “justice” is demanded in cases where one side has been wronged and unjustly treated. Demand for justice can be the only way to infuse value to the lives of Palestinians who are otherwise treated like worthless creatures by Israel, as writes Abulhawa:

We are not all blessed to receive a good education and inherit what it takes to live with some dignity. To exist on your land, in the bosom of your family and your history. To know where you belong in the world and what you are fighting for. To have some goddamn value. (*Against the Loveless World*, p.183)

7.0 Conclusion

To sum up, Abulhawa’s fictional work *Against the Loveless World* interpreted from a postcolonial and memory studies perspective reveals so many intricate aspects of the relationship between memory, displacement, and resistance. The novel shows that narrative of traumatic past is one of the strategies for Palestinians to counter-assert settler colonial efforts who try to deny them the right of return and obstruct their reclamation of memory. Abulhawa’s Nahr fights for her right to return to reclaim her history, memory and identity. Memory, individual as well as collective, serves as a non-violent struggle against the oppressor. The memory for Palestinians serves as an affirmation of their national identity. Abulhawa’s Nahr’s memories are characterized by compulsion to repeat, which is bound to her moral, political and ethical responsibilities. Narrativization of memory, in line with narrativization of trauma, possesses the power to declutter the mind of unwanted emotions. Susan Abulhawa portrays the central character, Nahr, in her novel *Against the Loveless World* as a victim of violence and colonial dominance. Nahr’s experience represents the experiences of numerous Palestinian men and women who face violence at the behest of Israeli soldiers as they encounter them every day. However, Nahr decides to bring the history of violence and colonial injustice to public discourse in the hope that in this way it would begin dismantling the violence, and the colonial expansion, since the idea of violence and injustice is closely linked to Israeli colonial expansion into Palestinian territories. There are parallels between violence and characterizing the Israeli aggression against Palestinian population as “Conflict” in international political scenario since the notion of being in a “conflict” justifies Israeli violence against a “terrorist” population in self-defense. This hegemonic nexus needs to be dismantled.

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ⁱ The relevant passage from Baldwin reads as follows:

Here you were to be loved. To be loved, baby, hard at once and forever to strengthen you against the loveless world. Remember that. I know how black it looks today for you. It looked black that day too. Yes, we were trembling. We have not stopped trembling yet, but if we had not loved each other, none of us would have survived, and now you must survive because we love you and for the sake of your children and your children's children.