



## WRITING/RIGHTING PAIN: NEGOTIATING HUMAN RIGHTS AND EMPATHY IN SUSAN ABULHAWA'S FICTION

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin* (2010), *The Blue Between Sky and Water* (2015) and *Against the Loveless World* (2019) as exemplary works of contemporary Palestinian literary activism. Her novels inscribe the ongoing Nakba as a continuum of juridically legible violations under international law while simultaneously generating modes of empathic identification that exceed the affective limits of liberal pity and instead precipitate an ethically implicated demand for historical accountability and structural restitution. Through deliberate interweaving of embodied testimony and counter-archival reconstruction, Abulhawa makes a decisive ontological shift. She displaces the Palestinian subject from its reification as passive object within humanitarian spectacle and reinstalls it as an agential bearer of historical truth and juridical claim. This paper argues that Abulhawa's fiction transcends the limitations of humanitarian spectacle and liberal empathy. While the former reduces suffering to consumable, decontextualized tragedy and the latter fosters shallow, self-soothing identification, Abulhawa's novels render Palestinian pain epistemologically legible and politically urgent—as concrete evidence of specific, ongoing violations, above all the continuous Nakba and settler-colonial dispossession.

KEYWORDS: Empathy, Human Rights, History, Literature, Narrative, Pain

### 1. INTRODUCTION

“Stories matter. We are composed of our stories. The human heart is made of the words we put in it”.—Susan Abulhawa.

Literature has always been actively engaged in representing what we call the ‘human dimension’ of our everyday happenings. It is something which en-

dures human values and morality thus uniquely emphasizing ‘the culture of feelings’ that is integral to the essence of literature. Pramod K. Nayar (2016, xi) has remarked, “cultural discourses and their texts, in many media forms and genres, tell stories of what it means to be human or to be denied humanity, and of these storytelling forms, Literature is by far the most pervasive”. In this context, the intersection of human rights and literature is a vital and dynamic field that explores how narrative forms can articulate, challenge and advocate for the fundamental rights and dignities of individuals and communities. Historically, the role of writers and writing in the evolution of human rights activism has been significant and transformative. The burgeoning rights movements of the modern era found a natural ally in literature, given its profound capacity to dramatize human experiences and foster empathy. In the beginning however, the issues depicted in literature were primarily focused on the nations of Western Europe and North America. However, the scope of this literary advocacy broadened significantly after 1948 when the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) helped embed the concept of universal rights into the global consciousness. Consequently, authors have increasingly started using their narratives to expose the brutalizing effects of industrialization, imperialism and totalitarianism. They also championed the rights of those who, despite the proclaimed universality of the UDHR, continued to be marginalized by class, race, gender, sexuality and ethnicity. Literature in this vogue becomes a medium of representation of testimonies that offers a compact narrative form to explicitly articulate the plights of the marginalized subjects. Highlighting this grappling power of narrative, Homi K Bhaba has eloquently claimed, “narrative is not simply a social virtue; it is a moving sign of civic life. Those societies that turn their back on the right to narrate are societies of deafening silence: authoritarian societies, police states, xenophobic countries, nations traumatized by war or economic hardship; societies under the boot of death, in the grip of the destruction of freedom” (Bhaba 2003, 180–181). In this apparatus, the critical study of literature and human rights has naturally gravitated towards the genres of ‘life narratives’ and ‘political fiction’ that documents the experiences of those who have endured severe human rights violations. Providing an authentic and intimate portrayal of suffering that abstract reports and statistics often fail to convey, these narratives bear witness to the lived realities of oppression and abuse which represents a human face to otherwise faceless atrocities of the marginalized. Moreover, these narratives also aim to evoke a sense of empathy and moral outrage among readers. By vividly depicting the plight of victims, these works seek to transcend mere awareness and inspire active solidarity and advocacy. The personal stories embedded in these genres of literature reveal the broader political and social shortcomings within national communities which underscores the systemic issues that perpetuate injustice and violence.

Human rights literary criticism, particularly the work of Joseph R. Slaughter, provides a foundational lens for understanding how narrative forms intersect with international human rights law. In *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* (2007), Slaughter argues that the Bildungsroman—the novel of individual development and incorporation into society—serves as a literary counterpart to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Both share a teleological vision of the “free and full development of the human personality”, naturalizing the incorporation of the individual into a rights-bearing subject under the law. Slaughter demonstrates how postcolonial and world literature often adapts, critiques or exposes the exclusions inherent in this model, particularly when rights remain aspirational or actively denied due to colonial legacies and global inequalities. In Abulhawa’s novels, the multigenerational trauma of the Nakba and ongoing occupation disrupts linear development, transforming the Bildungsroman into a fractured form that highlights the failure of international human rights discourse to incorporate Palestinian subjects. This approach, complemented by scholars such as Sophia McClennen and Elizabeth S. Anker, who examine the tension between humanitarian sentimentalism and political rights, allows for a critique of how literary representations of suffering can either reinforce or challenge the commodification of pain in global human rights narratives. Again, theories of ‘narrative empathy,’ primarily developed by Suzanne Keen, offer tools to examine how Abulhawa’s fiction elicits readerly responses to Palestinian pain. In *Empathy and the Novel* (2007) and subsequent works, Keen defines narrative empathy as the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by fictional representations, distinguishing between authorial empathy (strategic choices in character portrayal), textual empathy (narrative techniques that invite immersion), and reader’s empathy (the affective response in audiences). Keen cautions against assuming automatic altruistic outcomes from empathetic reading, noting that empathy can be bounded (limited to in-group characters), ambassadorial (bridging differences) or broadcast (universalizing). Complementing Keen, Sara Ahmed’s work on the cultural politics of emotion and Martha Nussbaum’s philosophy of literature as cultivating ethical imagination highlight how affect can either foster solidarity or risk sentimental consumption of suffering without political action.

Contemporary representations of Palestine however exhibit a central paradox. Palestinian suffering attains extensive visibility within global media circuits. Images of civilian casualties, residential demolition and forced displacement regularly appear in news outlets and digital platforms. However, this high degree of visibility correlates with a corresponding political invisibility. The systemic conditions that generate the suffering—settler-colonial occupation, ongoing dispossession, and sustained denial of self-determination—are routinely excluded from dominant frameworks of international accounta-

bility which “left every Palestinians in disarray, politically, economically, and psychologically” (Sa’di & Abu-Lughod 2007, 9). As Fassin (2012) has argued, humanitarian reason tends to prioritize the suffering body while marginalizing the political subject who articulates the causes of that suffering. In the Palestinian context, the visible wound authenticates a universal humanitarian concern yet simultaneously defuses demands for structural redress. Susan Abulhawa’s fiction directly addresses this paradox. Her novels enact a deliberate dual operation captured in the pun ‘writing/righting.’ Her fiction represents Palestinian suffering into legible form as a series of human-rights violations documented through historical evidence and cognizable under international law. At the same time, they perform an ‘ethical’ and ‘political’ labor of righting that rejects the compensatory function of humanitarian compassion (Ticktin 2011, 63). In this paper, I draw on human rights literary criticism, narrative empathy and postcolonial trauma studies to argue that Susan Abulhawa’s fiction transcends the limitations of humanitarian spectacle and liberal empathy. I contend that Abulhawa’s work accomplishes what humanitarian spectacle and liberal empathy cannot. Her works render hyper-visible pain epistemologically legible as evidence of specific violations while producing an empathic identification that exceeds distanced pity and requires acknowledgment of historical complicity and obligation.

## 2. THE NAKBA AS CONTINUING TRAUMA

The Nakba, the Arabic term denoting the ‘catastrophe’ of 1948, refers to the mass displacement and dispossession of approximately 750,000<sup>1</sup> Palestinians during the establishment of the State of Israel. While conventional historical accounts frequently treat this event as a discrete occurrence confined to a specific moment in time, Palestinian experience and literary representations insist upon a different temporality. For Palestinians, it is not a closed historical episode but a continuing condition of traumatic pain that extends into the present and remains unresolved. Lila Abu-Lughod & Ahmad H. Sa’di have eloquently noted, “the Nakba is not over yet; after almost sixty years neither the Palestinians nor Israelis have yet achieved a state of normality; the violence and uprooting of Palestinians continues” (Ibid., 10). This understanding departs markedly from the classical model of trauma developed in early psychoanalytic and literary trauma studies (Caruth 1996; Felman and Laub 1992), which typically conceptualizes trauma as a singular, overwhelming event whose full impact registers only belatedly through repetitive intrusion and the difficult

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<sup>1</sup> For historical accuracy, we can refer to Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), and Rashid Khalidi, *The Hundred Years’ War on Palestine* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2020).

work of testimony. Conventional trauma theory has often privileged the model of a singular, overwhelming event that resists integration and returns belatedly. Cathy Caruth famously defines trauma as “the oscillation between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life” that manifests through “repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors” (Caruth 1996, 7). While this paradigm illuminates certain dimensions of ‘delayed’ witness, it risks reinforcing a historicization that settler-colonial power actively promotes: the confinement of the Palestinian Nakba to the discrete year 1948. Dominick LaCapra (2001) cautions against an exclusive focus on foundational trauma, noting that it can engender ‘melancholic fixation’ and obstruct the possibility of ‘working-through.’ In the Palestinian context, such fixation would inadvertently align with Zionist historiography, which treats 1948 as a closed and indeed the foundational chapter of Israeli independence rather than the beginning of an ongoing process.

Susan Abulhawa’s three major novels—*Mornings in Jenin* (2010), *The Blue Between Sky and Water* (2015) and *Against the Loveless World* (2019), systematically refuse this event-based model. They present Nakba not just as a past disaster with lasting effects, but as an ongoing reality whose main forces are still at work today. As Bashir and Goldberg assert, “the Nakba is not a past event that ‘happened’ seventy years ago but is a continuing, painful journey that began in 1948 but endures to this day” (Bashir & Goldberg 2018, Forward xv). Abulhawa’s multi-generational narratives translate this theoretical claim into literary form. In *Mornings in Jenin*, the Abulheja family undergoes successive expulsions in 1948, 1967, 1982 (Sabra and Shatila) and 2002 (Jenin camp siege). Each displacement is narrated as a reiteration of the same logic rather than a new tragedy. When Amal visits the former village of Ein Hod and discovers it transformed into an Israeli colony, the novel reflects a structural continuity as the land has been ethnically cleansed once and is kept cleansed through ongoing legal and cultural mechanisms.

*The Blue Between Sky and Water* extends the same principle to Gaza. The Baraka family originates in Beit Daras, destroyed in 1948. Nazmiyeh, the matriarch, buries written fragments of village history beneath her Gaza home, insisting that memory must survive because dispossession has not ended. The Israeli assaults on Gaza in 2008–2009 and 2014 are presented not as isolated military operations but as intensified enactments of the original Nakba logic. As Rothberg argues in his theorization of implication, beneficiaries of historical violence become ‘implicated subjects’ who inherit the effects of harms done by people and institutions to which one is linked and “help propagate the legacies of historical violence and prop up the structures of inequality that mar the present; apparently direct forms of violence turn out to rely on indirection” (Rothberg 2019, 1–2). Abulhawa repeatedly positions the reader as such

a subject, forcing recognition that contemporary comfort often rests on the continuation of 1948's violence.

Abulhawa's *Against the Loveless World* extends the structural understanding of the Nakba into its most radical literary form through a carceral framework that equates imprisonment with the foundational logic of expulsion. The protagonist Nahr, narrates her entire life from within 'the Cube,' an experimental Israeli solitary-confinement unit where time and space are technologically manipulated to produce perpetual disorientation. From the novel's opening lines, Nahr declares her paradoxical position of enunciation:

I LIVE IN the Cube. I write on its glossy gray cinder-block walls however I can—with my nails before, with pencils now that the guards bring me some supplies. (Abulhawa 2020, 3)

This act of writing on the prison wall literalizes the refusal of erasure. The surface designed for absolute containment becomes the very medium through which Palestinian history is inscribed. The novel's non-linear chronology systematically denies 1948 the status of privileged origin. Memories surface not as traumatic returns to a singular past event but as evidence of an unbroken continuum. Every sensory deprivation, every interrogation session, every denial of visitation rights repeats the original violence of the Nakba in miniaturized form. Separation from land and family constitutes the shared principle that links the open-air prison of Gaza, the refugee camp and the high-tech Cube. The prison cell thus emerges as the Nakba's most contemporary architectural iteration. Incarceration is not an exceptional measure applied to individual criminals, it is the concentrated expression of a structure that has always aimed at isolating Palestinians from the conditions of social and political reproduction. Edward Said's seminal concept of the Palestinian 'permission to narrate' acquires renewed urgency within this carceral context. Said (1984) observed that Palestinians have been systematically denied 'permission to narrate' their own history within dominant global discourses. The denial operates through exclusion from official archives, censorship of testimony, and the delegitimization of Palestinian narrative authority. Nahr's narration from the Cube constitutes a direct rebuttal. The very site designed to silence her becomes the platform from which she addresses an implied global readership. Her scratched and pencilled words on the wall enact a literal counter-archive. The act of writing under conditions of total surveillance transforms the prison from a space of enforced muteness into a space of insurgent testimony. This reclamation of narrative authority carries profound implications for the structural understanding of the Nakba. The technological distortion of time and space within the cell mirrors the broader Zionist project of rendering Palestinian historical continuity illegible. However, Nahr's non-linear narrative re-

fuses that distortion. By moving fluidly between pre-1948 Jaffa, post-1967 occupation, diasporic exile, and present incarceration, she reconstructs the very temporality that the prison seeks to fracture. The Nakba appears not as a past event that haunts the present but as a living structure that continually produces new forms of confinement. The novel thus transforms Said's 'permission to narrate' from a diagnostic observation into an active literary praxis. The scratched walls become the material evidence that Palestinian narrative authority precedes and exceeds official recognition.

Intergenerational transmission of memory further dismantles the event model. Trauma does not circulate as an unassimilable kernel that returns compulsively across generations. It functions instead as explicit political knowledge of a structure that remains fully operative in the present. Memory is neither pathological repetition nor private wound. It constitutes a deliberate pedagogy of resistance passed from body to body across the fractured geography of dispossession. In *The Blue Between Sky and Water*, this transmission assumes its most explicit form. The matriarch Nazmiyeh, displaced from Beit Daras in 1948, buries handwritten fragments of her village's history beneath the floor of her Gaza home. These fragments are not nostalgic relics. They serve as material evidence addressed to future generations who will inhabit an intensified version of the same violence. The narrator reflects that "words and stories and dreams remained, trying to find a place in the next generation" (Abulhawa 2015, 71). It reconceives memory as cognitive resistance rather than psychological symptom. Where Caruth's model risks confining trauma to an ahistorical latency that erupts unpredictably, Abulhawa presents memory as a structured curriculum. Grandmothers teach grandchildren the names of destroyed villages, the taste of fruits that no longer grow on confiscated land, the precise mechanisms by which expulsion was executed and continues to be executed. The transmission is corporeal as well as verbal. Bodies carry memory in gestures, recipes, lullabies and silences. When Nazmiyeh in *The Blue Between Sky and Water* prepares traditional dishes under siege, the act is pedagogical. Her granddaughter Nur learns not only how to cook but why cooking under bombardment constitutes defiance. The body that kneads dough in a kitchen without electricity inherits the same refusal that once buried testimonies beneath a house floor. Memory thus becomes 'muscle memory,' transmitted through the repetition of life-affirming practices that directly counter the necropolitical ambition to render Palestinian social reproduction impossible. This reconceptualization has significant implications for trauma theory. The inherited material is not an unintegrated shard that disrupts psychic coherence. It is a coherent political analysis of a structure which equips the next generation with cognitive and affective tools required to interrupt its reproduction.

Abulhawa's fiction therefore compels a significant revision of trauma theory itself. In this apparatus, the Palestinian case demands what LaCapra (2001) terms 'structural trauma'—trauma that is not confined to an original event but is continually reproduced by enduring social and political formations. Her novels do not invite readers to witness a past injustice from a safe historical distance. They situate readers inside a present that actively generates future dispossession, transforming the act of reading into an ethical encounter with the reader's own implication in the continuing Nakba.

### 3. BODIES, EMPATHY AND THE RISK OF SPECTACLE

The representation of violated Palestinian bodies poses an acute ethical dilemma within contemporary literature. Graphic depictions of torture, rape and child death risk reproducing the very spectacle that Zionist visual regimes have long deployed to dehumanize Palestinians, while simultaneously providing the evidentiary material necessary for bearing witness. Susan Abulhawa's narratives contain some of the most unflinching and sensory representation of bodily destruction in modern Palestinian fiction. Yet it refuses to allow the wounded body to function as pure spectacle. Through deliberate narrative strategies, Abulhawa embeds extreme violence within dense affective networks (mother-child bonds, sibling intimacy, erotic attachment), thereby converting the violated body from object of voyeuristic consumption into the site of a relational ethics that demands recognition rather than distanced pity. Judith Butler's *Frames of War* (2009) provides the essential theoretical framework for this. Butler argues that certain lives are framed as 'grievable' while others are rendered 'ungrievable' through "normative schemes of intelligibility" that determine whose bodies matter (Butler 2009, 26). The Palestinian body under occupation has historically been positioned outside the frame of grievability i.e. of course, visible as threat or as collateral damage, but rarely as a life whose loss constitutes an injury to a shared humanity. Elaine Scarry's earlier work in *The Body in Pain* (1985) complements this insight by demonstrating how extreme pain destroys language and isolates the sufferer, making the tortured body "eminently representable yet unrepresentable at the same time" (Scarry 1985, 177). In the Israeli-Palestinian context, the hyper-visibility of Palestinian pain in media imagery often performs exactly this double operation where the body is shown in agony, but the political meaning of that agony is erased or reversed. The risk, then, is that literary representation will replicate the same structure. As Megan Boler (1999) warns in her critique of 'passive empathy,' consuming images of distant suffering can produce a 'spectatorial stance' that reinforces the viewer's sense of moral superiority while leaving power relations intact. Suzanne Keen (2007) similarly distin-

guishes between ‘empathy’ as bounded, character-specific identification and “strategic empathic positioning” that can be manipulated by authors to serve ideological ends. The central question for Abulhawa’s fiction therefore becomes—does the sensory representation of violated Palestinian bodies simply feed the Zionist gaze, or does it subvert that gaze? To this, Abulhawa’s answer lies in her systematic refusal to isolate the suffering body from its relational matrix. Violence is never presented as a solitary spectacle, it is always mediated through intimate and pre-existing bonds that survive the moment of destruction.

In *Mornings in Jenin*, one of the most devastating scenes unfolds during the 1948 Nakba in the village of Ein Hod. The narrator recounts the moment when an Israeli soldier executes Fatooma and Darweesh in front of the gathered villagers. The passage is rendered with unflinching precision:

The soldier fired his pistol twice. One shot between Fatooma’s eyes, on her white streak. She fell instantly dead. The other through Darweesh’s chest. His pregnant wife, Basima’s niece who had been betrothed to Hasan, shrieked, screaming by her bleeding husband as people gathered to carry Darweesh a distance away’ [...] the bullet lodged in Darweesh’s spine, condemning him to motionlessness, to a life plagued by unsightly bedsores, a life tormented by the burden of his wife’s cheerless fate, bound to a husband who lived only from the chest up. And even from the chest up, he lived on memories of horses and wind. (Abulhawa 2010, 31–32)

The violence is brutal and irrevocable, yet the narrative focalization refuses to abandon the violated bodies to isolated spectacle. The text remains insistently anchored to the relational web that the bullets attempt to annihilate. Fatooma dies beside her lifelong companion; Darweesh’s mutilation is witnessed and immediately tended by the collective body of the village. The pregnant wife’s scream, the improvised dressing with honey and torn clothing, the communal act of carrying the wounded man—all these details embed the assault within an unbroken network of kinship and care. The destroyed bodies are not exhibited as mere evidence of Zionist brutality; they are re-inscribed within the very social fabric that the violence seeks to tear apart. As Judith Butler (2009) argues, “to be a body is to be exposed to others” (Ibid., 24). Abulhawa literalizes this exposure by compelling the reader to witness the killings through the persisting bonds that refuse severance. Darweesh’s paralysis does not reduce him to a passive victim. His truncated life is framed by the ongoing presence of his wife, bound to him in a future now defined by shared burden rather than shared joy. The memory of horses and wind that sustains him from the chest up is not private nostalgia. It is collective memory transmitted through the village’s refusal to let the wounded man disappear into anonymity. The violated body is thus never abandoned to spectacle. It remains

insistently relational, testifying to a sociality that survives the attempt to annihilate it.

Abulhawa's *The Blue Between Sky and Water* intensifies this relational strategy in its unflinching depiction of the 1948 assault on Beit Daras. The young Nazmiyeh is gang-raped by Israeli soldiers while desperately shielding her younger sister Mariam. The text renders the violation with stark physical immediacy:

Nazmiyeh did not understand what the soldier yelled before forcing himself into her. She clenched her teeth, biting the agony of rape lest it escape from her voice and reach Mariam's ears. 'Scream!' the soldier demanded in his language as he shoved himself harder into her. 'Scream!' He pulled her body up by the hair, but Nazmiyeh understood neither his words nor his desire to hear her suffering. Instead, she continued to endure the assault as silently as possible. [...] The other soldier took the place of the first one, who now tried to thrust himself into her mouth. He slapped her repeatedly. 'Scream!' he ordered. 'Scream!' (Abulhawa 2015, 37–38)

The narrative focalization never abandons the violated body to isolated spectacle. Nazmiyeh's consciousness remains anchored to the sibling bond she is determined to protect. Every act of resistance (clenching her teeth, swallowing her cries, recalling her husband's tenderness only to violently reject the memory) is performed for Mariam's sake. The rapists demand audible confirmation of their power and Nazmiyeh refuses it precisely to preserve the relational field that the violence seeks to annihilate. Silence becomes an act of maternal guardianship extended to her sister. The violated body is thus never surrendered to the soldiers' voyeuristic desire. It remains insistently re-embedded within the protective dyad that the assault attempts to destroy. Nazmiyeh's clenched jaw and swallowed screams constitute a refusal to let the soldiers' demand for spectacle succeed. The 'body in pain' is not offered as consumable evidence of Zionist brutality. It is presented as a body that continues to act ethically toward another, even under the most extreme conditions of unmaking. Elaine Scarry (1985) observes that pain unmakes the world; Abulhawa shows Nazmiyeh remaking the world around the imperative of shielding Mariam, thereby asserting a relational continuity that the weaponized spectacle cannot obliterate.

*Against the Loveless World* offers the most radical subversion of the spectacle paradigm through its portrayal of prison torture. Nahr is subjected to prolonged sexual humiliation and physical abuse in Israeli detention. Yet the narrative repeatedly interrupts the torture sequence with flashbacks to moments of erotic tenderness with her lover. The same body that is being broken by the interrogator is simultaneously remembered as the site of mutual pleasure and agency. This temporal layering prevents the reader from consuming

the violated body in isolation. As Keen (2007) observes, authors can deploy ‘narrative situation’ to control the direction of empathy (Ibid., 93). Abulhawa’s non-linear structure forces the reader to hold in simultaneous view the body-as-object-of-torture and the body-as-subject-of-desire, thereby short-circuiting the dehumanizing gaze.

Across all three novels, siblings function as a particularly resilient affective network. In *Mornings in Jenin*, Amal’s lifelong search for her abducted brother Ismail structures the entire narrative. In *The Blue Between Sky and Water*, the bond between Nur and her jinn-possessed uncle Khaled survives even his physical death. In *Against the Loveless World*, Nahr’s relationship with her brother persists as a moral compass inside the Cube. These sibling bonds are never sentimentalized, they are shown to be strained, fractured and sometimes violent themselves. Yet they provide the relational infrastructure that prevents the individual body from being abstracted into pure victimhood. This embedding of violence within intimate networks performs several crucial ethical operations. First, it counters the Zionist framing of Palestinian bodies as either threats or disposable entities by insisting on their prior and continuing embeddedness in recognizable human relations. Second, it transforms the reader’s empathy from the passive consumption that Boler critiques into what she terms ‘testimonial reading’—a practice that “requires the reader’s responsibility” (Boler 1999, 157). Third, it refuses the humanitarian logic that Butler (2009) identifies as the ‘management of precarity’ i.e. the spectacle of the suffering body is not offered as proof of shared humanity that then absolves further action (Ibid). It is offered as evidence of a relational world that has been assaulted and that demands restoration.

Abulhawa’s strategy thus resolves the apparent contradiction between sensory representation and ethical witness. By never allowing the violated body to appear outside its affective relations, she prevents the reproduction of the Zionist gaze that isolates and dehumanizes. The body in pain remains a body in relation, and it is precisely this relational excess that converts spectacle into indictment and empathy into obligation.

#### 4. HUMAN RIGHTS DISCOURSE AND ITS LIMITS

Contemporary human-rights discourse has emerged as the dominant global idiom for articulating claims to justice. However, its universalist pretensions repeatedly falter when confronted with the Palestinian condition. Abulhawa’s fiction engages this discourse with deliberate ambivalence. Her novels mobilize the formal and rhetorical resources of international human-rights frameworks while simultaneously exposing their structural exclusions. Through narrative strategies that both invoke and ironize the conventions of human-

rights testimony, Abulhawa reveals the limits of a juridical imaginary that recognizes suffering only when it can be incorporated into the figure of the stateless-yet-rights-bearing individual. Joseph Slaughter's (2007) seminal reflections on human rights scholarship provide a primary theoretical ground here. Slaughter argues that the post-1948 human-rights regime and the Bildungsroman share a common plot as the story of an individual who, through suffering and self-articulation, achieves incorporation into the community of rights-bearing subjects. He notes, "the novel is seen as the paramount medium for representing the socio-aesthetic construction of modern, bourgeois individualism, and the paramount model for imagining the modern nation-state as a social community. In this regard, the novel can be described as a technology for making the institutional abstractions of both the human person and the nation-state formation (individually and collectively) sensible" (Ibid., 92). In this apparatus, the genre of this 'human rights novel' depends upon a tautological structure whereby the personality that is entitled to rights is the personality that can claim and enact them through narrative. Palestinians, however, are systematically excluded from this plot. As stateless persons denied the 'right to have rights' (Arendt 2017, 307), they occupy the constitutive outside of the very regime that claims universality. Abulhawa's fiction repeatedly stages this exclusion yet refuses to ratify it as irrevocable. The most radical enactment of this refusal appears in *Against the Loveless World*, where Nahr delivers her entire life narrative from within the Cube. From the very outset, Nahr transforms the site of absolute containment into a platform of insurgent testimony. She declares:

Even the best inventions for confinement and subjugation cannot account for life's resolve to freedom. These high-tech shackles are meant to hold me in place with my arms behind my back, but I fasten myself facing the wall, to my jailers' great annoyance. I remain that way until visitors leave. In the meantime, sometimes I sing, and when possible, I fart. Their discomfort gives me pleasure. In this way, the north side is both the domain of bondage and the direction for defiance. I waged my fight for writing utensils on the north wall. The guards had ignored all my requests for pen and paper until I used bodily fluids to write on that wall. In menstrual blood I wrote: Long live Saddam Hussein, and in feces: Israel is shit. (Abulhawa 2019, 111–112)

This passage performs a double subversion. First, it converts the technological apparatus of erasure into an improvisational archive. The body that the prison seeks to reduce to bare life becomes the very instrument of inscription. Menstrual blood and faeces, substances conventionally coded as waste and shame, are repurposed as ink for political declaration. Second, and more crucially, the act parodies and expropriates the formal conventions of human-rights testimony itself. The wall that was meant to silence becomes the page

and the Cube that officially ‘does not exist’ becomes the tribunal. Nahr does not petition an absent international community for recognition. She bypasses it entirely, constituting her readership as the jury that the UN and its affiliated bodies have refused to convene. The irony is structural rather than incidental. The international community incarcerates Nahr precisely by withholding the platform she now seizes through fiction. Yet the novel demonstrates that the Bildungsroman plot of human-rights incorporation (the journey from suffering to juridical personality) is not the only narrative available. By writing with the very substances the prison cannot regulate, Nahr enacts a dissident self-formation that precedes and exceeds state recognition. The right to narrate is no longer a supplication directed toward a benevolent external authority. It is an autonomous act performed from within the space designed to render such acts impossible. In this way, Abulhawa’s text does not merely critique the exclusion of Palestinians from the human-rights plot. It writes an alternative plot in which the stateless subject claims narrative authority as the prior condition of any future right to have rights.

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson’s (2010) work on life narrative helps illuminate this strategy. They identify ‘rights discourse’ as a genre that requires the subject to present herself as both victim and agent, speaking in a voice that is simultaneously individual and representative. Nahr fulfils this requirement only to expose its inadequacy. She recounts administrative detention without charge, sexual torture and the revocation of residency rights, yet refuses the redemptive arc that human-rights testimony typically demands. There is no moment of recognition by the international community, no restoration of rights. Instead, the novel ends with Nahr still in the Cube, her narrative smuggled out through unknown means. The human-rights plot is invoked only to be suspended, revealing the Palestinian as the subject for whom the promised incorporation never arrives. Sophia A. McClennen (2009) extends this critique in her analysis of ‘the novel of human rights.’ She argues that contemporary literature often performs a ‘double gesture’ of ‘using and abusing’ human-rights frameworks (McClennen 2009, 9). Abulhawa explicitly executes this gesture in her fiction. Several legal documents such as—UN Resolution 194 on the right of return, Geneva Convention articles, Amnesty reports are tacitly woven into the narrative fabric of her novels. The culminating instance occurs in *Mornings in Jenin* when Amal, now an American citizen, returns to the Jenin refugee camp in 2002 during the Israeli invasion. She is fatally shot by an Israeli soldier while shielding her daughter Sara from gunfire. In her final moments, the narrative turns to the bitter irony of human-rights discourse itself:

She wondered if officials might express regret for the “accidental” killing of her, an American citizen. Or if her life would merely culminate in the dander of “collateral damage. (Abulhawa 2010, 9)

The passage stages the precise mechanism by which the universalist promises of human rights collapses when confronted with Palestinian life. Amal’s acquired U.S. passport should, in theory, elevate her death above the threshold of disposability. The language of ‘regret,’ ‘accident’ and ‘collateral damage’ is the standardized lexicon of international humanitarian law and state apology protocols. However, the novel reveals these terms as performative gestures that acknowledge the violation only to neutralize its political consequence. The American passport does not confer grievability, it merely transforms deliberate killing into a regrettable administrative error that requires no structural remedy. Amal’s death thus dramatizes the double gesture McClenen describes. The text mobilizes the full apparatus of human-rights rhetoric (citizenship status, civilian protection, proportionality review) only to demonstrate its systematic failure when the victim is Palestinian. The invocation of legal universality serves not to secure rights but to expose their suspension. The Palestinian subject is recognized by the discourse only at the moment of death, and even then recognition functions as a technology of deferral rather than restitution. Abulhawa thereby abuses the framework she uses, converting the expected narrative of juridical incorporation into an indictment of the regime that perpetually postpones Palestinian entry into the community of rights-bearing subjects.

The right of return constitutes the most glaring contradiction. Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms that “everyone has the right to return to his country” (United Nations 1948)<sup>2</sup>. Yet for Palestinians, this right remains the one most consistently violated by the same states that enshrine the Declaration. *The Blue Between Sky and Water* dramatizes this paradox through the character of Nazmiyeh, who buries written fragments of her destroyed village beneath her Gaza home. These fragments function as a counter-archive that preserves the legal and historical claim to return in the face of international abandonment. As Slaughter (2007) notes, “the right to have rights is predicated on the capacity to narrate oneself as a rights-bearing subject”. Nazmiyeh’s buried testimonies literalize Edward Said’s (1984) concept of the Palestinian ‘permission to narrate,’ transforming it into an insurgent practice that precedes and exceeds formal recognition. This transformation reaches its theoretical culmination in *Against the Loveless World*.

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<sup>2</sup> Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms that everyone has the right to leave any country, including their own, and to return to their country; see the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on the United Nations website, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights> (Article 13).

Nahr's narrative repeatedly ironizes the language of universal rights. She describes her statelessness not as a legal anomaly but as the logical endpoint of a system that requires state membership as the precondition for rights. The novel thus exposes what Hannah Arendt identified as the central aporia of human rights—its dependence on the very nation-state system that expels certain populations from protection. Abulhawa does not however abandon human-rights discourse entirely. Rather, she reclaims it through what Slaughter (2007) terms 'dissident subgenre'—a narrative formation that refuses incorporation on the existing terms (Ibid., 181). Nahr's final act of narration from the Cube constitutes a radical assertion of the right to narrate as the right to have rights. By addressing the reader directly, she bypasses the institutions that have denied her standing and constitutes a new public through the act of reading itself.

Across her oeuvre, Abulhawa reveals human-rights discourse as both resource and obstacle. Her novels transform the 'right to narrate' from a plea for inclusion into a declaration of prior and inalienable claim. In doing so, they delineate a literary praxis that neither rejects human rights nor submits to their current limitations, but instead uses fiction to hold open the space where a genuinely universal regime might yet be imagined.

##### 5. FEMINIST RECLAMATION AND 'RIGHTING' THROUGH CARE AND PLEASURE

Palestinian women in dominant representation are routinely confined to two intersecting tropes i.e. the mourning mother draped in black or the hyper-visible victim of gendered violence whose body authenticates humanitarian crisis. Both figures serve a necropolitical function while rendering Palestinian life as damaged and devoid of autonomous desire. Abulhawa's fiction systematically dismantles this representational economy. Across *Mornings in Jenin* (2010), *The Blue Between Sky and Water* (2015) and *Against the Loveless World* (2019), female characters insist on pleasure, erotic agency, communal care and deliberate acts of futurity (cooking, sex, dancing, planting trees) even under conditions of extreme constraint. These embodied practices constitute a feminist politics of reclamation that refuses the reduction of Palestinian femininity to trauma.

Sara Ahmed's (2004) theorization of the cultural politics of emotion offers a productive framework. Ahmed argues that emotions do not reside in subjects or objects but circulate and 'do things' by aligning bodies with or against one another (Ahmed 2004, 85). The figure of the damaged Palestinian woman aligns global spectators with a humanitarian affect of pity while distancing them from political responsibility. However, Abulhawa is very subtle enough to reverse this circulation. By locating pleasure and care within the same bod-

ies that bear the marks of occupation, her novels generate affective alignments that exceed pity and produce what Ahmed terms ‘affective economies’ of hope (Ibid., 44). Gala Rexer's (2023) concept of concept of ‘embodied resistance’ is equally central here. Rexer documents how Palestinian women under occupation deploy ‘bodies and bodily matter’ to “challenge the Israeli carceral system” (Rexer 2023, 3). In this vogue, everyday practices of the Palestinian women such as—cooking, storytelling, birthing etc. act as forms of ‘counter-necropolitics’ that affirm life against the state’s management of death. Abulhawa’s fiction translates this ethnographic insight into literary form. In *Mornings in Jenin*, the matriarch Dalia (later renamed Fatima after 1948) continues to cook traditional dishes (musakhan, maqluba) in the Jenin refugee camp despite the destruction of her village kitchen. The act is never nostalgic. Food preparation becomes an act of spatial and temporal reclamation as the smell of sumac and olive oil temporarily reconstitutes Ein Hod within the camp. As Rita Felski (2008) observes, aesthetic experiences of recognition can reconnect us with forms of embodied knowledge that have been sidelined. Cooking here functions as embodied counter-memory. *The Blue Between Sky and Water* radicalizes this feminist politics through the figure of Nazmiyeh, the matriarch who embodies an unbroken continuity of Palestinian women’s care and defiance. Even under the crushing conditions of recurrent bombardment and blockade, Nazmiyeh maintains the embodied practices that refuse necropolitical control over life itself. The novel repeatedly returns to her physical presence as the living archive of pre-1948 rural femininity:

The grandmother walked in from the kitchen. She wore a traditional fallahi black thobe, embroidered in fine patterns with the rose, olive, and lemon colors of the land. A delicate black headscarf framed her smile and, together with her immense bosom and wide hips, gave her a quality of maternal generosity. (Abulhawa 2015, 173)

The embroidered thobe is not folkloric ornament. It is a deliberate act of material memory and futural insistence. Each stitch in rose, olive and lemon threads constitutes a refusal to let the colors of the confiscated land disappear from Palestinian bodies. The garment transforms her body into a living repository of the land that the occupation seeks to erase from collective perception. This embodied practice is explicitly reproductive and ecological. Nazmiyeh’s ‘immense bosom and wide hips’ are not incidental details as they signal a maternal corporeality that continues to generate and shelter life under conditions designed to render reproduction impossible. The thobe’s colors are the same hues that once grew in Beit Daras and that she teaches her granddaughters to recognize as their rightful inheritance. Abulhawa’s depiction of Nazmiyeh’s embodied relationship to the land (metaphorically ‘wearing’ Palestine on her

body) culminates in what can be described as a mode of ‘rooted resistance’ (Motter, Grey & Singer 2020, 12). Through the everyday acts of caring for children and tending the soil, Palestinian women such as Nazmiyeh directly contest the settler-colonial logic of elimination that seeks to erase indigenous presence and sever ties to territory. The embroidered thobe, a traditional dress that survives repeated assaults and displacements alongside Nazmiyeh herself, functions as potent material evidence of endurance. It stands as tangible proof that necropolitical strategies of control, dispossession, and erasure cannot ultimately disconnect Palestinian women from the land or from the futurity they continue to gestate—both literally, through the bearing and nurturing of new generations, and figuratively, through the persistent cultivation of cultural and ecological continuity.

Erotic pleasure constitutes the most audacious dimension of this reclamation. *Against the Loveless World* centers Nahr, a sex worker who unapologetically claims desire as a domain of autonomy. In a context where Palestinian women’s bodies are routinely instrumentalized as sites of honor or violation, Nahr’s sexuality is neither shameful nor redemptive rather it is ordinary and agential. Her lovemaking scenes with her husband in Kuwait and later with her lover in Palestine are described with frank sensuality:

I faked pleasure through the discomfort of being penetrated for the first time. I was waiting for it to feel good, hoping nothing was wrong with me, wanting it to be over, wondering if this was what it would always be like[...]but I thought it would feel special and sweet too. I gritted my teeth and clenched my fists. He was mostly quiet, sometimes instructing me to relax. (Abulhawa 2019, 33).

Even in prison, memories of physical pleasure interrupt torture sequences, preventing the state from achieving total ownership of her body. Ahmed (2004) argues that “happiness can be revolutionary” when it refuses to be postponed until after liberation. Nahr’s refusal to defer pleasure performs exactly this revolution. Communal dancing further materializes this embodied counter-politics. In *The Blue Between Sky and Water*, women in Gaza insist on collective celebration even under conditions of prolonged immobilization and siege. A pivotal scene unfolds when the family gathers to honor Rhet Shel’s momentary joy despite Khaled’s continuing paralysis. The text describes the spontaneous eruption of music and dance:

Despite the disappointment of seeing Khaled still immobilized in his body, they had already been inspired by Rhet Shel’s elation and let it spread through them, too. The pop music of Nancy Ajram and Amr Diab leavened the air in Hajje Nazmiyeh’s home [...] She tied her mother’s scarf around her narrow child hips and danced. Her young friends were there, having followed as the

matriarchs did. They too danced as their elders clapped encouragement. (Abulhawa 2015, 180)

The scene is profoundly political in its apparent domesticity. In a context where the occupation systematically disrupts electricity, movement and communal gathering, the decision to play music and dance constitutes an act of deliberate reclamation. Nancy Ajram and Amr Diab's songs are an audible assertion of a living Arab cultural continuum that the blockade seeks to fragment. The young girls' improvised choreography, performed under the watchful eyes and rhythmic clapping of the matriarchs, transforms the cramped living room into reclaimed public space. The dancing bodies literally occupy and animate a territory that military power attempts to render inert and empty. Rita Felski's (2008) category of 'enchantment' illuminates the political efficacy of this moment. Felski argues that aesthetic practices can produce 'a momentary release from instrumentality' that paradoxically recharges political will rather than depleting it. The dance sequence operates precisely in this register. The girls' movement is not instrumental to any immediate strategic objective, yet it generates an affective surplus that exceeds the logic of siege. Rhet Shel's scarf tied around childish hips becomes a transmission belt for embodied joy across generations; the elders' clapping constitutes both approval and participation in a collective refusal to let paralysis define the boundaries of Palestinian sociality. This brief eruption of music and dance therefore performs a feminist counter-necropolitics. Where the occupation aims to reduce life to bare survival, the women and girls insist on plenitude: on pleasure, on intergenerational continuity, on the right to occupy space with bodies that move freely and joyfully. The scene refuses the humanitarian framing that would reduce Palestinian existence to perpetual victimhood. Instead, it demonstrates that resistance is not only enacted in the street or the checkpoint but also in the living room where a child ties her mother's scarf and dances while her elders clap in defiant rhythm. The dancing bodies thus generate a living present that the occupation cannot confiscate and a future it cannot foreclose.

These scenes are never utopian escapes. Pleasure is always precarious, often interrupted by violence. However, the insistence on pleasure is precisely what distinguishes Abulhawa's feminism from liberal humanitarian representations that require Palestinian women to remain legible primarily through damage. By locating desire and care within the same bodies that suffer, the novels produce what Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2015) terms 'life-affirming resistance' that "challenges the occupier's monopoly over the meaning of life itself". This feminist reclamation performs the second movement of the 'writing/righting' pun as writing inscribes violation and righting restores the damaged subject to relational plenitude. Through cooking, sex, dancing and so on Abulhawa's women practice an embodied righting that refuses to concede fu-

turity to the necropolitical order. In Ahmed's (2004) terms, these affective practices 'stick' bodies together across generations and geographies, generating a feminist counter-public that exceeds both Zionist dehumanization and humanitarian pity.

Abulhawa thus offers a Palestinian feminist aesthetics that neither denies violence nor allows it to have the final word. The female body remains the primary battlefield, but it is also the primary site of reclamation. By insisting on pleasure and care as political acts, her fiction enacts a feminist righting that transforms the damaged Palestinian trope into the agential Palestinian subject who continues to imagine futures on her own terms.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Judith Butler (2009) articulates the foundational question that any serious analysis of Palestinian representation must confront when she asks under what conditions life becomes grievable. Grievability, in Butler's formulation, constitutes a socially mediated attribute rather than an inherent property of the human subject, for certain lives enter the collective frame of mourning while others remain structurally excluded from that frame. The Palestinian case exemplifies this differential distribution with particular acuity, since suffering circulates in relentless visibility across global media platforms, yet the lives extinguished seldom register as losses that demand sustained public acknowledgment. As Butler further argues, lives deemed ungrievable endure disproportionate exposure to violence, starvation, legal erasure, and differential precarity. Susan Abulhawa's novels intervene decisively at this juncture, refusing mere documentation of the ungrievable and instead performing a sustained narrative operation that reconfigures Palestinian lives as inherently grievable, thereby compelling readers to recognize the political mechanisms that sustain their disposability.

This operation reaches its fullest theoretical expression in the dual process that the present study has conceptualized through the deliberate pun 'writing/righting.' Writing accomplishes the initial inscription of violation, as the novels record with meticulous precision the archival suppressions, juridical infractions and corporeal devastations that constitute the continuing Nakba. Righting, by contrast, executes the subsequent ethical and political rectification. Through strategies of relational embedding, feminist reclamation of embodied pleasure, and critical engagement with human-rights frameworks, Abulhawa restores Palestinian subjects to historical agency and relational integrity. The pun captures an essential indivisibility, since inscription of the wrong simultaneously initiates its correction, while reorientation of narrative perspective fundamentally alters the frames that govern recognition of the hu-

man. Rita Felski (2008) identifies literature's distinctive capacity to unsettle habitual perception and reveal concealed connections, Abulhawa's oeuvre reflects this capacity systematically by rejecting the event-bound model of trauma, the spectacular isolation of the suffering body and the compensatory universalism of liberal human-rights discourse. At the center of this achievement lies a carefully calibrated progression from empathy to solidarity. Suzanne Keen (2007) demonstrates that empathy frequently remains limited to transient identification with individual characters, an affective response that leaves the reader's broader worldview undisturbed. Abulhawa mobilizes empathy at the outset through dense affective networks that include maternal protection amid sexual violence, sibling bonds across decades of separation, and erotic memory within carceral confinement, thereby generating an immediate identificatory response. This response, however, never settles into passive consumption. Megan Boler (1999) distinguishes passive empathy from testimonial reading, where the latter imposes responsibility upon the reader and converts witnessing into an ethical demand. Sensory depictions of violence appear always within relational contexts that prevent voyeurism and compel acknowledgment that Palestinian suffering results from structured political processes, processes in which readers themselves occupy positions of implication (Rothberg 2019). Ethical responsiveness constitutes the pivotal intermediary stage, for empathy becomes politicized precisely when readers recognize their own historical tethering to the conditions of Palestinian precarity. Butler (2009) frames this recognition as the foundation for a relation of radical equality that requires confrontation with the normative violence embedded in representational frames. Abulhawa stages such confrontation repeatedly, as when Amal's encounter with the cartographic erasure of her village in *Mornings in Jenin* implicates the reader in ongoing settler-colonial comfort, or when Nahr's direct address from solitary confinement in *Against the Loveless World* transforms empathic identification into a juridical summons that echoes Edward Said's (1984) formulation of the Palestinian 'permission to narrate' as subversive self-authorization.

Political solidarity emerges as the terminal point of this trajectory. Empathy opens affective channels, ethical responsiveness converts feeling into accountability and solidarity sustains commitment as shared praxis. The writing/righting dyad illuminates the entire movement, for writing documents violation while righting enacts the restoration that renders solidarity both conceivable and imperative. Nazmiyeh's buried testimonies and persistent replanting of trees in *The Blue Between Sky and Water* materialize this restorative impulse. Shalhoub-Kevorkian theorizes such gestures as form of resistance that challenge what she identifies as the 'necropolitical matrix'—a regime of control exercised over life and death itself (Ibid. 186). Sara Ahmed (2004) further describes how hope and desire generate adhesive alignments

across bodies and distances, producing solidarities that outlast the moment of reading. In this apparatus, Abulhawa's fiction ultimately cultivates what the present study terms as the 'human dimension' of literature i.e. the concrete textures of relational existence that no regime of erasure can fully extinguish. Sensory details of cooking, dancing and physical intimacy constitute a 'culture of feelings' in which grief and joy intertwine to affirm Palestinian humanity in its particularity rather than as an abstract universal. Literature becomes the privileged medium for sustaining this culture, transforming empathy into responsibility and prompting readers to recognize the Palestinian not merely as victim but as co-bearer of a shared world. In an era defined by the simultaneous hyper-visibility and political invisibility of Palestinian suffering, such literature performs indispensable work, teaching accurate feeling, ethical response and sustained action. Empathy refuses silence, while responsibility refuses abstraction. Through the practice of writing/righting, Abulhawa reorients the frames that determine grievability. Her fiction thus refuses the consolations of sentimentality or the comforts of moral certainty. Instead, it operates through implication while positioning the reader as an implicated subject called to account. Readers emerge transformed from passive spectators into participants within a collective labour of justice, for the measure of Palestinian grievability ultimately becomes the measure of our own humanity.

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