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The Weight of Displacement: Amal's Journey  
Through Trauma and Motherhood in Susan  
Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin*

**Abstract:** *When discussing Palestine, one cannot overlook the profound realities of displacement, exile, and the struggle to preserve identity. Mornings in Jenin by Susan Abulhawa offers an intimate and powerful portrayal of this struggle, encapsulating what it means to be Palestinian. The novel explores the intergenerational effects of displacement, where each character's experiences shift across generations yet remain rooted in shared pain and hope. This paper explores the life of Amal, focusing on her journey after the Nakba, the devastating expulsion of Palestinians in 1948 and how this trauma shapes her identity as a displaced individual. Amal's role as a mother in exile highlights the ongoing struggles of Palestinian women, who carry a broken past while trying to create stability. The study also examines how Israeli operations impact individual and collective Palestinian experiences. Through Amal's story, Mornings in Jenin becomes a powerful reflection of resistance and the enduring struggle to maintain identity.*

**Keywords:** exile, displacement, motherhood, palestinian identity, resistance, trauma.

## The Weight of Displacement: Amal’s Journey Through Trauma and Motherhood in Susan Abulhawa’s *Mornings in Jenin*

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### **Introduction**

In his novel, *Men in the Sun*, Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani writes “The Palestinians aim to become the children of their homeland, rather than its orphans” (Kanafani 101). The Palestinian fight for resistance, identity, and belonging in the face of decades of exile and displacement is encapsulated in this statement alone. The Nakba of 1948, is not simply a historical event but a reality that altered Palestinians' lives, memories, and futures where the anguish of displacement is felt intensely by every Palestinian. Abulhawa’s *Mornings in Jenin* explores the most horrific moments of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, capturing the experiences of four generations of the Abulheja family from Ein Hod. According to Malik and Butt, “The Nakba is not simply a historical event but an ongoing reality that continues to shape Palestinian identity and literature” (Malik & Butt 25). Like many others, Amal finds herself torn between the harsh realities of exile and the haunting memories of Palestine. Amal's trauma becomes a major aspect of who she is and, eventually, how she behaves as a mother, influencing her relationship with her daughter through her emotional detachment and silence. Amal's roughness and detachment serve as mechanisms to shield her daughter from the pain and suffering she experienced. She refrains from discussing her past to protect Sara from the harsh realities, operating under the belief that this will prevent Sara from experiencing similar grief and despair. Nonetheless, the silence signifies the weight of trauma transmitted from mother to daughter, even in the absence of verbal communication.

Amal’s inability to confront her past becomes an act of emotional self-preservation, but it also results in a strained and difficult relationship with Sara, who finds it hard to understand her mother’s emotional distance. As discussed by Muhamad in his analysis of intergenerational trauma in *Mornings in Jenin*, this silent transmission of trauma manifests through “the cumulative impact of historical and collective trauma and loss on personal identity” (Muhamad 150). Examined through the lens of resistance theory, Amal’s narrative underscores the tension between the need for survival and the longing for healing. Although resistance can manifest in various ways, Amal's experience demonstrates that survival often carries a significant emotional cost, especially when past traumas remain unaddressed or unacknowledged. In this context, resistance transcends mere opposition to external challenges; it also encompasses the necessity of confronting internalized suffering. By centering on

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Amal's life, this paper will examine her experiences following the Nakba, the tragic expulsion of Palestinians from their homeland in 1948, and how this trauma profoundly influences her identity as a displaced person. Amal's role as a mother in exile highlights the ongoing struggles of Palestinian women, who bear the burdens of a fractured history while striving to establish stability for their families amid an unpredictable present. Additionally, the research seeks to analyze how the actions of Israel affect not only individual figures but also reflect the collective experiences of the Palestinian population.

### **The Nakba and Amal's Journey through Trauma**

The enforced displacement of more than 700,000 Palestinians during the 1948 establishment of the state of Israel is known as the Nakba, meaning "catastrophe" in Arabic. "The destruction of over 500 villages during the Nakba established a foundation for the ongoing cycle of occupation and exile" (Ghanim 35), highlighting the lasting impact of displacement and territorial loss. This expulsion was not an isolated event but rather the beginning of an ongoing system of occupation, exile, and displacement. For Palestinians, it represents the erasure of their historical and cultural identities in addition to the loss of their land. Palestinian identity has thus become closely linked with displacement, which is expressed by Ghanim, who states that "displacement and statelessness are central to understanding the contemporary Palestinian identity" (Ghanim 35).

In *Mornings in Jenin*, Abulhawa meticulously captures this historical trauma, portraying how the Nakba shattered families and dispersed communities while forging a collective memory of resistance. Amal's childhood unfolds in the Jenin refugee camp, a place that portrays both physical loss and intangible memory where the impact of the Nakba is present in everyday life. Refugee camps, which were initially seen as temporary, became permanent homes for generations of Palestinians, reinforcing their identity as exiles. Amal's parents, Hasan and Dalia, carry the burden of their lost homeland, and Amal's upbringing is influenced by this unavoidable truth of her family's history, which is not merely a matter of the past but a continuing conflict that shapes her present and future.

For her, growing up in exile means being denied the sense of rootedness that others take for granted. For her, growing up in exile signifies a lack of the rootedness that others often enjoy. She inhabits a world where nothing feels stable, not her home, her family's safety, or even her own sense of self. Pal notes that "the psychological scars of living in exile manifest in feelings of despair and uncertainty, making it difficult for characters like Amal to form secure attachments" (Pal). The trauma of being displaced is intensified by the harsh reality of occupation where Amal's father is arrested and disappears, leaving her with a deep sense of abandonment and her mother, Dalia, who was once full of life and love, retreats into herself, embodying the silent suffering that so many Palestinian women endure. Amal's response to this trauma is both internal and external. She becomes fiercely independent,

relying on her intellect to survive. But she also develops deep-seated insecurities, struggling with feelings of worthlessness and detachment. Furthermore, as Wael J. Salam notes, "the trauma experienced by Amal not only shapes her identity but also instills a pervasive sense of fear and uncertainty that complicates her relationships" (Salam). Her identity becomes fragmented, caught between her Palestinian heritage and the external influences that affect her life.

For Palestinians, memory is an act of resistance. Since the Nakba, there has been a systematic attempt to erase Palestinian history, from the destruction of villages to the rewriting of narratives that frame Palestinians as aggressors rather than victims of colonial violence. In response, Palestinian literature, art, and oral traditions have become essential means of preserving their identity. In *Mornings in Jenin*, Amal inherits this legacy of remembrance from her family. Her father tells stories of their lost village, Ein Hod, describing it vividly that it becomes real in her imagination. Even as she grows older and moves away, these memories remain with her, shaping her sense of self. Yet, memory can also be a source of pain. Carrying the past means carrying the weight of loss, and for Amal, this burden sometimes feels too heavy to bear: "Israeli occupation exposes us very young to the extremes of our emotions, until we cannot feel except in the extreme" (Abulhawa 75).

Amal's connection with memory transforms as she experiences various stages of her life. In her childhood, memory serves as a means of connection and a way to remember the homeland she has never experienced. However, in her adult years, it shifts into a source of sorrow, constantly reminding her of all that she has lost. As noted by Edward Said, "the achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever" (Said 173). This illustrates Amal's internal conflict as she deals with emotions of loss and disconnection, feelings that become more pronounced as she faces the realities of living in exile. This reflects Amal's struggle as she grapples with feelings of loss and detachment, which intensify as she confronts the realities of her life in exile. She grapples with the choice between clinging to her past or let it go in order to survive.

As Amal distances herself from Palestine, her sense of identity grows more fragmented. She is placed in an orphanage in Jerusalem, where her feelings of displacement intensify, and later moves to the United States for her education where each relocation deepens her sense of alienation. In America, she is no longer just a refugee but is an outsider, marked by her foreignness and by a history that few around her understand. Oulwan emphasizes that "the experience of exile creates a dual consciousness, where individuals navigate between their past and present identities, often feeling disconnected from both" (Oulwan 10). Amal's struggle with identity is emblematic of the Palestinian diaspora experience.

Many displaced Palestinians find themselves caught between two worlds, unable to fully assimilate into their new countries while also being disconnected from their homeland. This feeling of being "in-between" represents a form of exile that extends beyond geography into the realm of the psychological. Although Amal is physically distant from Palestine, she cannot break free from its grip

on her life. Her identity is still intertwined with a land she has never fully experienced, and as she attempts to establish a new existence, she brings along the scars of her history. This is particularly clear in her connections with others, as she struggles to trust people completely. Having been raised in an environment where safety is merely an illusion, she has difficulty lowering her defenses, fearing that genuine affection will inevitably lead to loss. Amal's journey highlights the complexities of exile, not just as a physical state but also as an emotional and existential experience. Her story reflects the broader Palestinian struggle of the search for belonging in a world that continues to deny their right to exist.

### **A Mother in Exile**

Motherhood, in the context of trauma and displacement, is never just about raising a child but is about survival, inheritance, and resistance. For Amal, her journey as a mother is shaped not only by her love for her daughter but also by the scars of her past, which influence her way of nurturing Sara where her trauma drives her to build a future for Sara that is different from her own, yet in doing so, she repeats the pattern of emotional detachment and silence. Furthermore, Palestinian women frequently experience motherhood as a "constant state of fear, grief, and anger," as they go through the challenges that are imposed on them by occupation and displacement (Institute for Palestine Studies). This environment forces mothers like Amal to prepare their children for grief and unpredictability, making it more complicated for them to connect emotionally. In literature, Palestinian motherhood, has often been framed as a site of both suffering and defiance.

In *Mornings in Jenin*, Amal's relationship with her daughter portrays the complexities of motherhood in exile, where survival often becomes more important than emotional warmth. Her resistance is clear in her determination to protect Sara from the realities of war and displacement. As noted by Salam, "Amal's resistance is manifested in her fierce protection of Sara, driven by a desire to shield her from the traumas of their shared history" (Salam 45). However, this protection comes with a cost by refusing to share her past, Amal eventually passes her trauma in a different form. Amal's approach to motherhood is shaped by the loss and suffering that she faced where her life has been defined by displacement, war, and grief, and these experiences leave her emotionally guarded. She has learned that attachment often leads to pain her father disappeared, her mother was emotionally distant, and she lost loved ones to violence. As a result, she develops a protective shell that extends into her role as a mother.

From a psychological perspective, Amal shows the signs of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which takes shape in her inability to freely express her feelings openly. PTSD is a delayed response to traumatic events that disrupts cognitive and emotional processing. Cathy Caruth's trauma theory frames PTSD through the concept of belatedness, where trauma is not fully experienced during the event but resurfaces through intrusive symptoms like flashbacks, nightmares, or emotional

detachment. She describes trauma as an event that “fragments consciousness” and creates a “disjointed narrative,” leaving survivors unable to linguistically articulate their experiences initially (Caruth 6). This fragmentation aligns with clinical definitions of PTSD, which include symptoms such as hyperarousal, avoidance of trauma-related stimuli, and persistent negative emotional states. Caruth emphasizes that trauma’s impact lies in its unassimilated nature, where the mind cannot integrate the event into coherent memory, leading to a cyclical “return of the repressed” (Caruth 17).

According to research on intergenerational trauma, people who have gone through severe trauma frequently suffer from emotional balance and attachment, which can affect their parenting styles. Intergenerational trauma is defined as trauma experienced by one generation that reverberates in the lives of their descendants, influencing their psychological, emotional, and even physiological development. According to *The Handbook of DOHaD and Society*, “the term ‘intergenerational trauma’ describes how trauma experienced in one generation can reverberate in the lives of descendants,” shaping individual, family, and community health across generations through both social and biological mechanisms, including epigenetic changes and learned behaviors (Richardson et al. 233). As Salam notes, “Amal’s emotional detachment is a survival mechanism shaped by her traumatic past, where vulnerability is equated with danger” (Salam 50). Amal’s harshness toward Sara arises not from a lack of love but rather from her belief that vulnerability is a weakness in a world that has offered her no kindness.

This internalized trauma is a common experience among Palestinian women, many of whom have had to raise children in refugee camps, conflict zones, or exile. As Jain and Agrawal observe, “the interplay between trauma and parenting creates a cycle where emotional expression is stifled, impacting the next generation” (Jain & Agrawal 115). Ensuring their children’s survival often means suppressing their emotions and focusing on practical resilience. In Amal’s case, this results in a mother who is present but emotionally distant, trying to prepare her daughter for a world where love and loss are inextricably linked.

One of Amal’s defining choices as a mother is her decision not to speak about her past. She believes that by keeping the painful details of her life, she can shield Sara from the burden of history. This act of silence is not just a coping mechanism also as a way to resist and attempt to break the cycle of inherited trauma that has plagued her family. Alqahtani emphasizes that “the act of silence in families affected by trauma often leads to a disconnection from cultural identity, which can have lasting consequences for future generations” (Alqahtani 2024)

However, silence can be both a form of protection and a form of oppression. By choosing not to share Sara’s Palestinian heritage and the challenges faced by her people, Amal unintentionally separates her daughter from her origins. While she wants to spare Sara the pain of displacement, she also prevents her from fully understanding who she is.

This tension highlights the dual nature of trauma, while it is painful to remember, forgetting can be just as damaging. Colonial and occupying forces often attempt to erase the histories of the people they subjugate, whether through rewriting accounts or silencing voices. By choosing silence, Amal inadvertently mirrors this erasure within her own household. Her decision not to share her story, while well-intentioned, aligns with the very forces that seek to erase Palestinian history. Yet, Amal's silence is not a complete surrender. In her own way, she is challenging the notion that Palestinians are destined to suffer eternally. She wants Sara to have a life that is not defined by war and exile. This is where Amal's resistance diverges from traditional forms it is not outward rebellion but an attempt to reclaim agency over her daughter's future.

The emotional distance between Amal and Sara creates a strained mother-daughter relationship. Sara, who grows up without a clear understanding of her mother's past, senses the walls that Amal has built around herself. Muhamad notes that "children of refugees often inherit their parents' fears and anxieties without always understanding their origins" (Muhamad 80). She does not experience the warmth and openness that many children expect from their mothers. Instead, she encounters a woman who is strong yet distant, loving yet unapproachable. This dynamic reflects a common struggle among children of refugees and war survivors that they inherit their parents' fears and anxieties without always understanding their origins.

Sara, though unaware of the full extent of her mother's trauma, feels its effects in the way Amal interacts with her. As Muhamad emphasizes, "the emotional distance created by trauma can lead to relationships that are present yet fraught with unspoken pain" (Muhamad 85). At the same time, Sara's frustration with her mother reflects the broader generational gap between those who experienced the Nakba firsthand and those who inherit its consequences. Many young Palestinians, especially those in exile, struggle to connect with a history that is not directly theirs but still defines their existence. This generational tension is a critical aspect of resistance literature, illustrating the ongoing struggle to keep history alive while also forging new identities.

Despite the emotional complexities of Amal's motherhood, her role as a mother is ultimately an act of resistance. In a world that seeks to erase Palestinian existence, raising a Palestinian child is a form of defiance. Every Palestinian mother who ensures that her child survives, despite the odds, is resisting the forces that seek to eliminate them. As Benattia and Boumakhlouf articulate, "the act of mothering itself becomes a political statement, a refusal to succumb to the erasure of identity" (Benattia & Boumakhlouf 2020). For Amal, this resistance is not loud or overt. She does not teach Sara revolutionary slogans or immerse her in nationalist rhetoric. Instead, she ensures that Sara has opportunities that she never did like education, stability, and a future away from the refugee camps. This is her act of defiance, proving that despite everything she has faced, she can give her daughter a life that is not entirely defined by suffering.

Palestinian women have historically led the charge in resistance, engaging in both political activism and the essential role of motherhood. In occupied territories, women who give birth defy attempts at demographic erasure. In exile, mothers who teach their children Arabic, who tell them stories of Palestine, who pass down traditions, ensure that their people's culture survives despite displacement. Amal's approach to motherhood, though flawed, aligns with this broader tradition. Even when she tries to distance herself from her past, her very existence as a Palestinian mother in exile represents a form of resistance.

As Sara grows older, she inevitably begins to uncover her mother's past and her own Palestinian identity. Amal's silence cannot erase the truth but can only delay it. When Sara finally learns about her heritage, she experiences a mix of confusion, anger, and newfound clarity. This moment is crucial because it represents the way resistance evolves across generations. While the first-generation experiences direct trauma, the second generation processes it differently, often seeking to reclaim the identities that their parents tried to suppress. As stated by Khatib, "the second generation often grapples with the legacies of trauma and silence left by their parents, leading them to seek out their own narratives" (Khatib 2020). This generational shift is central to Palestinian resistance literature, where younger characters often take on the responsibility of continuing the struggle in their own ways.

Sara's eventual confrontation with her identity reflects the resilience of memory. No matter how much history is buried, it resurfaces. In this sense, Amal's efforts to shield her daughter ultimately fail, but in failing, they also succeed. By leaving gaps in Sara's knowledge, Amal allows her daughter the opportunity to discover the truth independently, confirming that Palestinian identity is not merely passed down but actively reclaimed. This transition mirrors the real-world experiences of many Palestinian families. Maghfiroh and Khoiri emphasize that "the act of storytelling among Palestinians serves as a powerful means of cultural preservation and resistance" (Maghfiroh & Khoiri 2020). As older generations pass down fragmented memories, younger Palestinians take on the role of storytellers, historians, and activists. They ensure that despite exile, despite silence, the Palestinian narrative continues.

## **Conclusion**

Amal's experience with trauma and motherhood is both deeply personal and significantly political. It captures the wider Palestinian narrative, showcasing the enduring impact of the Nakba, the challenges of exile, and the role of memory as a form of resistance. Her struggles and choices reflect the reality of many displaced Palestinians, highlighting the ways in which trauma, identity, and resistance are intricately connected. Amal's journey as a mother is one of contradictions, embodying love and detachment, silence and resistance, survival and grief. Her choices reflect the struggles of Palestinian mothers who must confront trauma while trying to give their children a better future. Although she tries

to shield Sara from their past, she ultimately ensures that the narrative of Palestine continues. In *Mornings in Jenin*, Amal's motherhood is not just a personal journey but a political act. By raising a daughter in exile, by surviving despite everything, she becomes part of the larger Palestinian resistance. In the end, her legacy is not just one of trauma but of resilience, proving that even in displacement, Palestinian identity endures.

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