

Shackled Vows: A Feminist Critique of Marriage in Susan Abulhawa's
Against the Loveless World.

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ABSTRACT

The research paper analyzes the complex relationship between married couples through the lens of female characters in Palestinian author Susan Abulhawa's novel *Against the Loveless World*. The married women in the novel have been disrespected, mistreated and abandoned in the name of marriage. Nahr, the protagonist of the novel has married Mhammad, a revolutionary but is soon abandoned by her husband. Her mother has also been shown as a victim of her father's infidelity. The novel also provides a glimpse into the life of an Indian maid, working in Kuwait named Deepa and her husband Ajay, who takes another wife as he believes that his wife Deepa is infertile. This paper tries to be a testimony of how the

female characters in Susan Abulhawa's novel perceive and undergo the difficulties of married life in a male dominated Palestinian society. It also delves deep into how various women in this novel gets affected by the power dynamics within the family.

Keywords: Marriage, Abuse, Infidelity, Abandonment, Patriarchy.

The destiny that society traditionally offers women is marriage. Even today, most women are, were or plan to be married or they suffer from not being so. Marriage is the reference by which the single woman is defined, whether she is frustrated by, disgusted at, or even indifferent to this institution (Simon de Beauvoir 502).

Palestinian Literature serves as a mirror reflecting the way of life, struggles and hardships that the Palestinian people have been enduring for a long period of time. Through their rich language and unique narrative techniques, Palestinian writers try to draw the attention of people from various parts of the world towards Palestinian issues which have been neglected by the mainstream media over a long period of time. The characters in their fiction act as representatives of the real people who are suffering on a day-to-day basis in war torn lands. Thus, Palestinian literature has its own importance in the global literary landscape, opening a new perspective from the Palestinian viewpoint as it expresses the resistance of Palestinian people against the Jewish invasion, and records their strength to imagine a better future for the country.

Susan Abulhawa is a Palestinian-American novelist and poet who is well known for expressing the long-standing rivalry between Israel and Palestine from the Palestinian standpoint. She was born in a Palestinian refugee family and grew up in various countries before she settled in America. Her works mostly deal with themes such as displacement, identity and resistance. Her first novel *Mornings in Jenin* (2006) is a highly acclaimed one, which portrays the story of a Palestinian family through three generations. Her second novel *The Blue Between Sky and Water* (2015) is again a multi-generational story of a

Palestinian family, conveyed through the narrative technique of magical realism. Her third novel, *Against the Loveless World* (2019) is the story of a woman named Nahr, who remembers her past life in Kuwait as well as Jordan and Palestine while being a prisoner in Israeli high-tech prison cell, The Cube. Steven Salatia in her review on *Against the Loveless World* states that it is a novel about love and alienation against a political setting:

Despite its unmistakable investment in Palestine, *Against the Loveless World* isn't what I would call a political novel. It's a meditation on love and alienation in a setting that is by nature political, or imbued in multilingual politics, facing the West in audacious vulnerability. Its poetics can be harsh, and its heart breaks can be soothing. Such is the burden and blessing of the Palestinian novelist. ("Exhilaration and Contemplation")

Against the Loveless World by Susan Abulhawa revolves around a Palestinian woman named Nahr, imprisoned in an Israeli high-tech prison named Cube. Nahr is born in a Palestinian refugee family in Kuwait. Her family along with other Palestinians is forced to leave Kuwait after the Palestinian Liberation Organization supports Iraq to invade Kuwait in 1990. Moving from Kuwait to Jordan and then to West Bank in Palestine makes her understand the hardships of living in Palestine and the resilience of her own country counterparts against the Israeli occupation. By the end of the novel Abulhawa shows Nahr as a woman who welcomes her Palestinian identity wholeheartedly and even considers it a pride being a prisoner in an Israeli cell.

Though Susan Abulhawa's novels primarily deal with Palestinian identity, this paper tries to read *Against the Loveless World* from the perspective of some of the female characters. This paper also tries to analyze how a prominent female novelist Susan Abulhawa has portrayed the women in her novel as victims of inequality in marital life. Elizabeth Cady Stanton states about marital life as, "The marriage relation should be an equal relationship" (202). But here the women have been abandoned, cheated and

disrespected throughout, which the readers can't neglect in the broader historical sense of the novel. The protagonist of the novel Nahr, is married to Mhammad, a man of her choice. Mhammad, at first is shown as a Palestinian revolutionary who has spent seven years of his life in prison. He comes to Kuwait to visit his aunt, and this is when he gets a chance to meet Nahr. When reading the novel, the readers can understand that Nahr's interest towards Mhammad is not because she likes him. It is because she believes that her friend Sabah is interested in him. She wants to woo him before her friend. The jealousy and the complex of being physically more attractive than her friend drives her into a relationship which she is unable to cherish for a lifetime.

Mhammad too starts to like Nahr, and their families decide to proceed with their marriage. But Nahr's mother believes that Mhammad is too old for Nahr to be her life partner. At first everything goes smoothly in their marital life, but when time passes both seem not to enjoy each other's company. There is an awkward silence between the couple. Mhammad addresses his wife as Tamara in many instances but when she enquires about it, he just rubs it off. Suddenly one day Mhammad disappears without even taking his things. Nahr tries to find him but finally gives up. Even though her own mother and many of her well-wishers suggest a divorce, she waits patiently for years and after a long gap, she decides to separate from him legally. Nahr's short-lived relationship with Mhammad is penned by Abulhawa in a detailed manner as it shapes the future episodes of the novel.

Nahr gets to know the real reason behind her abandonment when she meets her husband's family and his brother in Palestine. She is shocked to find out that he is homosexual and that he has married her to hide his sexuality from society and not out of his love for her. His arrest is also due to his physical intimacy with a male Israeli soldier named Itamar whom he addresses as Tamara. As the novel itself runs from the perspective of Nahr, one can understand the betrayal that Nahr has faced in the relationship. Though Nahr has no real love towards him, she is loyal to him. But Mhammad has used her just to hide his

homosexuality from the world, vandalizing her value in the world as a woman as well as a human being. Through Nahr's disastrous marriage with her husband, Abulhawa brings in the theme of abandonment in marriage and how it becomes a reason for others to humiliate a woman in the society.

Infidelity in a marital life seems to have different consequences and experiences for both men and women. A woman's infidelity is seen as a scandal while a man's unfaithfulness is mostly neglected. In conservative societies, a male's extramarital affair is covered up just to save the family's name and the woman who marries him is forced to accept her disloyal husband without any objection. Susan Abulhawa reflects this scenario in the novel through the protagonist Nahr's mother. Nahr recalls how her father named her Yaqoot, after one of his former girlfriends. On seeing the name on the birth certificate, Nahr's mother became furious and expressed her anger towards her husband. She is presented as a vulnerable one in the relationship, who cannot do anything other than shout and scream at her husband who has destroyed their purity of their relationship. This incident is described as follows:

Yaqoot is an unusual name for Palestinians. One finds it more among the Iraqis, which is why I figure my father's lover was a daughter of Babylon. It means "ruby" and everyone agrees it's a rich and resonant Arabic name. But when Mama saw the birth certificate, she screamed and cried and hit my father. She smashed all the plates in our house, hurling a few at him as he ducked left and right. He let her vent, apologized, swore Mama was the only woman he loved, and promised he wouldn't do it again. They probably made love afterward, had a good run together for a while, then the whole scenario was repeated with another woman (Abulhawa 20).

Nahr's father cheated on her mother not only once. He was a man who continuously cheated on his wife with multiple women. When Nahr's mother got pregnant for the second time she threatened her husband not to name their child after his girlfriend. She was very happy when it was a boy child, as she didn't want to tolerate the sign of his infidelity. The mother's character has been drawn by Abulhawa in a

way that shows how women are submissive in their marital life in global as well as Middle East context. She knows that her husband is continuously cheating on her, but she is not willing to take a step which will create havoc in her marital status.

Susan Abulhawa also mentions a character named Deepa, who has been working as a maid in Kuwait for nearly twenty years. She is presented as just another woman, who has been treated unfairly by her spouse. Deepa and her husband Ajay remain childless after years of marriage which makes Ajay think that his wife is infertile. The perception of his wife being infertile makes him take a second wife. It is only after his second marriage that he realizes that it is not Deepa who is infertile, but he is the one who is impotent. Now Ajay, who abandoned Deepa for not bearing him a child, comes to her begging, to take him as her husband. This scene shows the double standards in marital life when it comes to infertility. An infertile woman is looked down by her own husband as well as her family but when it comes to a man, his wife must accept and tolerate him.

Susan Abulhawa in this novel portrays the hypocrisy of men against women in the society through the character of Ajay. Though the character is not seen much in the novel, Abulhawa manages to present the male hypocrisy through this character in a subtle way to capture the attention of the readers. Ajay not only abandons Deepa, but also his second wife when he discovers that he is impotent, as he believes that it will reveal his inefficiency to the world if he remains with her. To escape from the humiliation of society, he turns to his first wife leaving the second one behind. Ajay's marital life with both his wives seems to be dysfunctional and the author's words to make sure that the character has dug his own grave through his cuckold nature.

Deepa, a working woman, is shown as a character who is still dependent on the husband who left her, which is a representation of the South Asian and Middle Eastern societies in which a woman's identity and life largely revolve around the men in their lives. Deepa's reaction on accepting her husband who has

betrayed her is not mentioned in the novel by the author. This seems to be a conscious decision of Abulhawa, as it looks like she wants to portray this as a completely normal thing for a woman like Deepa. She even begs her employer Um Buraq to bring her unfaithful husband to Kuwait. This is the evidence that this female character is a staunch follower of gender prejudices in marital life even though she is a victim of her husband's betrayal.

Susan Abulhawa shows the female characters showing resistance towards the political chaos directed towards them due to their Palestinian identity. But in their own homes, they are still shackled by the patriarchal norms. The married women are subjected to inequality in relationships. It has become a common thing in their lives. They are subjected to issues such as violence, abandonment, cheating etc. in their marriage. Only the protagonist Nahr has come out of the unwanted relationship in the novel. Other female characters like her mother and Deepa, are still struck in the unholy matrimony. The author presents them as such, to provide us a reflection of the real world in which some women are still trapped in a suffocating marital life.

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