

## Cultural Resistance In Susan Abulhawa's *The Blue Between Sky And Water*

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### Abstract

*The current paper examines cultural resistance in Susan Abulhawa's *The Blue Between Sky and Water* (2015). It is an attempt to show how the colonisers' occupation of Palestine resulted in the deterioration of its culture and led to the shattering displacement of its people. It also reveals that the selected novel serves as both a literary act that exemplifies cultural resistance and a means of fostering the national pride of the Palestinians in their struggle against Zionist colonisers. Besides, the novel in question highlights the cultural deterioration of the Palestinians as a consequence of the disastrous arrival of the Zionist settlers and the crisis that followed. This study observes the epic history of the Palestinians and their ongoing struggle for independence. The theoretical analysis of this paper is based on the work of the postcolonial theorist Edward Said and is set within the context of postcolonial theory. The article also explores the tragic effects of colonisation, which heavily influenced the people of Palestine in the novel, leading to their marginalisation and disappointment. Eventually, this article reveals that the events and characters of the novel counteract dehumanisation and the erasure of the cultural identity of the Palestinians.*

**Keywords:** *Susan Abulhawa, cultural resistance, *The Blue Between Sky and Water* national pride, Zionist colonisers, Edward Said, occupation, Palestine and marginalization.*

### 1. Introduction

Without a doubt, the one distinctive condition that Arab Palestinians have been confronted with throughout the twentieth century is the fact that, in contrast to other indigenous people in the area, they have not been in possession of a homeland of their own after World War II. The fact that they were made to feel the effects of their political marginalisation made the gravity of their destiny much more severe. Furthermore, from the very beginning of their opposition to what they clearly saw as the alien control of their land, they strongly objected to Zionism because of its foreign roots in the area and its status as a minority political ideology. Likewise, it is crucial to acknowledge that the early expressions of Jewish presence in Palestine embraced a position of minority prejudice with respect to the dominant majority.

The issue that the current article tackles revolves around contesting and opposing Zionist colonialism, as well as exposing an encouraging and realistic depiction of Palestine different from the false one formed by the colonisers, in addition to defying dominant narratives and fostering national pride in Susan Abulhawa's *The Blue Between Sky and Water*. The importance of this paper lies in challenging stereotypes and misrepresentations through means of cultural resistance. It is also about debating the consequences of the Zionist occupation of Palestine, turning the country into chaos, leading to Palestinians'

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displacement, and causing thousands of them to be refugees around the world. It is also about the determination to challenge and counter the colonial representation of Palestine. Moreover, the current study endeavours to challenge stereotypes and misrepresentations through cultural resistance in Abulhawa's selected novel and as a response to the suffocating occupation of Palestine by the Zionist colonisers, trailed by the declaration of the State of Israel after the displacement and uprooting of the indigenous people.

Reinterpreting Abulhawa's *The Blue Between Sky and Water* according to Said's concept of cultural resistance is intended to show how important it is to use literature as a means of resistance. This study is set within the postcolonial theory and is based on Edward Said's concept, cultural resistance, which he tackles in *The Question of Palestine*. The novel aims at dismantling colonial narrative and to assert the Palestinian identity. The purpose of displacing Palestinians from their homes, confiscating their lands and restricting their freedom by the Israeli occupiers, was to establish domination and deprive victims of their agency and dignity. The purpose of using collective punishments against Palestinians was to make them scapegoats for other individuals who had the intention to resist foreign occupation set by the Zionist settlers. This article tries to reveal that *The Blue Between Sky and Water* serves as a means to safeguard the Palestinians' collective memory and national identity. Said makes the point that ideas about Palestinian national identity have a significant influence on Palestinian behavior and attitudes. The Palestinian writers have faced and overcome the distinct obstacles of Palestinian existence, according to Said's perspective. Consequently, a subgenre of Palestinian literature has emerged, known as "resistance" writing, which is characterised by Arab authors asserting their distinct identities and challenging political, cultural, and social oppression.

This study is intended to employ a document analysis in which implementations of cultural resistance through challenging stereotypes and misrepresentations of Palestinians by Zionist colonisers will be analysed using Susan Abulhawa's novel *The Blue Between Sky and Water*. Edward W. Said's concept of "cultural resistance" will be mainly utilized to analyse the target aspects. It should be clear that the current article tries to answer the following questions: 1- How does *The Blue Between Sky and Water* explore cultural resistance within the Palestinian context? 2- In what ways does Abulhawa's selected novel challenge stereotypes and misrepresentations through cultural resistance?

## 2. Said's Cultural Resistance

This article applies Postcolonial Theory to Susan Abulhawa's *The Blue Between Sky and Water* (2015) as its theoretical framework. The goal of the Postcolonial theory is to undermine the standard narratives about colonial rule. There is no denying that Postcolonial Theory is an effort to pinpoint the negative effects of the colonial era and find solutions to them. Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Aijaz Ahmad, and others study the root causes of identity crises by delving into multiculturalism and the collision of civilizations. Postcolonial theory, in its simplest form, is an examination of colonialism and its impact on both the coloniser and the colonised. It provides a perspective that addresses colonialism and the intricate power relations that arise during and after the colonial period. In one of the definitions of what is Postcolonialism, Ashcroft et al., (1989) posited: "We use the term 'post-colonial . . . to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonisation to the present day" (2).

This study is based on Said's concept of cultural resistance, which he tackled in his major work, *The Question of Palestine*, which is worth considering for what it tells us about the process of constructing an individual's identity formation. In the 1970s, with the publication of Said's *Orientalism* (1978), postcolonial studies emerged as a distinct field of study. This book's most significant contribution is its author's argument that the Western

concept of the "Orient" is itself a product of colonial imperialism. For Said, the study of the Orient "was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted a binary opposition between the familiar (Europe, the West, "us") and the strange (the Orient, the East, "them") (Loomba, 47). In *The Question of Palestine* (1979), the objective of Said is to explain the stance of the Palestinian people to a Western audience, with a specific focus on the American audience. This text provides a fervent depiction of the inequities that were associated with the establishment of the contemporary Israeli state. It also endeavors to "write back" by demonstrating that there exists an opposing narrative to the prevalent notion that Arabs are terrorists and perpetrators of violence against innocent individuals. Said presents a persuasive case for the need to reevaluate the discrimination experienced by Palestinian populations across the divide. Said posits that comprehending the predicament of the Palestinian populace hinges on the fervor and fervency with which Jews embraced the notion of a national territory. The notion of a divine covenant, recognized by Lord Balfour as the fundamental impetus behind the significant appeal of Zionism, implied that the Palestinian presence was excluded, right from the outset, from the European and Jewish visions of an Israeli state.

Furthermore, Palestine's obscurity is both a consequence of Zionist propaganda and an Orientalist discourse. This discourse has an "entrenched cultural attitude toward Palestinians deriving from age-old Western prejudices about Islam, the Arabs, and the Orient" (qtd. in Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 119). Said's objective is to guarantee the acknowledgment of Palestine's persistent presence and its populace's actuality. In brief, he raises the inquiry as to the ethical justification for compelling Palestinians to relinquish their demands for their national identity, territory, and fundamental human entitlements. The construction of victims necessitates Said's implicit construction of the Occident (Israel) and the Orient (Palestine).

### **3. The Representations of Cultural Resistance in *The Blue Between Sky and Water***

Undoubtedly, the Zionist occupation of Palestine resulted in cultural degradation and ultimately led to the oppression of the indigenous population, forcing them into refugee status. The current analysis reveals that *The Blue Between Sky and Water* serves as a kind of cultural resistance against the Zionist colonisers, while also serving as a means to safeguard the Palestinians' collective memory and national identity. It also examines the connection between the heroic past of the Palestinian people and their ongoing liberation struggle, and how this aligns with the growing sense of national identity among the Palestinian characters in the selected work.

To get a comprehensive understanding of the manifestations of "cultural resistance" in *The Blue Between Sky and Water*, it is essential to provide an elucidation of the specific work under consideration. In this novel, Abulhawa chronicles the experiences of a Palestinian family over many generations, elucidating their responses to adversity, displacement, and resistance against colonial Zionism. Edward Said in his seminal work, *The Question of Palestine* defines cultural resistance as follows:

As a consequence, much of what Palestinians do, and much of what they think about, concerns Palestinian identity . . . On the other hand, the specific travail and the concrete hardships of being Palestinian have exercised the talents of all of our writers, so much so that Arabic literature (which does not have an ample secular tradition of autobiographical or confessional writing) now boasts a genre of Palestinian, so-called "resistance" writing, which means a writing of self-assertion and of resistance to anonymity, political oppression, and so on. (155)

There are other figures who also highlight the concept of cultural resistance. For instance, Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), emphasises the importance of cultural resistance as a strategy to counteract dehumanisation and the erasure of cultural identity. He also emphasises the role of "the formerly colonised intellectual . . . who fights for the recognition of a national culture and its right to exist" (49). In fact, he thought that it was crucial to oppose colonial tyranny by asserting and recovering one's cultural identity. The colonised might reject the notion of their inferiority by reclaiming their original cultures, customs, languages, and histories. Fanon states that culture should serve as a tool for self-determination and group cohesion. He urged the colonised to take pride in their history and develop a strong sense of community. He strongly argues that cultural resistance, as a means of opposing colonial authority, allows the colonised to draw strength from their common experiences, history, and customs. Cultural resistance is a significant aspect in *The Blue Between Sky and Water*, as the characters endeavour to preserve their identities and traditions against challenging circumstances. The characters in the narrative have a profound emotional connection to their respective territories.

In a similar vein, Cabral (2015) writes: "The importance of culture as a tool of resistance to foreign domination lies in the fact that culture is the vigorous manifestation of the physical and historical reality of society" (3).

Furthermore, Thiong'o argues that the attempt to integrate colonial cultural norms within the colonial subjects is a successful method for empowering the native people. Colonisation, when applied to the mind, requires the essential incorporation of decolonisation of the mind as a means of resisting colonial control, which encompasses cultural and linguistic aspects (5).

*The Blue Between Sky and Water* illuminates the rich and varied cultural legacy of Palestine. Abulhawa focuses on Beit Daras, a little village that represents many Palestinian villages and cities as she writes: "A Village of Villages Surrounded by gardens and olive groves and bordered to the north by a lake, in the thirteenth century Beit Daras was on the mail route from Cairo to Damascus" (13). The village's location between gardens, olive trees, and a neighbouring lake exemplifies the agricultural richness of Palestine and the resulting affluence derived from its luxurious landscape. Beit Daras is located on the primary route between Cairo and Damascus. This exemplifies the strategic importance of Palestine as a central point for commercial and cultural exchange between Asia, North Africa, and Southeastern Europe. The existence of a "caravanserai" in Beit Daras, an ancient inn located along a major route, illustrates the pivotal role of Palestine in the development of commerce and transportation. These inns functioned as gathering spots for people from diverse locations, facilitating the exchange of knowledge about each other's customs and cultural norms. The caravanserai, constructed by the Mamluks during the 14th century, serves as a remarkable illustration of the prevailing artistry and scientific knowledge of that era. The persistent use of the term "el-Khan" by the local population throughout several centuries serves as evidence of the exceptional architectural design and construction of this structure: "Overlooking Beit Daras were the remnants of a castle built by the Crusaders in the early 1100s, which in turn was perched on a citadel that had been built by Alexander the Great more than a millennium before that" (ibid). Arguably, the significance of Palestine is shown by its historical landmarks, including a Crusader castle and a fortification built by Alexander the Great. These sites serve as concrete representations of the region's varied cultural legacy, which has been influenced by the existence of several civilizations throughout time. The presence of children playing and young couples seeking refuge in these historic buildings serves as a monument to the enduring cultural resilience of the Palestinian people. During that period, Palestine emerged as an important cultural centre as a result of its advantageous location near several significant trade routes. The region's cultural variety stems from the many influences

brought by the numerous individuals who have passed it, bringing not just goods but also ideas, languages, and traditions. The abundance of mentions about gardens and olive trees suggests that agriculture has been a pivotal factor in the region's prosperity. Due to their association with peace and constancy, olive trees have great cultural and economic importance in Palestine. Thus, Beit Daras stands as proof of Palestine's historical importance as a centre for commerce, cultural interchange, and agricultural abundance. Palestine's enduring cultural heritage is a symbol of national pride and resilience, despite the many adversities and conflicts that have afflicted the nation throughout the course of its history.

Moreover, Abulhawa discusses how the Palestinian social structure differs from other cultures in the selected novel to reflect the uniqueness of the Palestinian culture. She discusses the coexistence of familial clans in the Palestinian community of Beit Daras and the organisation of its social structure: "There were five Major family clans in Beit Daras, and each had its neighborhood. The Baroud, Maqademeh, and Abu al-Shamaleh families were the most prestigious. They owned most of the farms, orchards, beehives, and pastures" (17). This quote demonstrates the intricate historical framework and social structure of Beit Daras, particularly by highlighting the disparities in social status and repute among the prominent families. Beit Daras has five important families, each with its own unique residential neighbourhood. These clans likely had a significant impact on the social organisation of Beit Daras.

The Baroud, Maqademeh, and Abu al-Shamaleh families are considered the most prestigious families in this community. These families have substantial wealth and have majority control of the agricultural resources in the area, such as farms, orchards, beehives, and pastures. This suggests that they had a higher social status and exerted more influence in the society. This also suggests that the Baraka family lacks similar social status compared to the other influential families: "Baraka was Nazmiyah, Mamdouh, and Mariam's family name, but it was nothing to brag about. They live in the Masriyeen neighborhood, a ragtag muddle of Palestinians without pedigree who had settled in the poorest part of Beit Daras" (ibid). This quote discusses the elements that might be linked to the preservation of cultural identity and heritage despite challenges posed by societal and historical barriers. The actions and historical path of the Baraka family demonstrate a significant level of tenacity and determination in safeguarding their cultural legacy, and therefore exemplifying a kind of cultural resistance. Within the broader context of the historical events described, we come across instances of cultural opposition that stem from the aforementioned historical events. The historical origins of the Baraka family are marked by a certain level of mystery. The people in issue had immigrated to Beit Daras from Egypt some five centuries ago, during which period they had either hidden or forsaken their hereditary surnames. The reasons for their flight from Egypt are unclear and might be related to avoiding a tribe dispute or a perceived act of dishonour. The exact details of the occurrence are hidden. So, despite being marginalised, the characters maintain their Palestinian identity. The Palestinians affirm their cultural legacy and oppose efforts to remove or lessen their connection to their origins.

Abulhawa further recounts historical events and examines the prolonged resistance of the inhabitants of Gaza against the Macedonian army headed by Alexander the Great, which lasted for a duration of five months. Evidently, the inhabitants of Gaza are approaching it from a cultural standpoint. The Gazans' defiance against external colonisers, in which they battled to save their city and cultural heritage, demonstrated their determination to preserve their way of life, defend their country, safeguard their people, and preserve their culture. The historical event is delineated as follows:

In this same place in 332 B.C., Alexander the Great had built fortifications after laying siege to a conquered Gaza, some thirty-five kilometers to the south. Enraged by five months of Gazan resistance to his Macedonian army's march toward Egypt, he finally broke through, killing all male inhabitants and selling the women and children into slavery. Thus had been laid the foundations upon which the Romans, several centuries later, had built their citadel in Beit Daras. (29)

The preceding quote illustrates historical events in which resisting foreign invaders and preserving cultural heritage were presumably of significant importance to the Palestinians. The narrative of the uprising in Gaza and Alexander the Great's severe response exemplifies the formidable challenge of preserving one's cultural heritage while living under foreign dominion. It is clear that their motivations for opposing this army are cultural factors. The Gazans' resolute opposition to external aggressors, in safeguarding their city and culture, epitomises their will to preserve their customary way of life and their culture. Alexander's response to the resistance in Gaza, which included murdering adult citizens and enslaving women and children, might be seen as an attempt to suppress cultural opposition. His objective was to eliminate any potential competitors and achieve complete dominion over the indigenous population and their cultural practices.

Away from the past and by moving to the present, despite the displacement of Palestinian people from their homeland, upon resettling in the United States, they retain indelible memories of Palestine. Remarkable individuals like Mamdouh exhibit an exceptional dedication to fostering a deep connection to Palestinian culture and historical heritage. They do this by actively participating in the transference of Palestinian customs and traditions to the next generation through influential means of storytelling and oral history. Mamdouh consistently imparts narratives and historical accounts on Beit Daras to his granddaughter, Nur. Talking about Mamdouh, Abulhawa writes: "Her grandfather wanted to tell her that story and a thousand more from Beit Daras, again and again, . . . He wanted her to know and never forget the place that burned in his heart. He also insisted that they only speak in Arabic. He once tells Nur: "Stories matter. We are composed of our stories. The human heart is made of the words we put in it." (63) The grandfather's enthusiasm for passing on Beit Daras folktales to his granddaughter demonstrates his commitment to preserving the city's history and culture. He combats methods of elimination and subjugation by recounting tales of Beit Daras, which are argued to possess substantial historical significance. The grandfather's steadfast unwillingness to switch to the English language might be seen as a deliberate act of linguistic resistance. He has a deep love for the Arabic language and culture, which act as symbols of his identity. Mamdouh is actively preserving the historical legacy of Beit Daras by recounting and repeating narratives about the community. Palestinian narratives have significance and possess profound symbolic significance. These narratives shape their communal recollection and perception of a common identity. Mamdouh's stories not only provide historical facts, but also impart moral values and foster a sense of communal belonging. The objective of this cultural resistance is to foster individuals' profound feeling of affiliation and admiration for their own culture. Additionally, Yasmine, Mamdouh's wife, angrily addresses her son saying: "Mhammad is your name because I'm your mother and that's what I named you. Where did we go wrong? You deny your identity and marry a woman who looks down on us like we're filth. Straighten up, boy! . . . "A man who denies his roots is not a man" (66). So, the mother is teaching him the significance of his name, "Mhammad," as well as his place in the family and culture. She talks about how the name she has chosen for him is significant in their culture and family. Ultimately, this conversation reflects topics such as cultural tension and issues of identity.

Several other instances of Palestinian culture are also revealed in *The Blue Between Sky and Water*, including family ties, traditional practises, weddings, handicrafts and art, cultural celebrations and festivals, and solidarity. The close relationships within Mamdouh's family vividly reflect how important family is to Palestinian society. The family pulls together and finds comfort in one another and the other refugees in the refugee camp, despite the many catastrophes they have endured. Palestinian social practises such as weddings also hold considerable social significance as they serve as occasions for families to gather, celebrate, and showcase their cultural customs. The novel incorporates depictions of customary Palestinian wedding ceremonies, emphasising the lively music, dance, and traditional practises that are integral to these celebratory events, as in the case with Nur's wedding. Additionally, despite their difficulties, the characters remain close and supportive of one another. Their solidarity and mutual aid constitute a type of cultural resistance to the outside forces that want to undermine and separate them. Other aspects of Palestinian culture in the targeted novel, like traditional pottery and needlework, are both beautifully depicted. Nur is not the only member of her family who uses her creative abilities to share her thoughts and emotions, claim her place in the world, and help keep Palestinian culture alive and well. The characters continue to observe their cultural holidays and customs in spite of the challenging situations they encounter. These activities are acts of defiance against efforts to stifle their individuality and impose an alien culture on them.

### 3. Conclusions

To sum up, in *The Blue Between Sky and Water*, Abulhawa chronicles the experiences of a Palestinian family over many generations, elucidating their responses to adversity, displacement, and resistance against colonial Zionism. Most of the events and characters in the selected novel reflect cultural resistance as a strategy to counteract dehumanisation and the erasure of the cultural identity of her people. Through the course of the novel, there are many aspects of cultural resistance against Zionist colonial domination. For instance, in *The Blue Between Sky and Water*, characters like Mamdouh and Nur endeavour to preserve their identities and traditions against challenging circumstances. These characters have a profound emotional connection to their respective territories. This study found that what is presented by Susan Abulhawa is an effective strategy for empowering the indigenous Palestinians. Furthermore, this study revealed the significance of Palestine through its historical landmarks, including a Crusader castle and a fortification built by Alexander the Great. These sites serve as concrete representations of the land's varied cultural legacy, which has been influenced by the existence of several civilizations throughout time. In this way Abulhawa novel challenges stereotypes and misrepresentations through cultural resistance.

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