



Land, Body, and Resistance: An Ecofeminist Reading of Susan Abulhawa's Against the Loveless World

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Abstract:

This paper provides an ecofeminist reading of Susan Abulhawa's *Against the Loveless World*, examining the intricate relationship between the exploitation of Palestinian land and the commodification of women's bodies. Through the protagonist, Nahr, the novel explores how colonialism and patriarchy are interconnected systems of oppression that impact both the environment and women's autonomy. The paper draws on ecofeminist theories from scholars like Vandana Shiva, Greta Gaard, and Ynestra King, emphasizing how patriarchal and colonial forces exploit nature and women in similar ways. By analyzing Nahr's experiences—her forced marriage, imprisonment, and involvement in sex work—the study shows how her resistance to the degradation of her body mirrors the Palestinian struggle for land and identity. The paper argues that reclaiming the land is paralleled by reclaiming bodily autonomy, both of which are acts of resistance against broader systems of domination.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Susan Abulhawa, Palestine, gender, land, body, patriarchy, colonialism, resistance, identity.

الأرض، الجسد، المقاومة: قراءة نسوية بيئية (إيكوفيمينية) لرواية "ضد عالم بلا حب"

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ملخص:

تقدم هذه الورقة قراءة نسوية بيئية لرواية سوزان أبو الهوى "Against the Loveless World" (ضد عالم بلا حب)، مستكشفة العلاقة المتشابكة بين استغلال الأرض الفلسطينية وتسليح أجساد النساء. من خلال الشخصية الرئيسية نهر، تعرض الرواية كيف يرتبط الاستعمار بالنظام الأبوي كأنظمة قمع تؤثر على البيئة واستقلالية النساء. تستند الدراسة إلى نظريات النسوية البيئية من علماء مثل فاندانا شيفا، جريتا غارد، وإينسترا كينغ، مسلطة الضوء على كيفية استغلال القوى الأبوية والاستعمارية للطبيعة والنساء بطرق متشابهة. من خلال تحليل تجارب نهر—زواجها القسري، سجنها، وانخراطها في العمل الجنسي—تظهر الدراسة كيف أن مقاومتها لاستغلال جسدها تعكس الصراع

الفلسطيني من أجل الأرض والهوية. وتجادل الورقة بأن استعادة الأرض يتوازى مع استعادة استقلال الجسد، وكلاهما يمثلان أفعال مقاومة ضد أنظمة القمع الأوسع.

كلمات مفتاحية: النسوية البيئية (الإيكوفيمينية)، سوزان أبو الهوى، فلسطين، الجندر، الأرض، الجسد، النظام الأبوي، الاستعمار، المقاومة، الهوية.

[M]aldevelopment [is] a patriarchal project of domination and destruction, of violence and subjugation, of dispossession and the dispensability of both women and nature.

Vandana Shiva, 14

I sat back in the chair, drawing the crisp air deep into my lungs. Vivid wild poppies dotted the landscape, announcing the coming of spring. In a few weeks, they would multiply to carpet the land in burgundy velvet. The sky was already streaked with the red and orange ushers of sunset. We took in the beauty of the land, a metastasizing settlement sprawling ever closer, threatening to swallow it all.

Susan Abulhawa, 221

Land is integral for survival, whether as a place to live on or as a resource that provides food and clothing. Yet, awareness of its importance has not always been paramount in human actions, and humans have often caused its degradation, intentionally or unintentionally, and more often than not, as humans try to find resources for what they believe to be a better life. In creating this better life, and in humans' fight for survival and advancement, humans have, through the years, neglected the importance of keeping the earth safe and continued damaging it. Among humans are nations, by design or circumstance, who are more connected to their land, more atune to its nuances, and more in touch with how their identity can only survive if the land survives. The Palestinians are one such nation whose denial of access to their land by Israeli settlements, if not resisted, would mean not only a loss of a home but also a loss of identity.

Israeli settlers not only colonize Palestinian land but also continue to desecrate it and damage its riches, "threatening to swallow it all." The Palestinians' fight to get their land back is not just a fight for a place to live but one for a return to their connection to the land and their work on it. Palestinian literature is rich with examples where the land plays a pivotal role in the lives of the characters, shaping their identity and marking their body. This essay looks at one example, Susan Abulhawa's latest novel, *Against the Loveless World*, as it paints a picture of Nahr, the main character and a Palestinian woman, who denied her land and thus denied autonomy and power over her own commodified body. Palestinian literature is mostly literature of resistance, and Abulhawa's protagonist embodies this resistance, too. She is a fighter, among a nation of fighters, and Abulhawa is clear in showing that. To help readers grasp the connection between land and body that they see in Nahr and, on a broader scale, other Palestinians, an ecofeminist frame will be used, one that insists that the destruction of earth is inseparable from gender, race, and class dynamics and that the patriarchal capitalist world is complicit in all these interwoven forms of oppression and degradation. The essay argues that Nahr's awareness of and rebellion against the abuse of her body is directly connected to her appreciation of the value of land in Palestine and her fight against those who desecrate it.

To foreground the theoretical framework used, this essay first provides an overview of ecofeminist theory, feminist theory of the body, and some examples of Palestinian literature's

awareness of the connection between land and identity. An ecofeminist reading highlights the intersection between the exploitation of land and the exploitation of women, as it frames them both within patriarchal, capitalist, and colonial systems. The work of ecofeminist authors such as Shiva, Carolyn Merchant, Greta Gaard, and Ynestra King established the framework for an analysis of these intersections, while feminist theorists of and around the body, such as Judith Butler and Susan Bordo, further enhance the analysis as they focus on body politics and the exploitation of women's bodies under the aforementioned systems of oppression. In *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* (1988), Shiva argues that "what is currently called development is essentially maldevelopment" (5) as it neglects the role of women in producing "basic, vital needs" of survival (4), leading to a "decline in [women's] status in society and within the household" (112). She sees "modern science and development [as] projects of male, western origin, both historically and ideologically" (xiv), calling them "the latest and most brutal expression of a patriarchal ideology which is threatening to annihilate nature and the entire human species," and pitting them against Indian cosmology that sees nature and people as "a duality in unity" as manifested in nature/Prakriti (39). Colonialism, she argues, "is a constant necessary condition for capitalist growth" (1), and it often entails the destruction of nature, as, for example, when the British colonizers, ignorant of the wealth of India's forests and that of the knowledge of its local people, "displaced local rights, local needs and local knowledge and reduced this primary source of life into a timber mine" (58). In "The Scientific Revolution and *The Death of Nature*" (2006), Merchant more directly connects the scientific revolution and the colonial or imperial west by showing how the fathers of modern science, Bacon, Descartes, and Newton, contributed to "the most pressing ecological and social problems of our day" (517). Shiva further shows that "cultural perception of prudent subsistence living as poverty has provided the legitimisation for the development process as a poverty removal project," and though, in the case of Palestine, the removal of Palestinian villages and farms is a colonial project aimed at replacing them with Israelis, Israeli settlements are often projected as more advanced than the traditional, or "backward," Palestinian structures (9). Development becomes maldevelopment in colonized lands where settler colonialism damages nature and, by extension, women's connection to nature.

Gaard follows in Shiva's footsteps in her book, *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature*, when she defines ecofeminism's basic premise as one that recognizes that "the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature" (1). She connects this ideology with rights-based ethics as outlined by Carol Gilligan,ⁱ which "evolve from a sense of self as separate, existing within a society of individuals who must be protected from each other in competing for scarce resources" (Gaard 2). This form of ethics clearly contrasts with most non-Western societies in general, and Palestinian ones in particular, which function according to what Gilligan would define as an ethics of care. In her book, Gaard introduces Janis Birkeland who further expands on the intersection of race, class, and gender with nature by showing that destruction of nature cannot really be analyzed in separation from androcentrism, and that "[w]hile human chauvinism must be overcome, it cannot be overcome without addressing male-centeredness and sexism," making a gender analysis a necessary prerequisite to any ecological one that seeks to understand and undo the destruction of nature (Gaard 16). Birkeland defines ecofeminism as "a value system, a social movement, and a practice, but argues that it also offers

a *political analysis* that explores the links between androcentrism and environmental destruction. It is “an awareness,” Birkeland writes, that begins with the realization that the exploitation of nature is intimately linked to Western Man’s attitude toward women and tribal cultures” (18). This argument is also King’s premise in her 1988 article “The Ecology of Feminism and the Feminism of Ecology.” King argues that “[t]he hatred of women and the hatred of nature are intimately connected and mutually reinforcing” (18), again linking the domination of nature to the domination of women and connecting violence against women with a “commodity capitalism” (24) that nurtures a “militarized culture,” posing a threat to earth (25). As such, she lauds feminism for resisting domination in all forms and for embodying “the refusal of the original ‘other’ in patriarchal human society to remain silent or to be the ‘other’ any longer” (20). This fight against domination and silencing extends not only to land but also to the female body, which serves as a site of both control and resistance, as demonstrated through feminist body theories.

In line with the ecofeminist recognition of interconnected oppressions, feminist critic Bordo, in *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, explores how “for women, associated with the body and largely confined to a life centered on the body . . . , culture’s grip on the body is a constant, intimate fact of life” (17) that *homogenizes* and *normalizes* the body (24, 25). Drawing on Michel Foucault’s analysis of power that, though not authoritative today, “nonetheless produces and normalizes bodies to serve prevailing relations of dominance and subordination” (Bordo 17), Bordo argues that women are conditioned to internalize control, making their bodies compliant with societal ideals (27). Yet, she also emphasizes the body’s potential as a site of resistance, where women are “gradually changing our conception and experience of our bodies, . . . ‘imagin[ing] possibilities’, and close[ing] our eyes to limits and consequences” (39).

In *Against the Loveless World*, Nahr’s body endures forms of domination—through forced marriage, rape, prostitution, and imprisonment—that mirror the colonial exploitation of Palestinian land. However, just as Bordo suggests that bodies can resist these oppressive forces, Nahr’s defiant dance and refusal to submit to cultural expectations represent acts of bodily resistance. Her body, like the Palestinian land, becomes both a site of fragmentation and a space for reclaiming identity and power. Butler’s theory of performativity from *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* offers further insight into the way bodies resist control by subverting imposed identities. For Butler, gender is “an identity tenuously constituted in time . . . through a stylized repetition of acts” (191). These acts, though socially prescribed, can be performed in ways that challenge and disrupt normative expectations. Butler argues that “the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found precisely in the arbitrary relation between such acts,” opening up spaces for resistance and reconstitution of identity (192). Nahr’s shifting roles—from wife to dancer, to sex worker, to prisoner—illustrate how identities are imposed under this patriarchal and colonial system. However, her acts of defiance disrupt these roles and assert agency. In performing these roles on her own terms, Nahr transforms her body from an object of control into a site of resistance. Butler’s concept of performativity is well demonstrated in the way Nahr reclaims her body and identity in the face of oppression.

Palestinian literature frames the land as an extension of the self and of the body—a place where the struggles for identity, belonging, and autonomy unfold. The fragmentation of the land echoes the fragmentation of the self: reclaiming one’s connection to the land is as vital as

reclaiming autonomy over the body. Writers such as Edward Said, Ghassan Kanafani, and Mahmoud Darwish explore this connection, revealing how the degradation of land corresponds to personal and collective identity crises. Said argues that “exile is thus the fundamental condition of Palestinian life” (Loc 417). For Palestinians, exile is not merely geographic but psychological, shaping a collective identity built on loss and displacement. Said emphasizes that the colonization of land parallels the erasure of history and culture, where the fragmentation of geography becomes a metaphor for the fragmentation of memory and self. Kanafani’s “Men in the Sun” underscores how the loss of land leads to a profound sense of alienation and suffocation. The refugees in the novel, who die silently inside a water tank, symbolize the erasure of Palestinian voices under occupation. Darwish’s poetry furthers this theme, illustrating how land and identity are intertwined. In his poem “Identity Card,” he asserts his identity through the act of self-naming: “Write down! / I am an Arab / I have a name without a title.” Resisting the erasure imposed by colonial occupation, Darwish’s words reflect the struggle to reclaim both personal and national identity in a context where land and belonging are constantly under threat. Similarly, in “To My Mother,” he yearns for “[his] mother’s bread, / [his] mother’s coffee, / Mother’s brushing touch.” Here, the yearning for the intimate, familiar comforts of home symbolizes the broader Palestinian longing for the land—a place that, even in its absence, remains central to identity and belonging. In *Against the Loveless World*, Susan Abulhawa extends this symbolic relationship between body and land. Just as Palestinian land is desecrated through colonial occupation, Nahr’s body endures violence, imprisonment, and commodification. The novel draws clear parallels between Nahr’s suffering and the degradation of Palestinian land, suggesting that reclaiming her body is part of a broader resistance to reclaim identity and autonomy. As Abulhawa explains in an interview with Phil. Athenaeum, the novel is divided into geographic sections because “the geographic fragmentation [of the Palestinian people] ... evolved into psychological fragmentations and social fragmentations.” Nahr’s evolving relationship with her body—and later with the land—reflects how the personal and the political are intertwined, reinforcing the themes of endurance and defiance present in Palestinian literature.

The novel opens with Nahr in the Cube, a technologically enhanced advanced Israeli prisonⁱⁱ isolated from the world except for occasional visits from people who “carry on their bodies and speech the climate of the world where seasons and weather change” (4), and with no concept of time except that which she identifies through her nails going stronger and her hair turning grey (4, 5). It is here that the reader learns she was a sex worker in Kuwait, at almost the same time that the reader learns that she, unlike other Palestinians (or the stereotype of Palestinians in Kuwait), never did well in school, something that caused her “younger self [to doubt] her worth and intellect” (5). The connection between the two revelations is obvious. When she discovers that she does not fit societal expectations, she chooses a path even more frowned upon than lack of academic success: sex work. She is a rebel and a fighter, and the narrator lets the reader know early in this chapter how she “waged a long battle to gain [some] writing utensils” while in prison (10). The message is clear. Meeting the protagonist in prison, the reader should not assume her to be a helpless victim. In the simple act of writing, with her nails at first and then when the pens are provided to her, she tells her story. The analysis will begin by highlighting the abuse on Nahr’s body, connecting it to the abuse of the land and then showing how Nahr resists both and how that shapes her awareness of herself.

Nahr's early life is marked by traumatic experiences where her body becomes a battleground for social and patriarchal control. On her wedding night, Nahr's body is not embraced with intimacy but instead met with embarrassment and rejection. Reflecting on the moment, she says, "He smiled, turning his eyes away, as if embarrassed for me. My smile, curves, fire, beauty, and sexiness melted into a naked blob of shame" (32). Bordo's analysis of cultural expectations explains this sense of disillusionment when she argues that women's bodies are conditioned to embody societal ideals, and when those ideals are disrupted, women experience "shame over our bodies" (8). Nahr's introduction to marriage reveals how patriarchal norms shape her experience of her own body, framing it as an object to be evaluated, judged, and dismissed by others, rather than something she can own and celebrate.

When her marriage fails and she needs financial support to help her family, she remembers her love of dance, reflecting her former appreciation of her body before the humiliation she faced in her marriage. Her love of dance eventually leads her to Um Barraq who, in turn, leads her onto the path of becoming a sex worker. Though Um Barraq eventually becomes a friend and helps Nahr and her family in their journey out of Kuwait, she initially blackmails Nahr into working as a sex worker, leading to a harrowing rape scene on the beach where she learns, yet again, what it means to be a woman:

Something sharp, maybe a rock or a shell, dug into my back under the blanket with every thrust he made. I had to pee again. The stars were watching me, daring me to move. But I didn't. I endured and waited, because that's what girls do. Even bad girls like me. We endure and wait, and cater to the whims of men, because sometimes our lives are at stake... until we get even. (52)

Clearly, here again, the reader sees the rebel in Nahr, who knows that society expects her to be patient and to ensure that that she and others who are enduring pain eventually fight back. The assault on her body escalates with a second rape scene when a group of Saudi military men rape her, leaving her physically and emotionally scarred. "Four or five of them ... One of them pushed himself between my legs ... the others fondled my breasts and pushed their erections against my face" (74). That the rapists are military men brings to the reader's attention how King connects "violence against women, [and] a militarized culture" (25). Nahr's body, much like the Palestinian land, is treated as a disposable resource, ravaged by forces that view it as an object for conquest. This scene parallels the way colonial systems exploit and degrade land, viewing both women's bodies and the earth as expendable in the pursuit of power and domination.

Nahr's relationship with Abu Moathe further exemplifies how patriarchal control extends to emotional and physical violence. Abu Moathe is a sadist whose physical abuse of Nahr shapes all their time together, even when Nahr eventually leaves her work with Um Barraq and takes him as her exclusive lover. His assault on Nahr—"he slapped me hard enough to knock me out ... The swollen left side of my face turned out to be a fractured cheekbone"—reflects both his internalized self-hatred and the violence he projects onto Nahr (61). King argues that "commodity capitalism is intentionally simplifying human community and culture so that the same products can be marketed anywhere to anyone" (24). Abu Moathe's rejection of his Palestinian heritage aligns with this concept, as he distances himself from his roots, "hid[ing] his Palestinian origins" to adopt a new identity that aligns with the capitalist and colonial frameworks around him (61). His violence toward Nahr becomes symbolic of his attempt to

erase his own history and identity, much like the colonial project seeks to erase Palestinian identity through violence against the land and people. Nahr's loss of bodily autonomy reaches a climax when Abu Moathe forces her to have an abortion: "Two elderly women assisted me onto the table ... A nurse stuck an IV in my arm, and when I woke up, I had thick bloody pads between my legs" (64). The abortion, imposed against Nahr's will, underscores how patriarchal power attempts to dictate what her body should produce or reject, denying her any agency. Butler argues that identity is shaped through repeated acts imposed by social norms, and here, Nahr's body is subjected to patriarchal rituals of control, eroding her ability to define herself on her own terms.

Even in prison, Nahr's body remains under control, subjected both to physical punishment and to psychological deprivation. Her captors torture her for information and deny her hygiene, reinforcing the connection between bodily violation and colonial domination. Nahr reflects, "Before water falls from his small concrete holes, a red light will buzz ... I named my shower Attar" (80). Bordo's insight into women's ability to "imagine possibilities" is relevant here. In the absence of bodily autonomy, Nahr resists by renaming her environment, using small acts of defiance to reclaim some sense of control over herself (39). In a review of Palestinian literature, Mai Al-Nakib notes, "Palestinians have never stopped bearing witness to, recording, and representing their plight and also—crucially—their imaginative visions of a Palestine that once was and is yet to come" ("Palestinian Women's Voices" 12). Nahr's renaming of her environment is emblematic of this resistance. Her captors' manipulation of her access to water reflects the larger colonial control over Palestinian natural resources, emphasizing how both bodies and land are strategically deprived to enforce submission.

The violence inflicted on Nahr's body is mirrored in the abuse of Palestinian land as the systematic destruction of natural resources serves to erase not only livelihoods but also cultural and historical ties to the land. Nahr observes the consequences of Israeli policies firsthand, reflecting, "You see how the almond trees are dying?... They had talked about it before. Israeli rationed water to Palestinians, especially farmers" (247). The deliberate restriction of water exemplifies the colonial tactic of environmental control, as Shiva argues that "Violence to the water cycle is probably the worst but most invisible form of violence ... because it simultaneously threatens life at its source" (175). Cutting off water, a life-sustaining resource, parallels how Nahr's own body was denied autonomy and nourishment, illustrating how colonialism targets both land and body to enforce submission and dependence.

Beyond water restrictions, the intentional burning of Palestinian fields during harvest seasons becomes a ritualized form of destruction. Abulhawa writes, "Villagers converged from everywhere to extinguish the flames ... but to stand and watch the land burn would have been more painful than jumping onto the soil" (264). By burning Palestinian orchards, settlers do not only aim to destroy crops but also sever Palestinians from their ancestral connection to the land. This tactic reflects the ecofeminist understanding that the destruction of nature is never merely environmental but also deeply cultural and symbolic. The killing of shepherds and livestock further demonstrates how Israeli policies aim to eliminate any sustainable connection between Palestinians and their land. In one scene, Nahr describes how Zionist authorities murdered "a simple shepherd ... [with] fourteen of his animals ... where they normally graze" as if to imply that even livestock cared for by Palestinians had no right to this land (212). Just as Nahr's body is treated as disposable, the killing of animals and shepherds reflects the colonial logic that erases

Palestinian presence by targeting even the most basic elements of life—livelihood, animals, and land stewardship.

Through these acts of destruction, the colonial project reinforces what Shiva calls “maldevelopment,” which entails “domination and destruction ... of both women and nature” (14). The deliberate attack on Palestinian land—through water restrictions, burned fields, and murdered shepherds—functions as a metaphor for the political and economic domination that keeps Palestinians subjugated. In an analysis of the neglected role of the sea in Palestinian literature, Joseph Farag insists that “Palestine is land. Even if Palestine exists only as memory, it is, more often than not, as a memory of the land” (93). Abulhawa’s portrayal emphasizes that this environmental destruction is not accidental but a calculated extension of the same oppressive systems that commodify Nahr’s body and deny Palestinians sovereignty over their identity and resources. Ultimately, Abulhawa’s narrative aligns with the ecofeminist understanding that resistance to colonialism is not limited to armed struggle but includes the care and preservation of both body and land. The Palestinian fight to protect orchards, tend to animals, and reclaim burned fields reflects a deeper struggle to maintain cultural memory and to resist displacement. As King argues, “A central reason for women’s oppression is her association with the despised nature they are so concerned about” (18). Abulhawa’s novel shows that protecting the land is a form of reclaiming identity, just as Nahr’s resistance to bodily abuse is an act of self-reclamation. In her analysis of Abulhawa’s earlier works, Payel Pal emphasizes that “the layered experience of exile is a formative part of Palestinians’ collective psyche and gives impetus to their demands for self-determination” (48). In Nahr’s case, her evolving identity mirrors this collective experience, where displaced Palestinians rebuild their fragmented subjectivities by holding onto cultural memories and the symbolic significance of the land, even when physical return remains elusive. The preservation of land and life, even under oppressive conditions, becomes an act of defiance against a colonial system that seeks to erase both.

Nahr’s resistance against both forms of abuse begins with her reclaiming control over her body, starting with her defiant use of sensual dance to challenge patriarchal expectations. She describes how dancing offers her a sense of freedom: “But I liked dancing at these illicit parties ... There was something about it that freed me from the margins of my prescribed life” (72). Through dance, Nahr subverts societal expectations, transforming her body from a site of shame into one of pleasure and agency. As Butler theorizes, here Nahr’s dancing is a disruptive bodily act, “subverting and displacing those naturalized and reified notions of gender that support masculine hegemony” (46). Nahr makes gender trouble as a reminder that her body, like the Palestinian land, is not just a vessel of oppression but also a medium for resistance.

Furthermore, Nahr’s role as a sex worker is not merely a survival tactic but also an act of defiance that exposes the regulatory frameworks of patriarchy and colonialism. Butler’s concept of performativity again helps to frame Nahr’s sex work as a challenge to normative gender roles. Butler argues that “gender proves to be performative, that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed” (34). While Nahr’s initial entry into prostitution is coerced by Um Barraq, over time, she reclaims control over her body and challenges the very notion of what it means to be a sex worker. When a reporter tries to reduce her life to her sexual history, Nahr resists, asking, “You think prostitution has to do with sexuality?” (5). Her question disrupts the simplistic framing of her identity, revealing how sex work is not merely about sex but about

survival, power, and resistance. This redefinition demonstrates how Nahr's actions dismantle the illusion of a "natural" gender identity, revealing instead how gender is constructed through repeated acts within a "highly rigid regulatory frame" (Butler 45). The societal norms that mark her as a "fallen" woman are disrupted by her ability to use her body as a tool for survival and, ultimately, resistance. Just as the land of Palestine refuses to be fully colonized and erased, Nahr's body becomes a site of defiance, subverting the roles imposed on her and exposing the limits of patriarchal and colonial control.

Nahr's most basic bodily functions are transformed into acts of defiance. She recognizes the power in what society deems shameful or unclean, such as her menstrual blood and excrement, and uses them as tools to challenge the control imposed on her. As a sex worker, she exercises power by exploiting the fetish Abu Nasser has toward her "filthy panties, lined with a bloody menstrual pad," and later in the Cube, she performs an act of resistance by sabotaging the toilet with her shirt and feces: "I took off my shirt, stuffed it in the toilet, but it would not flush until I removed the shirt ... I tried again, only I shat in it that time" (60, 198). Her body becomes a further site of defiance through her subversion of bodily acts, echoing Butler's notion that since gender is performative, change (and resistance) can be found "in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a de-formity, or a parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction" (192). By defying the expectations of her gender, Nahr fights its limitations, even those imposed by her jailors when they control the timing and frequency of her showers.

Nahr's relationship with Bilal illustrates the intertwining of personal resistance and care for land. Together, their care for the olive trees is a clear act of resistance against Israeli attempts to destroy land. Nahr describes, "We had wrapped the burned trees with white cloth ... soak[ing] the soil as much as possible from the water tank, which we were still siphoning from the settlers' water pipe" (271). This struggle is emblematic of the broader loss of Palestinian botanical heritage. As Abulhawa notes in an interview with Mondoweiss, "Palestinians have a very rich botanical heritage ... that is slowly being lost because we don't have access to the land anymore," adding that Israeli policies, such as the outlawing of traditional practices like picking wild herbs, further underscore the colonial effort to erase Palestinian connections to their land. Nahr and Bilal's actions seem to answer Shiva's call that "the neglect of nature's work in producing fertility and life" under patriarchal systems must be countered by care and preservation (4). By tending to the trees, Nahr and Bilal refuse to let destruction define them, reinforcing that the fight for land is not just physical but also deeply symbolic—a way to reclaim identity. In an analysis of Palestinian writer Jabra Ibrahim Jabra's novel, *The Ship*, Farag shows how the connection to the land is vital to the identity of people who live by the land when the protagonist is reminded by his friend that his freedom can only be found "in the alleys of your country, in its orchards, its deserts" (101). In her book, *Palestinian Culture and the Nakba*, Hania Nashef also highlights that the Palestinians' connection to the land is not only material but deeply emotional: "Palestinians hold on to the memory of the lost homeland ... Having been stripped of the land, the Palestinians have long identified with the physical aspects of their farms and the fields they ploughed" (62). Abulhawa draws clear parallels between Nahr's resistance and the Palestinian practice of caring for the land as their only option for a free life.

This care finds a special place with Palestinian women while they continue their acts of resistance. Nahr amply refers to Bilal's mother as a "formidable woman who had endured a

lifetime of military occupation, toil, and widowhood” (253). The novel depicts Bilal’s mother as someone whose actions are rooted in both care for land and resistance against the occupier. The reader hears her “hurl[ing] curses” (253) and throwing “everything within arm’s reach at the soldiers—an ashtray, a carved wooden trinket, a shoe, the argileh” (252) but those images intersect with an image of a woman who cares for her land, “feed[ing] the chicken” (159) and “tending the garden” (165). This imagery underscores the ecofeminist notion that women’s care for the earth is itself a political act, a rejection of colonial erasure. As Shiva writes, “This organic process of growth in which women and nature work in partnership with each other has created a special relationship of women with nature,” a relation that Nahr becomes aware of eventually, wishing she had worked harder on it when she had the opportunity: “Hajjeh Um Mhammad, God rest her soul, had taught me the names of plants and their medicinal values. I couldn’t remember everything she’d imparted and wished I had written it all down” (41, 292). In nurturing the land, Palestinian women assert their presence, resisting colonial efforts to fragment both body and territory. Through her actions, Nahr demonstrates that resistance is not limited to overt rebellion but extends to everyday acts of care, survival, and defiance. Her connection to the land, despite not being born in Palestine, embodies the collective memory of the Palestinian people. As Pal observes, Palestinian narratives “not only capture, in heart-wrenching fashion, the saga of Palestinian Arab migration, but also show its entanglement in nostalgia for, and a desire to return to, the homeland” (48). This deep-seated longing shapes Nahr’s resistance as she, like many Palestinians, holds onto a symbolic connection to the land that fuels her fight for identity and autonomy. Her journey reflects a broader struggle where reclaiming autonomy over body and land becomes a form of empowerment. Just as Nahr reclaims her body through dance and survival, Palestinians reclaim their land through cultivation and care, showing that both resistance and survival are acts of profound defiance.

Through these acts of resistance, Nahr’s journey toward self-awareness unfolds gradually, shaped by her experiences with oppression and relationships as well as her reconnection with land and identity. Early in the novel, Nahr reflects on the pressures of conforming to societal expectations: “I had to become another person, someone at the other end of disgrace, rape, and exile, to fully appreciate my mother ... a simple widow with an elementary education” (117). This reflection highlights how she rethinks her sense of worth by distancing herself from societal norms. Her relationship with Um Barraq and later with Bilal is pivotal in this process of self-awareness. Um Barraq reminds her that “[she] was the one who had changed, not [her] family,” underscoring how Nahr’s growing political and personal awareness is deeply tied to her experiences of love and loss (208). Bilal, in particular, plays a crucial role in introducing her to a deeper understanding of communal care, reflecting aforementioned Gilligan’s concept on the ethics of care that Gaard references. Through Bilal and his mother, Nahr begins to grasp that resistance is not just about individual survival but about solidarity and connection to land and community. This moment is key in her development, as her evolving identity becomes intertwined with caring for others and the land, a concept that Gaard underscores in her ecofeminist analysis. Gaard writes, “A failure to recognize connections can lead to violence, and a disconnected sense of self is most assuredly at the root of the current ecological crisis (not to mention being the root cause of all oppression, which is based on difference)” (2). Nahr’s gradual realization of these connections among self, community, and land reflects the ecofeminist idea that individual and collective well-being are intertwined. Her evolving identity

is thus shaped not only by her personal choices but also by the relationships and roles she assumes within new environments. Farag writes, “If land connotes the identity, life, livelihood, and presence—in the past, present, or the longed-for future—of indigenous peoples, and the primary area of contention between settler and indigene, then what lies beyond it?” (94). For Nahr, reclaiming the land also means reclaiming her fragmented identity, as exile disrupts not only her physical presence but also her very sense of self.

Nahr’s growing awareness of gender as a constructed system of oppression is marked by her recognition of how patriarchal forces have shaped and controlled her body. Early in her life, Nahr internalizes the belief that her body is a source of shame and something to be controlled. Reflecting on her failed marriage, she describes her body as a “naked blob of shame” after her husband’s rejection (32). This description mirrors Bordo’s analysis where she explains that within Western philosophy, the body has often been constructed as “animal, as appetite, as deceiver, as prison of the soul” (3). Nahr’s initial understanding of her body reflects this dualistic thinking, where her physical self is separated from her true identity and seen as something that limits her value and potential. However, as Nahr becomes more aware of the patriarchal system that seeks to control her, particularly through her interactions with Um Barraq, she begins to reject this narrative. Bordo argues that, historically, the body has been viewed as “the heavy drag on self-realization” (5), but Nahr’s evolving awareness allows her to challenge this notion. She reflects, “Until I met Um Barraq, it had never occurred to me that patriarchy was anything but the natural order of life” (48). Through Um Barraq’s influence, Nahr begins to see that the constraints imposed on her body are not inherent but are part of a larger societal structure designed to undermine her autonomy. This realization marks a significant shift in her journey toward self-awareness, where she no longer views her body as a burden but as a site of potential resistance. Her growing understanding of gender allows her to see how the systems that oppress her body are interconnected with the larger political structures that control her identity, linking her personal transformation to the broader struggle for autonomy and resistance.

Nahr’s connection to the land deepens as she learns to appreciate traditional agricultural practices, such as cultivating olive trees and preserving Palestinian traditions. In her early years in Kuwait, she was already connected to her culture through dance and her views on the colonization of Eastern music:

Eastern music is the soundtrack of me, and dancing is the only nation I ever claimed, the only religion I comprehend. When I see women “belly dance” to music they do not understand, in clothes of a people they do not know—or worse, disdain—I feel they are colonizing me and all Arab women who are the keepers of our traditions and heritage.
(12)

The connection grows as she starts developing an appreciation of the Arabic language by reading Arabic poetry and, in time, was able to “recite some of the greatest and most erotic love stories in Arabic verse” (13). Here, the connection between her cultural awareness and her body is obvious. Eventually, when she also appreciates her mother’s needlework, she shows her awareness of Palestinian embroidery and its own connection to the land as her mother explains how she worked “geometric patterns typical of Romi thobes from the Ramallah area to show the olive, almond, and pomegranate trees” (289). As Nashef observes, “When a country is erased and more than three-quarters of its nationals are expelled, its culture and language become its

first casualties ... Maintaining and creating customs are necessary for the preservation of the link to the ancestral home, and are paramount in protecting that which remains of the original identity” (186). Connected to the land through her work on it, she is more capable of understanding its culture.

Through her interactions with Palestinian refugees and resistance fighters, Nahr also becomes more aware of issues of class and race. She observes, “Those destitute refugees from Iraq and Ethiopia taught me about honor” (183). Through this experience, Nahr begins to unlearn the constraints of her previous life in Kuwait, where she had been trapped by social class and patriarchy. Her growing awareness of her oppression intersects with her realization that class divides are artificial constructs used to perpetuate systems of inequality, echoing Gaard’s ecofeminist premise that oppressions “based in race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities” are enabled by the same ideology that oppresses nature (1). When she is later given a book, while in jail, that debunks communism, the reader sees her awareness of class issues in her refusal to believe its premise, reminding herself that she knows better, “because Bilal—the most complete human being I’ve ever known—is a communist” (216). Nahr’s journey illustrates how gender and class are not isolated struggles but interconnected, shaping both personal and political identities. Her awareness is not just personal but deeply political, as she learns that protecting the land and its traditions is integral to resisting colonial erasure. Through her journey of gradual awareness, Nahr rejects the roles imposed by patriarchy, colonialism, and class systems, embracing new ways of being that integrate personal identity with political resistance. As Abulhawa demonstrates through Nahr’s transformation, self-awareness is not a static achievement but an ongoing process intertwined with the struggles for autonomy, dignity, and belonging. Al-Nakib argues that “Palestine is immediately declared to be the only thing real about the novel. But the novel then proceeds to disrupt the opposition between reality and fiction.” Although Al-Nakib is analyzing a different novel by Yasmine Zahran, her statement resonates with Abulhawa’s novel and Nahr’s experience of shifting between her imagined connection to the land and the harsh realities of displacement (237). Nahr’s journey reflects how reclaiming oneself and the land is a continuous act of resistance—one that resists not only physical displacement but also psychological fragmentation.

In *Against the Loveless World*, Abulhawa intricately weaves together the personal and political, using Nahr’s experiences to illustrate how the exploitation of the body parallels the degradation of land under colonial and patriarchal systems. Read through an ecofeminist lens, the novel reveals how power operates through multiple channels—affecting not only the autonomy of individuals like Nahr but also the sovereignty of Palestinian land and identity. Nahr’s body, marked by forced intimacy, rape, commodification, and imprisonment, reflects the condition of Palestinian land, which endures, among other things, the destruction through water restrictions, burned fields, and the erasure of indigenous practices. The intersections of these oppressions demonstrate that resistance, whether personal or collective, lies in reclaiming both body and land, transforming sites of control into spaces of defiance.

Ultimately, Abulhawa’s novel aligns with the ecofeminist premise that the fight against domination must address interconnected forms of oppression, including gender, class, race, and environmental exploitation. Nahr’s journey from shame to agency—expressed through acts of defiance, sensual dance, survival, and care for the land—mirrors the broader Palestinian struggle to maintain dignity in the face of colonial violence. Her evolving awareness of her own power

reflects the broader understanding that resistance can take many forms, from overt rebellion to acts of care and preservation. By blurring the lines between personal and political, *Against the Loveless World* offers a nuanced vision of resistance—one that emphasizes survival, autonomy, and the reclamation of fragmented identities. The novel teaches the reader that the restoration of land and self is not only possible but also essential, showing how Palestinians, like Nahr, persist in reclaiming what has been taken from them, finding power in both survival and resistance.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

ⁱ Carol Gilligan is a psychologist whose 1982 book, *In a Different Voice*, argues that while most men function within an ethics of justice, most women adopt an ethics of care, forming moral judgments not based on what is lawful or legal but rather on a sense of compassion and responsibility to others.

ⁱⁱ This fact, in itself, begs a reflection on Shiva and Merchant's study of science and technology as paramount for the maintenance of colonialism and patriarchy at the same time.

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