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## Women Writers Writing Resistance: A Study of Sahar Khalifeh's *Wild Thorns*

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### Abstract:

Women-writers are one of those shimmering stars whose writings have created a niche in the world of resistance-literature. As writers, they have voiced the sufferings and anguish they witnessed themselves and around. The beginning of the twentieth century, when the education had trickled down even to the lowest rungs of the society, in some parts of the world led to the emergence of women-writers and activists who reacted in a myriad of ways to governmental, military, and patriarchal reins through their writings.

In this regard this paper delves into Sahar Khalifeh's *Wild Thorns (As-Subar)*. By using the profoundly affective power of description of the oppression in the Palestinian society in the said work, Khalifeh denounces the repression and discrimination of the authoritarian powers. This paper has further sought to recognize the contemporary women's resistance narratives as both an empowering and powerful, feminine and feminist mode of resistance.

**Keywords:** Armed Conflict, Oppression, Resistance, Sahar Khalifeh, *Wild Thorns*.

### INTRODUCTION

Literature as a discipline of education always has its lion's share in bringing, projecting and highlighting the changes in the society. Writers are often cited as perceptive observers of the prevailing human conditions who have used the power of their written word to project the struggles and sufferings of the exploited before a wider audience. In the early twentieth century when education had reached almost to everyone's home and

hearth, the situation for women also began to change. The earlier stereotype of the self-sacrificing and victimized woman got transformed in the wake of contemporary times. Women writers began to voice their stance as effective contributors to the society through literature. The result was an emergence of a feminine voice that started to create a distinct niche in the literary field. Women writers took to pen to pen-down different forms of resistance be it polygamy, patriarchy, domestic abuse, emigration, exile etc. We are also witnessing the emergence of many female voices that have and are producing a corpus of literary writing forming 'Resistance Literature' that foregrounds many complex issues like identity, justice, struggle, and oppression in a particular landscape.

## DISCUSSION

“Resistance” is a critical term crystallized in 1966, by Palestinian revolutionary writer, critic and martyr Ghassan Kanafani. Resistance literature as the term signifies, is a kind of literature thoroughly political in nature and has originated in different parts of the world, out of the long confrontation between the nationalist movements and the imperialist colonialist interests. Postcolonial scholar Barbara Harlow explains the origin of the phrase “resistance literature” in her book by the same title as a broad spectrum of narrative, poetic, and analytical writings produced by resistance and national liberation movements against repressive forms of ideological and cultural production (Harlow 1987). The principal motive of such writers writing resistance narratives is to defy “multifaceted cultural siege” imposed by the invading forces, which challenged the very existence, historical identity, intellectual, spiritual and material conditions of the well being of the people.

In this respect many modern woman writers have provided variegated pictures of resistance practices in their writings. One such eminent writer that concerns my paper is Sahar Khalifeh.

Sahar Khalifeh (1942) is considered as the foremost Palestinian novelist widely acclaimed for being the first feminist Palestinian writer. She is the most translated Palestinian author after Mahmoud Darwaish. Elements of liberation struggle, theme of alienation and representation of reality are the main issues that concern her most among other things. Her famous novel *Wild Thorns* (1976) originally called as *As-Subar* registers the sufferings of the Palestinian community as well as the daily influences of Israeli occupation in the West Bank in a grand scheme. “Resistance” in Palestinian writing is a very important theme and so it is with Khalifeh. Palestinian resistance literature resonates reality and presents the dilemma of Palestinians who have been alienated deeply, both physically and spiritually.

*Wild Thorns* is set in Nablus, one of the largest West Bank cities, under Israeli military occupation after the 1967 war, probably in the 1970s. Historically Nablus is famous as "the mountain of fire" because of its fiery status as a rebellious city of resistance to oppression. It is to be noted here that Sahar Khalifeh, is herself from Nablus. Here a reader is reminded of Barbara Harlow, who quotes Ghassan Kanafani:

No research of this kind can be complete unless the researcher is located within the resistance movement itself inside the occupied land, taking his testimony from the place in which it is born ... (*Resistance Literature* 3)

Through *Wild Thorns*, Sahar Khalifeh seizes what Edward Said calls "permission to narrate"(1984) and uses this novel narrative to depict the ‘wasteland’ of occupation and narrate its impact on the daily lives of Palestinians. In her foundational work *Resistance Literature* (1987), Barbara Harlow makes a similar point that the novel is one of many narrative sites of resistance.

The novel runs through the eyes of two major characters Usama and his cousin Adil representing two different approaches. Usama believes in violent resistance. Adil is Usama’s foil, a pragmatist due to his own necessity. He less concerned with military resistance but more with his family’s bread and butter.

The story opens with Usama's return to Palestine from working in the Gulf to support the resistance movement and fight for the Palestinian cause. However on his return, he is shocked by the changes he finds in his community — the indignities Palestinian people were facing starting with the difficulty of getting through the check points, military outposts, guns and soldiers, barbed wire, tear gas, searches and interrogations and mostly how they have adjusted with it. Usama recalls how the peaceful past "... those idyllic green meadows, the clear waterfall, beneath the towering walnut trees," had been turned into the "genie's magic bottle," and that he himself like his fellow natives is a prisoner in that bottle.

In the novel Usama is a character representing a certain faction of extremists with their particular violent attitude, who are angered even by their own people who have tried to settle into everyday life under the Israeli occupation. He actually represents those politically active Palestinian expatriates of 1967 war and considers people like Adil, Zuhdi or Shahada as materialists, traitors and collaborators:

I just don't believe that you've forgotten your own country and the occupation!  
(*Wild Thorns* 98)

Adil on the other hand represents a certain class of Palestinians who do believe in the struggle of the Palestinian people but do not de-humanize the Israelis unlike Usama. In the novel it's told us that Adil has given up working in the ancestral farm and is working in Israel to feed his family and through this the author dramatizes how Palestinians attempt to survive the devastations of the Israeli occupation.

While Usama supports the armed struggle, Adil is willing to work within the system — in the occupied territories in an effort to bring about positive change despite the harsh conditions of occupation. Each character perceives his actions as being an essential and necessary part in resistance to the occupation no matter how different his approach may be. Like in the novel when Usama questions to Adil a number of times about his not being a part of the movement:

You're the ones to blame. You're the ones who hold the key to the situation.  
(*Wild Thorns* 28)

Adil answers:

Okay, convince me that what I'm doing isn't part of the struggle, that the fight has fixed ground rules. (*Wild Thorns* 63)

Here, a reader is reminded of Franz Fanon who says "The masses resist and fight in a thousand ways, not only with arms in hand" (*A Dying Colonialism* 3). Though Adil refuses to join armed resistance yet his denial leaves more questions instead of answers. Adil's complicity in the eventual death of his father suggests that the occupation spares no soul from getting entrapped into the issues of mental and emotional strains. For instance in the novel Adil says;

An entire nations drowning while the radio goes on spewing out songs of hope and fervour, freedom, rebirth, the happiness of man...Myopic eyes, hearts filled with thousands of regrets, hands shackled by thousands of chains...Sink into the

mud, oh Palestine of mine, and suffer, my people, the bitterness of recognizing reality and being helpless before it. (*Wild Thorns* 61)

Albeit Adil and Usama are the clear symbolism in the story about the Palestinian society yet there are other minor characters who also represent different Palestinian perspectives. Adil's younger sister Nuwar, is involved in rebellion, but from a more domestic view. She is in love with a rebel who has been imprisoned, and whom her family does not want her to marry. She represents the women's struggle, those who are not only oppressed by the Israelis but also by the generation of older men in their lives.

Another of Adil's younger siblings is named Basil who is a young revolutionary and representative of the younger generation of Palestinians. He catches the fire of rebellion from his school colleagues. Basil represents the younger generation, those who are not yet burdened by responsibility, but are easily impassioned into revolt. Sahar Khalifeh's portrayal of various modes of resistance in *Wild Thorns* echoes writers like Frantz Fanon who asserts that the revolution represents "the social struggle of the masses, supported by armed actions" (*A Dying Colonialism* 5).

A co-worker of Adil's named Zuhdi, rides the workers' buses from Palestine to Israel. He has a situation where he must sacrifice a part of himself to work in Israeli territory because of the poor job market in Israel. Zuhdi represents the average man, who is a link that binds together the two extremes of passiveness and rebellion.

Thus, every character of the novel can be seen as a participant in the political history and in this respect, Sahar Khalifeh's *Wild Thorns* relates to Barbara Harlow's assertion that:

Resistance narratives embedded...in the historical and material conditions of their production and the allegiances and active participation of their authors...in the political events of their countries, testify to the nature of the struggle for liberation .... The resistance narrative is not only a document, it is also an indictment. (*Resistance Literature* 98)

The novel ends in the same way as it had begun, with Palestinians going about their daily lives in the town, buying Israeli bread, sweets and other essential commodities, seemingly oblivious to oppression. Khalifeh seems to be indicating that unless Palestinians as a whole disrupt their daily lives and make sacrifices to resist oppression, even through non-violent means, change will not occur. *Wild Thorns* according to Barbara Harlow "both vestiges the scenario of liberation and armed struggle scripted by the resistance movements".

## CONCLUSION

*Wild Thorns* provides a realistic and uncompromising view of life under Israeli occupation with varying shades of resistance practices. By portraying Usama's and Adil's divergent perceptions on resistance, what Sahar Khalifeh wants to convey is that the Palestinians share a common goal against the Israeli occupation which been a struggle for and within their community. And this paper is just an attempt to recognize such trends of women writers. In closing I assert the need of attending the women's voice in the study of resistance literature.

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