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Arab Cultures

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May 12<sup>th</sup>, 2017

### **A Cultural Critique of *Mornings in Jenin***

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82215 Arab Through Film and Literature

Susan Abulhawa is a Palestinian American activist, author, and founder of Playgrounds for Palestine. In her best-selling novel, *Mornings in Jenin*, she aims to introduce a Palestinian narrative of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The novel, now translated into over 25 languages, tells the story of four generations of Palestinians from the 1940's through 2002. Each generation faces struggles, exile, and bloodshed, together with inner peace and love. However, while Abulhawa brings many Israeli atrocities and Palestinian troubles to light, the novel repeatedly misrepresents the Jewish people and the Israeli perspective. Abulhawa laces fictional characters and motivations into historical events to present a skewed view of the conflict, one which fails to address many of its core intricacies.

Throughout the novel, Abulhawa implies that most Jews who immigrated to Israel before and upon its establishment were European. She refers to Jews as “lily-skinned foreigners” (46). In fact, every Jewish character in the novel is seemingly European. They eat “kreplach.. kugel and blintze” (94), a stark contrast to the Palestinian “koosa” and “knafe” consumed throughout the book. Towards the end of the novel, she uses food to symbolize Israeli conquest of Palestinian land and culture. “Israelis already know that their history is contrived from the bones

and traditions of the Palestinians. The Europeans who came knew neither hummus nor falafel...” (263). While the novel is a work of fiction, and many Jews who immigrated to Israel were European, many more were from countries around the world, including many Arab countries. Today, over 1.5 million Israeli Jews were born in other countries of the Middle East (such as Syria, Lebanon, Iran, Iraq, and Yemen) as well as North Africa (Central Bureau of Statistics). In 1948, approximately 945,000 Jews lived in Arab countries, a number that plummeted to a mere 28,000 by the year 2000 (Pergola). Between 1948 and 1951, the number of Jewish immigrants to Israel from Asia and Africa equaled that from Europe (Schmelz). In most cases, this mass exodus was due to collusion of the Arab nations to remove the Jews, an effort that began in 1947 (Hoge). For all of these Jews, “falafel” and “koosa” are their native foods, Arabic is their native language, and Israel was and continues to be their place of refuge. These Jews of Arab origin, known as Mizrachim, are entirely disregarded in the novel.

Ignoring Mizrahi Jews furthers Abulhawa’s agenda in two ways. First, it allows her to frame persecution of Palestinians as a result of, and vengeance for, the Holocaust. In chapter 41, Abulhawa writes that “Palestinians paid the price for the Jewish holocaust” (273). It is noteworthy that the US Department of the State recognizes “drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis” as a form of antisemitism (“Defining Anti-Semitism”). Comparisons of the Jews to Nazis in particular serves to undermine the atrocities of the Holocaust and disrespect the millions of lives lost to a deliberate and systematic ethnic cleansing. Nothing of the kind ever happened to the Palestinian people. The Palestinian population in the Israeli-Palestinian territory has nearly steadily increased since 1914 (Pergola). Furthermore, the Government Publishing Office (“Style Manual”), the Chicago Manual (University of Chicago Press), and most other language standards prescribe capitalizing the word

Holocaust when referring to the events that took place in Nazi Germany. Abulhawa's decision not to capitalize the word is a sign of disrespect. However, beyond anti-Semitic undertones, this statement is historically inaccurate. Israel's existence is not dependent on the Holocaust, and Israel's policies are not a result of the Holocaust. The Zionist movement began several decades before World War II, as did Jewish immigration patterns to Palestine. Between 1922 and 1931, the population of Jews in Palestine increased by 108% (Zaiman). Palestine, a British mandate during the war, is likely to have gained independence with the decline of the empire. The British first expressed plans to establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine in the Balfour Declaration of 1917 ("The Balfour Declaration"). The land is likely to have gained independence together with India, Pakistan, Burma, Malaysia, and other colonies ("British Empire"). These countries were decolonized without the impetus of the Holocaust.

Through disregarding Middle Eastern Jews, Abulhawa is also able to make claims that Jews have no historic connection to the land. Jews have maintained a continuous presence in Jerusalem for over 3,000 years ("Response to Common Inaccuracy"). The land of Israel was an integral part of Jewish life from the religion's inception through the Jewish exile in 70 CE. Abulhawa writes that Jews have "no connection to the land. If they had a sense of the land then the land would compel in them a love for the olives" (46). The Torah discusses the tribe of Asher, which settled in the region just north of Ein Hod, being the primary olive oil producer of the region ("Map of the Tribe of Asher"). Since the Roman exile of 70 CE, Jewish people around the world have prayed for a speedy return to Israel several times each day. While Jews lived in exile for centuries, the Jewish connection to the land was not limited to ancient times. By 1856, over 17,000 Jews lived in the region ("Response to Common Inaccuracy"). Yet Abulhawa writes that the Israelis "arrived from foreign nations and uncovered coins in Palestine's earth from the

Canaanites, the Romans, the Ottomans, then sold them as their own ‘ancient Jewish artifacts’” (263).

Each of these points aims to delegitimize Israel’s establishment in 1948. Through suggesting that Jews are European foreigners with no connection to the land, and through emphasizing Palestinian agricultural society, Abulhawa suggests that Palestine and its culture have been stolen from the Palestinian people. This is reflected in the character Ismael, who serves as a symbol for the land. In 1948, Moshe and Jolanta, Holocaust survivors, kidnapped Ismael from his Palestinian family, changed his name to David, and raised him as a Jew for most of his life. The author ascribes this behavior to the fact that Jolanta was raped by Nazis and could no longer bear children. Moshe thinks, “How could God deny her the elemental gift of motherhood while granting so many healthy children to Arabs, who were already so numerous?” (37). This despicable character is used to represent prevalent Jewish opinion, and to suggest that Jews view the Holocaust as a license to the land of Israel. I would be shocked if any Holocaust survivors felt entitled to destroy the lives of others the way the Nazis had destroyed their own lives. Both Jews and Palestinians have many legitimate claims to the land, and neither group feels guilty for its presence or ascribes its right to purely historic claims. Just as it would be difficult for an Israeli to write representative thoughts into a Palestinian mind, so too Abulhawa should be honest in her lack of perspective and focus on Palestinian views.

Instead of presenting a purely Palestinian narrative to counterbalance the strong political connections the US has with Israel, Abulhawa repeatedly projects her own perspective towards Israeli Jews onto fictional Israeli characters. Jewish guilt develops into a central theme of the novel. Moshe and Jolanta feel guilt for stealing Ismael, again symbolic of Jewish guilt for stealing Palestinian land. Ari Pearlstein, an Israeli character who is sympathetic to the Palestinian

cause, ends his story with an expression of guilt. He recounts a time when he was travelling with his Arab friend, Hasan, when he suddenly thought Hasan had betrayed him. He considered stabbing Hasan, only to recognize he had misinterpreted the situation. He says, “I sank into such shame for having thought what I did” (288). Even when the protagonist confronts an Israeli soldier, a young man fighting to protect what he sees as his country and family, she writes that he carries a “staggering burden,” and one that he “wants lifted” (305). Any Palestinians who fight for their country, on the other hand, are portrayed with “mad courage” (121). The fictional guilty conscience that Abulhawa places on Jewish characters, sometimes after committing despicable but fictitious crimes, suggest that Israelis admit that their claims to the land of Israel are bogus. This view is even mentioned explicitly on page 263. However, while Israelis often express remorse over the violence and bloodshed of the region, many are also proud and embracing of their country. By portraying Israelis as apologetic, Abulhawa feigns humanizing them and instead reduces their views to reflections on a highly contested premise: that Jews have no right to Palestinian land.

The author’s bias against Jews is apparent not only in the thoughts of Jewish characters, but also in their speech. The only true profanity in the novel is found when we are introduced to young Israelis. Their language shows that the author views the characters as vulgar, and hopes that the reader will see them the same way. In fact, the Hebrew language is notable for its lack of vulgarity. Most swear words are borrowed from English or Arabic (“Speaking the Language”). The only Hebrew word for “whore” (97) is also used in academic and professional contexts with the connotation of the word prostitute. The Hebrew word “fuck” (98) is a euphemism derived from the Hebrew letter *zayin*. Abulhawa’s use of excessive vulgarity is reflective only of her personal views towards Israeli culture and society. In contrast, when describing crude language

in Lebanon, Abulhawa calls it “colorful insults” (185), ““foul lexicon”” (185), and “nothing more than a gratuitous reference to the anatomy of a female relative” (186). These descriptions of profanity are reserved only for Arab characters.

Many of Abulhawa’s criticisms of Israel are accurate and important. However, Abulhawa also demotes some tangible Israeli achievements. For example, she suggests that Palestinian land was fruitful before Israel arrived, and yet Israel falsely claimed to have “made it bloom” (117). In fact, Israel is one of two countries that ended the 20<sup>th</sup> century with a net gain in trees (“Why Israel Now Has More Trees”), despite the Negev desert taking up over 50% of the country (“Tilapia Culture in the Negev”). As of 2008, Israel was the only country in the world in which the desert was receding (“In the Desert”). In his bestselling book “Let There Be Water,” Seth Siegel discusses Israel’s technological advancement in irrigation and water preservation, in hopes that it will become a model for dryland countries around the world. Abulhawa writes that “oranges were the culmination of centuries of Palestinian farmers perfecting the art of citrus growing” (263). While this is true, the successful mass cultivation and export of the Jaffa orange heavily relied on the \$75 million worth of Jewish investments in the years following World War II (Kimmerling, 470). Instead of framing orange cultivation as it was – a cooperative effort between Jews and Palestinians – Abulhawa instead writes it off as another stolen element of Palestinian culture.

*Mornings in Jenin* is an important book in its introduction of a human, Palestinian perspective to American conversations about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. It discusses many dilemmas related to the conflict, and, more importantly, the Palestinian point of view towards those dilemmas. However, the Palestinian view can only go half way. In stereotyping Jews as Europeans, belittling Jewish claims to the land of Israel, presenting vulgar or despicable Jews,

and misrepresenting the views of Israelis, *Mornings in Jenin* lacks historical and cultural honesty. This honesty is fundamental to improving the lives of Palestinians and Israelis alike. Palestinians and Jews are in Israel and occupied territories to stay, and it is fundamental that citizens on both sides listen to each other. This novel had the opportunity to present the Palestinian narrative in itself, but instead it perpetuates the false conception that the Palestinian and Jewish narratives are inherently contradictory.

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