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Documenting the Nakba in Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin* (2010)

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Abstract

The Catastrophe of 1948, generally known as the Nakba, is one of the most traumatic calamities in the history of Palestinian people. It has deeply affected a whole population for generations. The Nakba has ever since become rooted in the Palestinian collective memory and a reference to their national identity. The Nakba is not a mere memory or a trauma of the past, instead it suggests a continuity of pain and struggle flowing from the past into the present. To document and preserve those historical events is of prime importance to Palestinians. It is a need to protect the collective Palestinian identity and culture, a need to keep a written record for the next generations. More importantly, it is a need to establish a counter narrative that serves as resistance to the distorted Zionist version and various attempts at silencing Palestinian voices. The genre of documentary fiction generally refers to the novels that are based on facts and are documented by the author. The use of such a genre fits the need to communicate traumatic history to reach a wider audience. This paper examines the novel *Mornings in Jenin* by Susan Abulhawa as a representative of a Palestinian documentary novel. It shows how blending the documented facts with a fictional plot gives a clear understanding of the subject.

Keywords: Documentary Fiction, Palestine, Nakba, Susan Abulhawa, trauma.

The Catastrophe of 1948, generally known as the Nakba, is one of the most traumatic calamities in the history of Palestinian people. It witnessed the killing of many Palestinians in horrific massacres across the villages of Palestine. It also marks the expulsion of more than 700,000 Palestinians out of their homes and lands, leading to their dispossession and diaspora around the globe. Around 80 percent of the Palestinians were uprooted and became refugees. Some sought living in the refugee camps in the neighboring countries of Lebanon, Syria and Jordan; some in camps in the West Bank and Gaza; while the few who managed to remain within the boundaries of the new state became inferior Israeli citizens. It has deeply affected a whole population for generations. The Nakba has ever since become the main referent of Palestinian collective memory and national identity. The Nakba is not a mere memory or a trauma of the past, instead it suggests a continuity of pain and struggle flowing from the past into the present. Amid an atmosphere utterly dominated by the Zionist view of the story of Palestine, there rises the need to challenge that dominance and establish a solid ground for the Palestinian voice to be heard and acclaimed. Ever since the catastrophe of the Nakba, the Palestinian narrative was predominantly written in Arabic and was not accessible to the western audience. Edward Said, one of the prominent Palestinian intellectuals who fought for the Palestinian right to be heard, urged Palestinians to seek the "permission to narrate" (27), to be able to give a unified narrative that stands in the face of oppression. Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin* comes out as an attempt to present such a unified narrative covering the suffering of the Palestinian people since the Nakba till the present day. It is considered as one of the first recognizable novels written in the English language that addresses the ongoing trauma of the Palestinian people.

The need to document and preserve those historical events is of prime importance to Palestinians; it is a need to protect the collective Palestinian identity and culture, a need to keep a written record for the next generations, and more importantly a need to establish a counter narrative that serves as resistance to the distorted Zionist version. Though historical documents, books and testimonies may be present, however, literature remains the most accessible medium to the larger audience. Hence, appears the need to introduce such narrative through literary genres such as the documentary novel.

Ever since the emergence of the novel as a prominent literary genre, it has been a medium for epistemological quests. A novel has a certain mixture of fact and

fiction that varies from one book to another. Though the presiding of fictional imagination over factuality is a main characteristic of the genre, many aspects of the novel are borrowed from reality that serves to re-create an authentic feeling of life. However, when factual events are given more prominence, there comes out the term “documentary fiction.”

Documentary fiction as a term, according to Leonora Flis, “describe[s] works that read like novels, but are based on facts documented by the author” (1). Barbara Foley regards it as a distinctive type of fiction that hovers around “the border between factual discourse and fictive discourse, but it does not propose an eradication of that border. Rather, it purports to represent reality by means of agreed-upon conventions of fictionality, while grafting onto its fictive pact some kind of additional claim to empirical validation” (25). Moreover, Nancy Pedri shares the same understanding of the term as she defines it as “a literary genre that purports to present a truthful account of a particular historical event. Regulated by a self-declared obligation to be factual, it presents a fictional universe marked with the recognition and the responsibility of truth” (11). Masu’d Zavarzadeh thinks of the nonfiction novel as “a narrative which is simultaneously self-referential and out-referential”, namely factual and fictional, and “thus well equipped to deal with the elusive fusion of fact and fiction which has become the matrix of today’s experience” (57).

Documentary fiction according to Pedri “overtly engages in the interpretation of documentary materials and sources that may give evidential weight to its telling” (11). The writer presents “text-intrinsic declarations” which they claim “to relate an historical truth through a faithful recording or reporting on the world” (11). Such “factual truth claims” are often supported by an evidence which could be any documented material such as an excerpt of a newspaper, an article, a testimony, a photo or a letter. A documentary fiction author usually insists “that it contains some kind of specific and verifiable link to the historical world” (Foley 26). Readers usually prefer such kind of fiction because it “gives them fairly easy access to the pleasures of fact, as well as to the message of the story ... the appeal of fact is supported by ... a human need for knowledge, as knowledge suggests control, a sense of power” (Flis 195).

Within the narrative text, Zavarzadeh distinguishes between two modes of referentiality, the figurational and the elemental. The “figurational-fact reference” is “the factlike detail of empirical reality which helps to create a

fictional likeness of the real world” (60). It helps to give the text “circumstantiality, internal believability, and specificity. All of which make the imaginary world of the writer lifelike” (58). It is an “intratextual” referent that is restricted within the boundaries of the fictional narrative, it has “total internal believability by being self-referent and self-contained” (54). On the other hand, the “elemental-fact reference” implies external “knowledge of the facts used in the narrative and the areas of human experience to which they refer” (61). It is extratextual, since it is a documentary presentation of verifiable facts that urges the reader to look for evidence beyond the text, such as the original source of the document or other historically known accounts of the same event.

The novel *Mornings in Jenin* (2010) could be considered a documentary novel par excellence. It depicts the real historical events of Palestine from the Nakba of 1948, up to the Naksa of 1967, the massacre of Sabra and Shatila, and up to the massacre of Jenin in 2002. Abulhawa does a skillful blending of the historical factual events into an engaging fictional plot. She does not merely recount the historical facts per se, she succeeds in imparting the traumatic feelings associated with the major traumatic events in history through individualizing their collective trauma.

Abulhawa sets the mimetic contract between her and the reader within the novel, as she openly asserts that the aim of her narrative is to document the Palestinian history and trauma. She states in a note at the end of her novel: “Although the characters in this book are fictitious, Palestine is not, nor are the historical events and figures in this story. To accurately render the settings and history, I relied on many written sources, which are cited as references and, in some instances, quoted in the text” (325). By declaring her intention behind writing this novel, Abulhawa aims “to stir people to react to the confusing, even chaotically destructive reality” (Flis 181). She aims through writing such a novel to educate readers about the disturbing reality of the Palestinian suffering and distortion of their history. Such a statement fits the novel into the documentary fiction genre. She transforms the past of Palestine in her book as means of retaining this history and creating a bond between Palestinians and the rest of the world.

The book is chronologically divided into eight sections, each marking a historical phase in the recent history of Palestinians. The first part “El Nakba” describes the life prior to the *Nakba* and its major events. The second “El

Naksa” deals with 1967 war, the third part “The Scar of David” sheds light on life of Palestinians under occupation and formation of resistance. The fourth part “El Ghurba” highlights the emotional suffering of Palestinians in exile, the fifth part “Albi Fi Beirut” tackles the refugee camps of Beirut and the carnage of Sabra and Shatila. The sixth is “Elly Bayna” which recounts the rise of the first intifada. The seventh “Baladi” tells of the history and life in the refugee camp of Jenin. The last is “Nihaya O Bidaya” which takes us through the siege and massacre of the Jenin camp in 2002.

Although the characters in the novel as Abulhawa contends are “fictitious”, nevertheless, the main characters carry the name of “Abulheja” family, which belongs to a real family in Palestine. Abulheja family were the real founders of the village of Ein Hod “eight centuries” earlier “by a general of Saladin’s army in 1189 A.D.” (34). They “had first settled there during the Byzantine empire. Legend had it that Saladin el Ayoub himself had granted the land to one of his generals as a reward for valor in battle” (263). Through these real/fictitious characters, history is imparted; Abulhawa vividly describes the time the village lived before its fall:

forty generations of living, now stolen. Forty generations of childbirth and funerals, weddings and dance, prayer and scraped knees. Forty generations of sin and charity, of cooking, toiling, and idling, of friendships and animosities and pacts, of rain and lovemaking. Forty generations with their imprinted memories, secrets, and scandals. (35)

The repetition of “forty generations” gives a deep feeling of the longevity of the time these people lived on the land, and how it is loaded with feelings for the rich human experiences of the land. It was not just “a land without people”, it was a land rooted with forty generations of life in its fullness.

Abulhawa devotes the first part of *Mornings in Jenin* to document the Nakba events, the main focus in this part is on the characters of Hasan and Dalia. Through a conversation between Hasan and Ari, his Jewish friend, we get introduced to the political atmosphere of 1947 and the tension between the Palestinians and the immigrant Jews who “launched a campaign across the world calling Palestine ‘a land without a people’. They’re going to make it a Jewish homeland” (23). Ari tries to rationalize this action as a compensation for what had happened to the Jews at the hands of Nazis. Hasan replies to him with the question all Arabs look for its answer, since it was “[w]hat Europe did. Not

the Arabs. Jews have always lived here. That's why so many more are here now, isn't it? While we believed they were simply seeking refuge, poor souls just wanting to live, they've been amassing weapons to drive us from our homes" (24). We get also information about the Zionist gangs:

The Irgun, Haganah, and Stern Gang. The British called them terrorists. The Arabs called them Yahood, Jews, Zionists, Dogs, Sons of Whores, Filth. The recent Jewish population called them Freedom Fighters, Soldiers of God, Saviors, Fathers, Brothers. By whatever name, they were heavily armed, well organized, and well trained. They set about getting rid of the non-Jewish population—first the British, through lynchings and bombings, then the Arabs, through massacres, terror, and expulsion. Their numbers were not large, but the fear they provoked made the year 1947 quake with menace, injecting it with warnings of the coming history. They came at least four times in 1947 and 1948 to Ein Hod while Palestine was still a British mandate. (24-25)

Abulhawa inserts reports from newspapers and news agencies to validate the events she recounts. For example, in the doomed events of Nakba, on the 24th of July, it was reported by the Associated Press that "Israeli planes and infantry had violated the Palestinian truce by the unprovoked attack" (28). She shows how Palestinian people would listen intently to the news waiting for any glimpse of hope for their return home.

In the course of the novel, it is noticeable how Abulhawa skillfully blends the figurational and elemental fact references. As Zavarzadeh has pointed out that both references could be used either compositionally or comprehensively (62). The first part of the novel includes many facts compositionally; facts about life preceding the Nakba: the harvest, traditions and culture of the people. She gives an idea about the history of the village of Ein Hod and how people started to live on that land. She, also, gives a detailed history of the Jews immigration to Palestine and the response of Palestinians towards that. For instance, the conversation between Hasan and his Jewish friend Ari provides the reader with information regarding the Jewish plans of taking over the land:

"It's very bad, Hasan," Ari said. 'Zionists have hordes of guns. They've recruited an army from shiploads of Jews arriving every day. You don't know all of it, Hasan. They have armored cars and planes, even... Hasan, they're going to take land. They've launched a campaign across the world

calling Palestine 'a land without a people.' They're going to make it a Jewish homeland. (22-23)

The narration of the Nakba of Palestinians within the novel could be linked to Dominick La Capra's concept of "empathic unsettlement". He describes it as:

a kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other's position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other's place. Opening oneself to empathic unsettlement is ... a desirable affective dimension of inquiry which complements and supplements empirical research and analysis. (78)

Through this notion, LaCapra endorses the idea of being responsive to trauma in a way that enables readers "to work through problems or mourn rather than merely to sentimentalize victims" (Vickroy xi). In this novel, Abulhawa takes the reader through a virtual experience of what it means to be a Palestinian. What befell the village of Ein Hod that day of Nakba was traumatic to all people and is imparted principally through the trauma of Dalia, who "ran from shelter to shelter with terror-stricken Yousef and a screaming baby Ismael" (28). The village was in ruins and the people were forcibly evicted from their homes, and many others fell dead. Hasan and Darweesh, his brother, along with other men were ordered to dig mass graves for their fellow villagers. The Zionist soldiers stole all of their belongings and valuables, and all villagers were ordered to walk out of the village under the harsh sun with no water or food for more than three days, and whoever objected was shot at once. Amid the chaos of the day, the most heightened traumatic moment is when Dalia lost her six-month-old son Ismael who she had firmly held to her chest. The baby was kidnapped from her arms by Moshe, the Israeli soldier who wanted to please his barren wife with a baby. Dalia did not see the soldier grabbing away her baby, she was bewildered at how her son disappeared from her tight embrace. She screamed frantically: "Ibni! Ibni! My son, my son, her eyes bulging in search of her son. Dust at her face, cactus at her feet" (33). The extent of traumatic shock to her is so great that she does not even care if her face is full of dust, or feel pain in her feet when she steps on cactus as they march through the desert. She makes a lot of effort to search for her son both physically and mentally. The futile search for her son amid the crowd left her mind vulnerable and rendered her to silence. The reader feels empathy with the villagers as they are forced out of their homes, and searches with Dalia for her son and feels the dust and cactus as she

does. The readers get to experience these unsettling emotions while reading about a historical event. Thus, instead of knowing about the Nakba merely as historical numbers and statistics, the gravity of it is rather felt as a deep and agonizing human experience.

Moving forward in the timeline of historical events, Abulhawa gives considerable weight to the documentation of the history of the Sabra and Shatila massacre in Lebanon in 1982. The documentation of such time in the novel is mainly recorded through the narration of Yousef and Amal's story. Elemental references are also presented as well, such as excerpts from newspapers and other books that tackle the massacre. All methods are intermingled together to give a detailed historical background of the political scene leading to the carnage:

Israel had been striking Lebanon to provoke the PLO into retaliation. In July 1981, Israeli jets killed two hundred civilians in a single raid on Beirut, and Ariel Sharon, Israel's defense minister at the time, issued a public vow to wipe out the resistance once and for all. The rhetoric was weighing heavily on Yousef and he was concerned for us should Israeli attacks intensify. Protecting the refugee camps was the priority. Toward that end, the PLO leadership ultimately struck a devil's deal to keep the women and children safe. But by April 1982, the United Nations had recorded 2,125 Israeli violations of Lebanese airspace and 652 violations of Lebanese territorial waters. Israel amassed twenty-five thousand soldiers on the border and continued to illegally deploy provocative maneuvers to the south of Lebanon. The PLO resisted retaliation and so did the Lebanese government. But Yousef correctly surmised that Israel would find a reason to invade, regardless of whether the PLO took action. (211)

The above events are narrated from the viewpoint of Yousef summarizing the situation right before the massacre. Amal's narration starts with how she came to Lebanon to be reunited with her brother Yousef and his wife Fatima as they were expecting their first baby. It is then that Amal not only regained the familial love she had been missing in her lonely life in the US, but she also found Majid, the love of her life, to whom she got married. Her life started anew and they were expecting their first child when the Israeli invasion of Beirut

occurred. Their lives at the camp of Shatila were directly threatened by the Israeli-supported Lebanese militia, so they thought of getting out of the country. They agreed that Amal should go back to the US to secure visas for her husband and Fatima. However, fate was faster in arrangements, and Amal got a call from Yousef telling her that on the night Majid was travelling to reunite with her, an Israeli raid fell down on his building and no one could survive the attack. A few days later, the Shatila camp was invaded by the militias and most of the men, women and children there were either shot or slaughtered, including Fatima and her daughter.

Abulhawa uses headlines of the news to describe Israel's invasion of Beirut on 6th June 1982. "A massive invasion.' 'Intense aerial bombardment.' 'Ninety-thousand-strong invasion force moving up the coast of Lebanon.' The television headlined 'Operation Peace in the Galilee.' Such was history's name" (216).

'Israel is striking back against the PLO, a terrorist organization whose aim is to slaughter Jews like they did the Munich athletes.' Israel's stated aim was self-defense. To dislodge the PLO, a six-thousand-member resistance. By August, the results were 17,500 civilians killed, 40,000 wounded, 400,000 homeless, and 100,000 without shelter. Prostrate, Lebanon lay devastated and raped, with no infrastructure for food or water. Israel claimed it had been forced to invade for peace. 'We are here for peace. This is a peacekeeping mission.' (218-219)

In this quote, Abulhawa accentuates the word "peace"; showing the mass killings as "a peace keeping mission" is an ironic contrast that demonstrates the double-sidedness of Israel. All the atrocities they committed are simply justified as acts of "self-defense".

Newslike narration is used to delineate that point in history within the novel. Details are given of the US brokered peace deal that the PLO agreed to, which was an attempt to save the lives of women and children in the refugee camps from the merciless attack. The deal entailed the departure of the men from Lebanon to Tunis, leaving behind all the women and children in the camps with the guarantee to their safety:

The PLO withdrew from Lebanon only after an explicit guarantee from U.S. envoy Philip Habib and Alexander Haig that the United States of America, with the authority and promise of its president,

Ronald Reagan, would ensure the safety of the women and children left defenseless in the refugee camps. Philip Habib personally signed the document. (219)

After a few days of the departure of the PLO men to Tunis, it became an ideal opportunity for the Israeli army to plan a massacre to rid of the largest number of Palestinians in the camp of Sabra and Shatila:

On September 16, in defiance of the cease-fire, Ariel Sharon's army circled the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila, where Fatima and Falasteen slept defenselessly without Yousef. Israeli soldiers set up checkpoints, barring the exit of refugees, and allowed their Lebanese Phalange allies into the camp. Israeli soldiers, perched on rooftops, watched through their binoculars during the day and at night lit the sky with flares to guide the path of the Phalange, who went from shelter to shelter in the refugee camps. (223-224)

To add to the documentation of the massacre, Abulhawa integrates around two pages from the book of the journalist Robert Fisk *Pity the Nation* into the novel. In the book, being one of the first journalists to enter the camp after the massacre, Fisk recounts the atrocities he had witnessed. He describes in detail how "[d]own every alleyway, there were corpses—women, young men, babies and grandparents—lying together in lazy and terrible profusion where they had been knifed or machine-gunned to death" (224). In the quoted pages, fine details are introduced of the mass killings, the rape of women, the execution of unarmed youth and the hastily dug mass graves.

Furthermore, Abulhawa highlights the indifference of the West to anything that happens to the Palestinians, she notes that a week after that horrific massacre, "Newsweek magazine determined that the most important story of the previous seven days had been the death of Princess Grace" (230). It is evident from such headlines, that the death of thousands of Palestinians is not worthy of caring, that they do not rise up to the value of one human being who dies from the West.

Abulhawa moves forward with the historical timeline to the period of the first Intifada (uprising) that took place from the years 1987 to 1994. The documentary nature of the novel is further delineated through the citation of almost two full pages from the book *The Rise and Fall of Palestine* by Norman Finkelstein. The excerpts selected by Abulhawa and quoted within the novel

draw attention to the violation of Palestinian children's rights by the Israeli army. They expose how repeatedly children as young as six years old would be kidnapped and beaten. How the parents of these children were denied knowledge of their whereabouts, unless they paid a ransom of 750 dollars to the Israeli authorities. The book reported incidents of children that were shot directly in the head or the heart, as well as several cases of torture for the kidnapped children.

Many documentary novels adopt the narrative mode that Lars Ole Sauerberg describes as "documentary realism". It is obviously related to the traditional realism of the novel and he contrasts the two modes. In terms of narrative features, they both share the same characteristics; a realistic narrative usually presents "a unified whole by imposing a linear chronology, by devising a well-made plot, by maintaining consistency of character and by sustaining the authority and integrity of narrative voice, while representing experience" (16). Documentary realism may not differ much in terms of features, but it certainly does in terms of content.

Traditional realism as Sauerberg contends "assumes the fictional universe to be a satisfactory verbal rendition of an intrinsically coherent *analogy* to a reality which is seen to exist 'out there' for us to take in and for our imagination to work on against the background of our general experience" (3). The fictional experience is a convincing reworking of the real life experiences, which intuitively provokes constant comparison with reality. On the other hand, documentary realism "explicitly or implicitly acknowledges borrowing 'directly' from reality, that is, from kinds of discourse intended for nonliterary purposes" (3). It is the introduction of a certain real historical event or figure into the "fictitious world of the fictional text" (3), thus "deliberately integrating the factual into the fictional" (4). Sauerberg clearly defines it as "a narrative mode which, while adhering in principle to the time-honoured narrative conventions of realistic narrative, draws on verifiable reality to various extents, but invariably in such a way as to call attention explicitly or implicitly to the difference between the fictional and the factual" (6). It is "a kind of fiction in which the narrative technique is plainly subservient to exploring the social and political realities of human situations rather than speculating about whether we can be said to exist at all" (191).

Mornings in Jenin could also be considered as an embodiment of Lars Ole Sauerberg's concept of documentary realism. The novel adopts a linear chronological plot typical of a traditionally realistic narrative, presenting well developed round characters. The novel explicitly acknowledges the direct borrowing from reality and the inclusion of real historical event to the "fictional universe". The plot serves the representation of historical reality and is subservient to the factual events. The novel fits into Sauerberg's notion as a combination of both "the adaptation of a wholly factual series of events to a traditionally fictional narrative pattern" (7), as well as "embedding of factual passages of different lengths" (6). As a documentary realistic work, the novel exposes the reader to a large number of factual references that directs the reader to the "extra-literary reality", which in this case is the history of Palestine. This forces the reader to research beyond the facts introduced in the novel to reach a wider awareness of the story of Palestine that is contrary to the much known story told by the Zionist view of the conflict.

In the end, *Mornings in Jenin* succeeds in illuminating the history of Palestinian people and the loss of their land. Through blending the fictitious with the factual, the novel serves as a perfect example of the genre of documentary fiction. Precedence is given to the factual events of the Nakba and the subsequent massacres over the fictional plot of the novel. Several documents are incorporated into the novel, including many excerpts of books and newspapers. The documentary realist narrative is used to integrate the trauma of the people within the text, thus making readers feel a state of empathic unsettlement. This in turn urges readers to search and validate the information they acquired through the narrative, which supports the aim of documentary fiction as a powerful epistemological tool.

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توثيق النكبة في رواية سوزان أبو الهوى صباحات جنين

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مستخلص

تعد نكبة 1948 من أكثر المصائب المفجعة في تاريخ الشعب الفلسطيني، فقد تركت أثراً عميقاً على العديد من الأجيال. و منذ ذلك الحين أصبحت النكبة رمزا أساسيا للذاكرة الفلسطينية الجمعية و مرجعا للهوية القومية. فالنكبة ليست مجرد ذكرى عابرة أو فجيعة من آثار الماضي، وإنما هي حالة مستمرة من الألم والصراع تتدفق من الماضي إلى الحاضر. إن حفظ وتوثيق هذه الأحداث التاريخية يحمل أهمية كبيرة للفلسطينيين، فهو حماية للهوية والثقافة الجمعية الفلسطينية و توثيق مكتوب للأجيال القادمة. كما أن هذا التوثيق يبني خطاباً مضاداً ليكون بمثابة مقاومة للخطاب الصهيوني المشوه و مقاومة لمحاولات إسكات الأصوات الفلسطينية. الرواية التسجيلية كنوع أدبي هي تلك الروايات القائمة على حقائق موثقة من قبل الكاتب. و استخدام هذا النوع الأدبي في الكتابة يساعد في توصيل أحداث التاريخ المفجعة إلى جمهور أوسع. تتناول هذه الورقة البحثية رواية صباحات جنين للكاتبة سوزان أبو الهوى كمثال للرواية التسجيلية الفلسطينية، و يظهر من خلال استخدام الأساليب المختلفة كيف أن خلط الحقائق الموثقة بالقصة الخيالية يعطي فهماً أوضح للموضوع.

الكلمات الدالة: الرواية التسجيلية، النكبة، فلسطين، سوزان أبو الهوى، الفجيعة.