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Cartographies of Loss and Resistance in the Palestinian Diaspora: Homeland, Memory and the Female Body in Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin* and Lina Meruane's *Volverse Palestina*

Cartografiando la pérdida y la resistencia desde la diáspora palestina: hogar, memoria y el cuerpo femenino en *Mornings in Jenin*, de Susan Abulhawa, y en *Volverse Palestina*, de Lina Meruane

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Abstract: This article examines *Mornings in Jenin* by Susan Abulhawa and *Volverse Palestina* by Lina Meruane through the lens of postcolonial feminism, along with contributions from memory studies, and decolonial theory. It argues that both writers transform language into a homeland of resistance, reimagining exile as a space of gendered agency and narrative reclamation. While Abulhawa reconstructs collective memory through English realism, Meruane reclaims Palestinian identity through Spanish introspection. Across linguistic and cultural divides, both authors articulate a decolonial poetics of survival where storytelling becomes the final act of return.
Keywords: exile; language; postmemory; decolonial feminism; Palestinian diaspora.
Summary: Introduction. Postcolonial Feminist Readings of English and Spanish Palestinian Diasporic Narratives. Home, Exile, and the Imagined Return. Memory, Postmemory, and Generational Inheritance. Gendered Bodies and the Politics of Suffering. Conclusions.

Resumen: Este artículo analiza *Mornings in Jenin* de Susan Abulhawa y *Volverse Palestina* de Lina Meruane desde la perspectiva del feminismo poscolonial, incorporando contribuciones de los estudios de la memoria y la teoría decolonial. Se sostiene que ambas escritoras convierten el lenguaje en una patria de resistencia, transformando el exilio en un espacio de agencia femenina y de recuperación narrativa. Mientras Abulhawa reconstruye la memoria colectiva mediante el realismo en inglés, Meruane reivindica la identidad palestina a través de la introspección en español. A pesar de las divisiones lingüísticas y culturales, ambas articulan una poética decolonial de supervivencia donde narrar es el último acto de retorno.
Palabras clave: exilio; lenguaje; posmemoria; feminismo decolonial; diáspora palestina.
Sumario: Introducción. Lecturas feministas poscoloniales de narrativas diaspóricas palestinas en inglés y español. Hogar, exilio y el retorno imaginado. Memoria, posmemoria y herencia generacional. Cuerpos generizados y la política del sufrimiento. Conclusiones.

INTRODUCTION

The narratives of the Palestinian diaspora, particularly those penned by women, constitute a vital and insurgent archive against historical erasure and geopolitical silencing. Operating from within and across the languages of global power, these writers perform a dual act of translation: transforming personal exile into collective testimony and repurposing colonial idioms into vehicles of decolonial remembrance. This article examines two singular contributions to this corpus: Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin* (2010), written in English, and Lina Meruane's *Volverse Palestina* (2013), composed in Spanish. Though emerging from distinct linguistic landscapes and generational vantage points—Abulhawa from the heart of Anglophone discourse and Meruane from the Latin American periphery—both texts converge in their profound exploration of loss, resistance, memory, and the gendered reclamation of identity. In the pages that follow, loss and resistance will be analyzed through the lens of postcolonial feminism not as sequential phases but as a unified whole, examined through three interconnected axes: the lost homeland, reconstituted through narrative; the workings of memory, which defies temporal erasure; and the female body, which becomes both a site of wounding and a vessel for resurgence.

Susan Abulhawa is a Palestinian-American novelist, poet, and activist whose work centers on exile, memory, and intergenerational trauma within the Palestinian diaspora. Her debut novel, *Mornings in Jenin*, offers a sweeping historical narrative that traces one family's displacement from the village of Ein Hod during the 1948 Nakba through subsequent decades of war, occupation, and diaspora. Blending intimate focalization with

geopolitical history, the novel situates private grief within the broader structure of settler colonialism, foregrounding how forced migration fractures kinship, identity, and belonging while also sustaining forms of cultural continuity. In a different but dialogic register, Lina Meruane—a Chilean writer of Palestinian descent—approaches Palestinian identity from the positionality of diasporic return. In *Volverse Palestina*, Meruane constructs a hybrid memoir-chronicle that documents her journey to Palestine in search of familial and historical roots, interrogating the affective and political dimensions of "becoming" Palestinian from afar. Whereas Abulhawa fictionalizes collective trauma through a multigenerational realist saga, Meruane mobilizes autofictional and essayistic strategies to explore belated identification, mediated memory, and the ethics of witnessing, together mapping complementary literary cartographies of Palestinian identity across displacement and return.

Ultimately, the two authors' views of resistance converge in their insistence on storytelling as a fundamental act of survival—a means of defying the finality of exile and inscribing Palestine onto the global literary map. Yet they diverge in their formal and philosophical approaches to this task: where Abulhawa's epic realism mounts a resistance of reconstruction, painstakingly rebuilding a world to prove its historical existence, Meruane's introspective autofiction enacts a resistance of deconstruction, relentlessly questioning the possibility of fully possessing either memory or homeland. Together, these distinct strategies illuminate the rich plurality of the Palestinian literary voice, demonstrating that resistance is not a monolithic cry but a polyphonic conversation across generations, languages, and genres.

1. Postcolonial Feminist Readings of English and Spanish Palestinian Diasporic Narratives

The exploration of identity in the works of Susan Abulhawa and Lina Meruane demands a theoretical foundation that foregrounds postcolonial feminism while also drawing on memory studies, decolonial theory, and spatial thinking. Their narratives of Palestinian displacement, written in English and Spanish, resist hegemonic constructions of Arab womanhood and contest the erasures produced by colonial histories.

At the core of this framework lies postcolonial feminism, which exposes how global power structures marginalize women of the Global South within both colonial and mainstream feminist discourses. In this line

of thought, Chandra Talpade Mohanty's article "Under Western Eyes" critiques Western feminism's tendency to homogenize "Third World women," arguing that colonization entails structural domination and the suppression of heterogeneity (Mohanty 333). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theorization of the subaltern further questions whether women who are doubly silenced by patriarchy and imperialism can attain self-representation, insisting that "the colonized subaltern subject is irretrievably heterogeneous" (Spivak 271). These insights are crucial for reading Abulhawa and Meruane, whose texts speak from positions of racialized and gendered exile, refusing both the universalization and the silencing of Palestinian womanhood.

Postcolonial feminism also illuminates the gendered politics of Orientalist representation. In *Women and Gender in Islam*, Leila Ahmed traces how colonial regimes instrumentalized images of Arab and Muslim women to legitimize domination, a dynamic that Lila Abu-Lughod revisits in *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, where the figure of the Muslim woman becomes a pretext for imperial rescue. Abulhawa's works, *Mornings in Jenin* and *The Blue Between Sky and Water* (2015), counter the trope of the "oppressed Arab woman" by foregrounding female resilience and relational forms of agency within ongoing occupation and displacement. Meanwhile, working from Latin America and the United States, Meruane's narratives reclaim Palestinian women's voices from within Western and Latin American cultural fields, inhabiting what Sara Suleri terms "imperial intimacy," a space in which colonial power is experienced not as a simple binary but as an intricate, everyday entanglement (Suleri 9). Rather than writing from a position of pure exteriority to Western modernity, both authors negotiate, appropriate, and subvert the very discourses that have historically defined and constrained them.

Diaspora theory provides a second pillar for this postcolonial feminist approach by conceptualizing exile as an ongoing process rather than a completed rupture. Stuart Hall famously defines identity as "a production which is never complete, always in process" (Hall 222), a formulation that resonates with Homi K. Bhabha's notion of hybridity and the "Third Space" where cultural meanings are renegotiated (Bhabha 55). For Palestinian diasporic subjects, identity is not anchored solely in a lost homeland nor dissolved into the host nation; instead, it is formed in the interstices between dispossession, adaptation, and political struggle. Avtar Brah's *Cartographies of Diaspora* emphasizes that diaspora is not only

about routes but also about the affective geographies of memory, longing, and the contested politics of return. On the other hand, Edward Said's *Reflections on Exile* describes exile as "the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place" while acknowledging the critical and creative possibilities that displacement opens (Said 180). Abulhawa and Meruane transform that rift into literary energy, crafting gendered narratives in which exile becomes a site of reconfiguration rather than pure loss.

To sharpen this focus on space, it is necessary to introduce spatial theory to define cartography and geopolitics as key terms to define what both authors achieve with their works. Following relational conceptions of space, cartography in this paper refers not merely to literal maps but to the narrative and symbolic mapping of routes, borders, and everyday spaces through which Palestinian women's lives are organized and imagined. In Abulhawa and Meruane, such feminist cartographies chart movements across camps, cities, checkpoints, and domestic interiors, tracing how these spaces are saturated with memory, affect, and power. Geopolitics, by contrast, designates the material and discursive structures—occupation, borders, citizenship regimes, and racialized surveillance—that shape who can move, who can return, and whose suffering is rendered visible. Read together, cartography and geopolitics illuminate how gendered exile is lived at the intersection of intimate spaces and global power formations, allowing the novels to be understood as postcolonial feminist remappings of Palestinian space.

Within this spatialized framework, memory studies function as a supporting tool that clarifies how the past inhabits the present of diasporic women. Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory describes how descendants of trauma survivors inherit memories they did not themselves experience, yet that profoundly shape their identities. For many diasporic Palestinians, especially those born in exile, Palestine is known through transmitted stories, photographs, and silences rather than direct experience. In *Mornings in Jenin*, Abulhawa's intergenerational narrative follows Palestinian women whose private grief is inseparable from collective dispossession, exemplifying Cathy Caruth's claim that trauma is constituted by its belated, unassimilated return rather than by a single original event (Caruth 4). Dominick LaCapra's distinction between "acting out" and "working through" helps articulate how these texts dramatize oscillations between compulsive repetition and critical engagement, as characters alternately relive and re-narrate inherited wounds.

Meruane's *Volverse Palestina* performs a related, yet formally distinct, act of postmemorial reconstruction. Writing from Chile and in Spanish, she stages a journey to Palestine as both physical travel and narrative inquiry into family origins, practicing what Svetlana Boym calls "reflective nostalgia," a mode that "dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging" and "lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history" rather than idealizing a lost home (Boym 41). Reflective nostalgia here becomes a feminist method for questioning inherited myths, acknowledging fragmentation, and imagining solidarities that do not depend on a purified or fully recoverable past. In both Abulhawa and Meruane, memory thus emerges as an aesthetic and political practice of resistance to erasure, a practice that is always mediated by language.

Language itself is the third axis of this framework: it is where postcolonial feminism, decolonial thought, and memory converge. Writing in English, Abulhawa engages the colonial language to "decolonise the mind," in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's sense, transforming the idiom of empire into a vehicle for Palestinian testimony. Lina Meruane, by contrast, writes predominantly in Spanish, a language historically marked by Iberian colonialism yet also by Latin American anti-colonial struggles and traditions of testimonio. Jacques Derrida's reflections in *Monolingualism of the Other* highlight how language is always, to some extent, the property of the Other, producing a constitutive linguistic estrangement that resonates with diasporic experience. Walter Mignolo's concept of "border thinking" further clarifies Meruane's position: situated at the epistemic borders of the Arab world and Latin America, she produces knowledge from the peripheries of multiple cultural and linguistic systems (Mignolo 61). This border epistemology echoes Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*, where "mestiza consciousness" names a mode of identity formed through the negotiation of overlapping linguistic and cultural borders (Anzaldúa 77). Abulhawa similarly inhabits a literary "Third Space" of enunciation (Bhabha 37), where code-switching, translation, and intertextuality become strategies for reimagining Palestinian identity across English, Arabic, and other idioms.

These translingual practices feed into a broader decolonial feminist praxis that the novels collectively enact. Boaventura de Sousa Santos's call for "epistemologies of the South" urges attention to knowledges produced from sites of struggle and marginality (de Sousa Santos 19). Abulhawa and Meruane respond to this call by writing from the margins of empire—U.S. and Latin American contexts deeply implicated in global power

structures—while centering Palestinian women's experiences of war, displacement, and everyday negotiation. Frantz Fanon's reflections in *Black Skin, White Masks* on language as both a marker of colonial alienation and a site of psychic conflict are reworked in Abulhawa's fiction: English becomes not simply the sign of assimilation, but a weaponized resource for narrating Palestinian histories to global audiences. In Meruane's case, the Spanish-language tradition of testimonio enables her to link Palestinian dispossession to Latin American histories of dictatorship, exile, and resistance, forging a South-South solidarity that exceeds Eurocentric geopolitical frames.

Finally, transnational feminist theory and affect studies help name the specifically gendered dimensions of this decolonial, spatial, and mnemonic project. Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan argue that transnational feminism must account for how globalization produces differentiated subjectivities, rather than assuming a unified category of "women" (Grewal and Kaplan 13). Abulhawa's fiction often centers maternal figures whose labor of care and remembrance functions as a form of political endurance, while Meruane's narrators foreground embodied vulnerability—illness, partial blindness, and visibility—as critical lenses on power. Sara Ahmed's notion of "affective economies" elucidates how emotions such as shame, loss, anger, and pride circulate between individual bodies and collective histories, turning affect into a terrain of political struggle (44). bell hooks's distinction between marginality as imposed exclusion and marginality as a chosen "location of radical openness" offers a vocabulary for the resistant positionality that both writers claim (hooks 153). Chela Sandoval's "differential consciousness" further captures the strategic shifting of perspectives, identities, and rhetorical modes through which their protagonists navigate overlapping systems of oppression (Sandoval 140).

Therefore, Abulhawa's Anglophone and Meruane's Hispanophone narratives will be read as postcolonial feminist cartographies of gendered exile and translingual memory: they map Palestinian women's lives across contested spaces, languages, and geopolitical regimes, transforming literature into a decolonial practice of remembrance, resistance, and reimagination.

2. HOME, EXILE, AND THE IMAGINED RETURN

The idea of home in both *Mornings in Jenin* and *Volverse Palestina* is profoundly paradoxical: it signifies both origin and exile, belonging and loss. For both authors, Palestine is less a territorial certainty than a narrative homeland, a space that survives through recollection and language. However, their approaches diverge: Abulhawa reclaims a dispossessed homeland through collective memory, while Meruane reconstructs an inherited identity from the fragmentary perspective of a Chilean-Palestinian diaspora.

Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin* begins with a visceral image that condenses the tension between intimacy and violence: "Amal wanted a closer look into the soldier's eyes, but the muzzle of his automatic rifle, pressed against her forehead, would not allow it" (Abulhawa, *Mornings* 11). This scene epitomizes the novel's tragic geometry: Palestine is glimpsed only through the barrel of a gun, the gaze perpetually obstructed by occupation. In spite of this fact, the novel resists erasure by anchoring its identity in the earth itself. The opening chapter recalls a prelapsarian Eden: "A small village east of Haifa lived quietly on figs and olives, open frontiers and sunshine" (13). This pastoral image of Ein Hod, rendered in lyrical prose, reclaims the continuity of a land violently redefined by history. The sensory detail—figs, olives, sunshine—transforms memory into resistance, asserting Palestinian rootedness before displacement. This rootedness is embodied in the figure of Yehya, whose connection to the land is so profound that it is literally inscribed in his hands: "Age-dappled and rough, his farmer's hands were infused with the melanin truths of those hills. The truth that an olive branch flowers only once … Yehya's hands knew those facts from a lifetime devoted to trees and their earth" (Abulhawa, *Mornings* 60). Home, for Yehya, is not an idea but a physical extension of the self, making the loss of the land a form of bodily amputation.

Meruane's *Volverse Palestina*, by contrast, begins not from possession but from estrangement:

> To return. That is the verb that assaults me every time I think about the possibility of Palestine. I tell myself: it would not be a return but merely a visit to a land where I have never been, from which I do not hold a single

> own picture . . . It would not be my return, but a borrowed return.[1] (Meruane 13)

Her repetition of "return" underscores an existential crisis: she is heir to an absence, compelled to translate someone else's nostalgia. Whereas Abulhawa's characters remember exile, Meruane inherits it. Her relationship to Palestine is mediated through imagination, archives, and paternal silence. This mediation is fraught with uncertainty; even the family name, a primary anchor of identity, becomes suspect. When a relative in Beit Jala tells her, "You are not Meruane . . . You are Saba" (Meruane 58), the very foundation of her inherited home—the name passed down through generations—crumbles, revealing the fragility of the narratives that connect her to a place she has never seen. The "home" she seeks is not a physical structure but a stable story, and that story is suddenly in doubt.

Furthermore, in *Mornings in Jenin*, the catastrophe of 1948 becomes both historical and mythic. Abulhawa writes that "forty generations of sin and charity, of cooking, toiling, and idling . . . carried away by the notion of entitlement of another people" (48). The rhythm of this sentence transforms dispossession into liturgy: daily gestures—cooking, toiling—become sacred remnants of a stolen continuity. This sense of a profound, linear history being violently truncated is reinforced by the Arab practice of naming children to preserve genealogy, a tradition Yehya reflects upon as he calculates "the number of generations who had lived and died in that village . . . a task made simple by the way Arabs name their children to tell the story of their genealogy" (Abulhawa, *Mornings* 48). The loss of the land is also the severing of this chain of names, a rupture in the very act of storytelling that defines a people. Yehya's futile return to his village crystallizes this transformation of nostalgia into martyrdom: "He had gone happily to the heaven of martyrs" (63). Death becomes the only possible mode of return, underscoring how exile recasts the homeland as an eschatological promise. Even in death, he is marked by his return, his face wearing "a smile" (Abulhawa, *Mornings* 63), a testament to the peace found in a final, fatal connection to the land.

Meruane's exploration of return, on the other hand, is far more ambivalent. When her father refuses to cross the Israeli checkpoint into the

[1] All the quotations from *Volverse Palestina* have been translated from the original Spanish into English by the author of this paper.

West Bank, she observes about her father: "He would not submit to the arbitrary wait . . . to be called a foreigner in a land he considers his own, for there it remains, uncoquered, the house of his father" (14). The father's refusal embodies a new mode of exile—one not imposed by force but chosen to preserve dignity. Later, she writes how the father reflects on how "[t]hat house has long ceased to be ours . . . It is closed with a key that no longer belongs to us" (25). The locked house becomes an emblem of generational dispossession: ownership survives only as memory. If Abulhawa's home is lost to violence, Meruane's is lost to time, but both are suspended between memory and the impossibility of return. This suspension is poignantly captured when she and her siblings stand before the family's former home, only to find it locked and inaccessible, its interior erased by an earthquake and fire: "It is locked with a key that is not ours anymore . . . I can't see anything, insist the voice of my little-brother, looking through the peephole. And perhaps there is nothing to see" (Meruane 25–26). The home, the ultimate symbol of origin, offers no visual confirmation of the past, only a void.

Emotionally, these narratives diverge sharply. Abulhawa externalizes grief through collective lament, crystallized in Dalia's scream as her son is torn from her arms: "'Ibni! Ibni!' ('My son! My son!')" (*Mornings* 46). The maternal cry collapses personal and national anguish as the mother's loss becomes the nation's wound. Meruane, by contrast, approaches exile through skepticism and irony: "I would be called a Palestinian, perhaps an exile, but I do not know my land" (31). Her confession destabilizes the rhetoric of authenticity that often dominates diasporic narratives. Abulhawa's prose is epic in tone—affirming endurance and sacrifice—whereas Meruane's is self-reflexive and anti-heroic, interrogating the very legitimacy of her longing.

Both authors suspend chronological time to depict the timelessness of displacement. Abulhawa writes that "the year 1948 in Palestine fell from the calendar into exile, ceasing to reckon the marching count of days … becoming an infinite mist of one moment in history" (*Mornings* 48). This is the central articulation of how historical time fractures into repetition and stasis, echoing the cyclical temporality of trauma. For the refugees in Jenin, 1948 is not a past event but a perpetual present. Yehya's despair upon realizing his tent has been replaced by a clay house—"The symbolic permanence of the shelter was too much to bear. He would rather have stayed in the cloth dwelling, its leaky top and muddy floor confirming only a temporary exile" (Abulhawa, *Mornings* 56)—shows how the physical

marker of time passing is itself a source of trauma, a confirmation that the rupture is not a momentary nightmare but a permanent condition. The family is stuck, waiting in "that interminable year, with its surreal twist of fate and tentative conclusion, stretching on and on, renewed each morning with the news" (Abulhawa, *Mornings* 55). Meruane similarly observes that "[t]he recapitulation of the past has become doubtful even for my father" (16). This doubt is a product of time's fracture; the linear narrative of family history has been broken. For her father, the past is not a clear chronology but a collection of questionable fragments, a condition that Meruane inherits. This is further emphasized by the loss of official records: her grandfather's birthdate is uncertain because "the birth certificate was lost when the Palestinian church burned down" (Meruane 23). Another fire, another erasure, another fracture in the timeline that makes the past inaccessible and dubious. The cyclical nature of this destruction—the family home in Chile also burns—creates a traumatic echo, a repetition of loss across generations and continents, trapping the family in a cycle where home is always under threat of immolation. In both texts, historical time fractures into repetition and stasis, echoing the cyclical temporality of trauma.

Ultimately, writing itself becomes the only viable form of return. For Abulhawa, narrative restores what exile erases: through storytelling, Palestine endures in collective consciousness. Her prose becomes an act of reclamation—a textual homeland that survives colonial erasure. For Meruane, writing is explicitly positioned as a substitute for physical return: "To go or not to go, that will be my question. To go and write, or not to go and never leave my Palestine in writing" (*Mornings* 32). Her formulation of writing as return articulates a postmodern inversion: the act of narration itself constitutes belonging.

Thus, while Abulhawa reimagines Palestine through communal resistance and generational continuity, Meruane constructs it through introspective translation and postmemory. Both, however, convert exile into a geography where they can be creative, transforming displacement from silence into voice, from absence into text.

3. Memory, Postmemory, and Generational Inheritance

In both *Mornings in Jenin* and *Volverse Palestina*, memory serves as the principal means by which identity is constructed, transmitted, and contested. For the Palestinian subject in exile, recollection is never

individual, it is collective, transgenerational, and political. The two writers, however, approach this inheritance from distinct temporal positions: Susan Abulhawa writes as the child of direct displacement, while Lina Meruane writes as the grandchild of migrants who left long before the Nakba. Through this temporal distance, their works dramatize two modes of remembrance, Abulhawa's living memory and Meruane's postmemory in Marianne Hirsch's sense: the imaginative reworking of an inherited past that one never lived directly. This distinction is crucial: where Abulhawa's narrative seeks to mend the tears in the fabric of memory, Meruane's dwells in the frayed edges themselves.

In *Mornings in Jenin*, memory functions as a form of resistance against both historical amnesia and personal despair. Abulhawa's characters carry memory as both burden and weapon. Amal, the novel's protagonist, lives under its tyranny, yet the novel consistently demonstrates how storytelling imposes coherence upon inherited chaos. This is evident in the figure of Haj Salem, the camp elder who functions as a living archive. Amal notes that

> [h]e was the most animated and lively character of [her] youth, and it was he who passed history on to the camp's children. [Her] treasure of Palestinian folklore and proverbs came from him. It was he who gave [her] the names and stories of people [she] would encounter as miscellaneous victims of war in the history texts that [she] would read decades later. (Abulhawa, *Mornings* 96)

Haj Salem's oral narratives transform abstract historical victims into named individuals with stories, creating a coherent lineage between the past and the future. He is the human embodiment of the novel's own project: to ensure that no Palestinian becomes a mere statistic, that every life retains its narrative thread. Amal's eventual ability to write her family's story is built upon this foundational inheritance of structured, purposeful storytelling.

The most striking emblem of this inheritance is the separation of Amal from her brother Ismael, renamed David by an Israeli family. This fraternal rupture literalizes the fragmentation of Palestinian identity. Yet the novel does not leave this rupture open; it meticulously works toward its resolution. This resolution is prepared decades in advance through the persistence of embodied memory. When David, as a young Israeli soldier,

first encounters Yousef, his biological brother, in a prison clinic, something stirs within him despite his ignorance of his origins:

> Is it possible they captured a Jew by mistake? A Jew who is related to me? A Jew who came to Palestine without knowing his relatives had also survived? He searched his mind for answers, opening and closing the doors of memories for a clue to who, or what—if anything—this prisoner might be to him. A tear slid from the corner of the Arab's eye. Ismael! He reached his hand toward the soldier and fell unconscious again. (Abulhawa, *Mornings* 118)

Even without conscious memory, the body recognizes its kin. The scar on Ismael's face, a mark of his infant life in Ein Hod, becomes the physical evidence that will later allow David to piece together his true identity. The narrative ensures that the fragmentary clues—the scar, the tear, the inexplicable recognition—accumulate into a coherent picture that can be assembled and understood.

Lina Meruane's *Volverse Palestina*, by contrast, stages the crisis of postmemory: the tension between inherited narratives and lived distance. Her voice oscillates between fascination and skepticism toward the very memory she seeks to recover. This skepticism is rooted in the fundamental instability of the materials she inherits. The family's past is not preserved in coherent stories but in fragments that resist assembly. When she asks her father about the names carved on their grandparents' tombstone, he cannot remember: "My father shifts in his seat, trying to remember which ones were carved into the stones" (Meruane 15). Even the final, physical inscription of identity on a grave is subject to the erosion of memory. The Arabic names of her grandparents—Salvador or Isa? Milade or María?—exist in a state of unresolved translation, hovering between languages and identities without settling into a definitive version. This is not memory that can be passed down; it is memory that dissolves with each passing generation.

Where Abulhawa's narrative is saturated with the immediacy of trauma, Meruane's is marked by anxiety over authenticity. This anxiety is compounded by the political dimensions of naming itself. She reflects on the impossibility of neutral language in the region: "The very definition of the territory, as we already discussed in a message, is problematic. Simply choosing to name cities with certain names and not others in this region is equivalent to a declaration of war" (Meruane 34). If even the act of naming

a place is a political act fraught with erasure, how can she, a diasporic descendant, hope to reconstruct an authentic narrative? The tools of storytelling themselves are compromised before she begins. Her inheritance is not a story but a minefield of contested terminology, where every word choice carries the weight of erasure and counter-erasure. This awareness paralyzes any attempt at coherent reconstruction.

Both writers foreground the act of storytelling as the means by which memory survives exile. In *Mornings in Jenin*, Amal reconstructs her family's past through oral and written testimony. This reconstruction is portrayed as a sacred duty, a way of honoring the dead and ensuring that their lives retain meaning. When Amal reflects on her mother Dalia's decline, she notes that

> her favorite scarf was tightly wrapped on her head, its hems pouring down her shoulders. That scarf had been a present from Baba years ago... Now yellowed by time, it had been white with ornate stitching along its border. When Mama's body finally caught up to her mind, which had departed the world soon after the 1967 war, I kept that scarf, and I still have it, tucked safely in a small box that holds what remains to me from my family. (Abulhawa, *Mornings* 99)

The scarf is a tangible object of memory, a physical thread connecting her to a past that, while painful, can be held and preserved. The small box containing these remnants is a metaphor for the narrative itself: a carefully kept collection of meaningful objects that, together, tell the story of a family. The narrative imposes order on these remnants, arranging them into a meaningful whole. Similarly, Meruane frames her entire narrative as a quest to reclaim a story before it disappears. Yet while Abulhawa's storytelling seeks to recover coherence, Meruane's exposes its impossibility. She writes from a position of radical uncertainty, acknowledging that the past may be irretrievable. When she contemplates visiting the family home in Beit Jala, her father warns her it is pointless: "That house years ago ceased to be ours . . . It was dismantled and rented out, the house, and then came the fire. They also got rid of the corner store where my grandfather sold fabric by the meter" (Meruane 18). Unlike Amal's carefully preserved scarf, there is no physical remnant left to anchor Meruane's narrative. The house is locked, the store is gone, the objects have been dispersed. There is no small box of family treasures to

unpack and arrange. She must build her story from absence itself, from the negative space left by what has disappeared.

All in all, while Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin* performs the memory of direct dispossession, Meruane's *Volverse Palestina* enacts the uncertainty of diasporic aftermemory. The former mourns a stolen homeland, the latter interrogates the inheritance of mourning itself. Together, they illuminate the continuum between memory and postmemory—the living and the inherited—revealing how Palestinian identity persists not through possession of place, but through the persistent, imperfect act of remembering.

4. Gendered Bodies and the Politics of Suffering

Both *Mornings in Jenin* and *Volverse Palestina* inscribe the experience of exile not merely in language but in the female body. In both texts, womanhood becomes a political text, a living archive that carries the burden of displacement, memory, and resistance. The maternal, wounded, and observing bodies of Abulhawa's and Meruane's protagonists function as corporeal sites where personal grief intersects with collective trauma. Read through a postcolonial feminist lens, these bodies materialize what Chandra Talpade Mohanty identifies as the structural entanglement of gender and colonial power, while also challenging Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question of whether the subaltern woman can speak by demonstrating that speech often occurs through embodied suffering rather than explicit political declaration. Yet while Abulhawa's writing transforms the female body into a repository of historical endurance, Meruane's work situates it as a mirror of epistemic fragility, questioning the authority of both memory and vision itself.

In *Mornings in Jenin*, the body is the first terrain of occupation. The scene in which Dalia gives birth in a refugee camp epitomizes this. This connection between the maternal body and the land is established from the very beginning of the family's trauma. During the 1948 Nakba, as Dalia flees Ein Hod, the text emphasizes the profound physical disorientation of losing a child:

> Dalia stopped and so did time. She screamed like she hadn't when her father burned her hand. A loud, penetrating, consuming, unworldly scream from a mother's deepest agony. From the most profound desire to reverse time, just

> a few minutes. If there is a God, he heard Dalia's wail. (Abulhawa, *Mornings* 46)

Here, the scream of "Ibni! Ibni!" ('My son!') is not just grief; it is the physical eruption of a history interrupted, a body whose purpose—to nurture and protect—has been violently severed by the machinery of a new state. Later, the child stolen from Dalia, raised as the Israeli David, is haunted by the same scene. His adoptive father, Moshe, is perpetually tormented by "the image of the Arab woman and her children," (Abulhawa, *Mornings* 50) and the sound of her scream, "Ibni, ibni!" echoes inside his head as a demon he cannot escape (Abulhawa, *Mornings* 52; 118). The stolen child's very existence is thus a physical testament to his birth mother's trauma, a living scar on the body of their shared history. In spatial-theoretical terms, Abulhawa constructs a feminist cartography in which the refugee camp is remapped through childbirth, transforming abjection into generative persistence. Dalia's motherhood becomes inseparable from dispossession; to bring life into the world is simultaneously to affirm continuity and to expose it to annihilation. Her body, deprived of a stable home, stands as the most immediate embodiment of nationhood.

Abulhawa extends this metaphor of bodily endurance through Amal, Dalia's daughter and the novel's central consciousness. Amal's life, marked by loss, becomes an anatomy of historical trauma. When she leaves for America and finds herself being "the Palestinin girl of pitiable beginnings" (Abulhawa, *Mornings* 198), she remarks that pain was the only inheritance her mother left her, and thus she redefines maternal legacy as transmitted suffering. This articulation resonates directly with Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory: Amal inherits not land but affect, not property but wound. Trauma, as Cathy Caruth argues, is constituted by its belated return, and Amal's subjectivity is structured by precisely such repetition—an unassimilated history that insists on reappearing in the body. This inheritance is literalized in the shrapnel wound she receives during the Six-Day War, an event that merges her physical development with national catastrophe. As she hides in the kitchen hole, the explosion that kills her baby cousin Aisha marks her forever: a piece of shrapnel, "[s]o small and light, how could it have cut her open like that?" (Abulhawa, *Mornings* 86). This moment is the violent, physical punctuation of her childhood, a trauma etched into her memory and flesh. Later, as a young woman, Amal is shot by Israeli soldiers, the bullet tearing

into her abdomen—the same part of her body that has just begun to bleed with the arrival of her first period (Abulhawa, *Mornings* 141–42). This cruel coincidence intertwines her emerging womanhood with political violence, framing her reproductive capacity as a target and making her body an archive of the occupation's incursions. In Abulhawa's prose, pain becomes the central language of belonging and the proof that Palestine continues to exist through its wounded bodies. The physical suffering of women—rape, childbirth, hunger—acquires testimonial authority and transforms the female body into what Judith Butler would call a site of grievability, that is, a space that demands recognition of the humanity denied to the politically dispossessed.

Abulhawa often locates female resistance precisely in maternal suffering. When Amal reflects on her mother's silent endurance, she recognizes that silence itself is a form of political agency:

> Yousef turned everything inward, as Dalia had done. He cloistered the pain, letting it tangle with powerlessness. Silence consumed their little shack in Jenin, and both Amal and Yousef would later recall those times with a thick taste of emptiness. Toughness found fertile soil in the hearts of Palestinians, and the grains of resistance embedded themselves in their skin. (Abulhawa, *Mornings* 130)

The silence of women in *Mornings in Jenin* carries generational weight: it is an unspoken history preserved in gestures, lullabies, and recipes. Such domestic practices constitute what Avtar Brah terms the "affective geography" of diaspora, where memory is sustained not in official archives but in embodied repetition. The kitchen, the cradle, and the refugee tent become counter-geopolitical spaces, intimate sites where colonial displacement is symbolically undone through care and continuity. Abulhawa asserts in her writing that Palestinian women, long represented as victims, are in fact the carriers of collective endurance.

In contrast, Lina Meruane's *Volverse Palestina* reframes the politics of embodiment through the lens of perception and fragility. Her autobiographical narrator approaches the journey to Palestine not as a return but as a mediated encounter with an inherited narrative: "It would be a borrowed return, a returning in the place of someone else. My grandfather. My father" (Meruane 13). This recognition situates the narrator's relationship to Palestine within a framework of displacement even before the journey begins. Palestine is not an experienced homeland

but a transmitted story, "a background rumor, a narrative invoked to save a shared origin from extinction" (Meruane 13). The act of seeing thus becomes epistemologically charged: to encounter the land is to confront the fragility of the inherited myth. This ambivalence aligns with Svetlana Boym's concept of reflective nostalgia, which resists restoring an idealized homeland and instead dwells in fragmentation and doubt. For Meruane, to see is not to confirm belonging but to risk epistemic rupture. Where Abulhawa's women are bound by physical suffering, Meruane's narrator experiences epistemic dislocation, a fragmentation of self produced by the collision of identity and perspective.

Encounters with Palestinians repeatedly expose the instability of her position. When a man recognizes her surname, he tells her with surprise: "You are a Palestinian, you are an exile. You don't know your land?" (Meruane 31). The remark, posed almost casually, exposes the paradox of diasporic identity: she is recognized as Palestinian precisely through the absence of lived experience. Later, when a supposed relative questions her genealogy, the narrator confronts an even deeper rupture: "Something twists inside my head. Something collapses. If I am not Meruane, then who am I?" (Meruane 59).

The irony embedded in these moments reveals a distinctly postmodern discomfort: she cannot fully inhabit either the physical or symbolic space of her origin. Here, Stuart Hall's theorization of identity as a process becomes embodied: Meruane's narrator inhabits Bhabha's "Third Space," negotiating hybridity under the gaze of others. Her body, unlike Dalia's or Amal's, is not marked by visible wounds but by estrangement—an exile inscribed in perception rather than blood.

Meruane's representation of womanhood, by contrast, resists idealization. She rejects the trope of the suffering mother as national allegory. Instead, her narrative centers on self-analysis and critical observation. The female body appears as a site of scrutiny and surveillance. The narrator recounts waiting in line under the watch of soldiers while "we answer questions and show our papers," holding in one hand her Chilean passport and in the other her identification card marked as potentially dangerous.

The contrast between Abulhawa's and Meruane's treatment of the body mirrors their broader political aesthetics. Abulhawa's realism transforms pain into solidarity while Meruane's essayistic introspection turns alienation into critical distance. For Abulhawa, the womb and the land are intertwined metaphors of persistence: both violated, yet both

generative. Her maternal figures convert biological reproduction into historical survival, insisting that Palestinian existence continues despite expulsion. For Meruane, the body is an unstable signifier, neither fully Palestinian nor fully Western, marked by what Homi Bhabha would call "hybrid visibility," a state in which identity is constantly negotiated through the gaze of the other. If Abulhawa's female body operates as monument—solid, enduring, testimonial—Meruane's operates as mirror, reflecting the fractures of diasporic identity and the epistemic instability of inherited narratives.

Despite these divergences, both writers converge on one fundamental insight: that the female body bears the inscription of geopolitical violence. In Abulhawa, this inscription is carved in childbirth and mourning, and in Meruane, it is etched through border interrogations and the discomfort of belonging nowhere. Together, they enact what this theoretical framework defines as a postcolonial feminist cartography: a remapping of Palestine through gendered embodiment, where exile is neither abstract nor purely territorial but materially lived in flesh, memory, and perception. Their female narrators embody a sort of marginality as resistance, an ability to transform displacement into a vantage point from which to critique power.

Ultimately, *Mornings in Jenin* and *Volverse Palestina* expose the body as the most intimate site of the Palestinian question. For Abulhawa, the body signifies survival through pain, and for Meruane, it reveals the instability of identity itself. One writes the body as monument, the other as mirror. When Abulhawa's Amal finally confronts her long-lost brother, David, she sees him not as an Israeli soldier but as a fellow inheritor of their mother's legacy: "You and I are the remains of an unfulfilled legacy, heirs to a kingdom of stolen identities and ragged confusion" (Abulhawa, *Mornings* 303). It is a recognition of a shared, wounded embodiment. Similarly, Meruane's narrator, contemplating the possibility of return, concludes that her body is the only vessel for a history she cannot otherwise access: "The question of returning home always comes back. No matter where I am: the house and its lack summon me" (Meruane 127). The house, like the homeland, is a phantom limb, felt most acutely in its absence. Together, they demonstrate that to speak of Palestine through women's narratives is to articulate not only political dispossession but the very material texture of being human under exile.

CONCLUSIONS

The comparative analysis of Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin* and Lina Meruane's *Volverse Palestina* reveals the multilayered and potent ways in which literature can suture the wounds of displacement, crafting coherence from fragmentation and voice from silence. While rooted in the shared soil of Palestinian loss, these narratives diverge in their aesthetic strategies, linguistic negotiations, and generational perspectives, together mapping a expansive cartography of diasporic consciousness. Abulhawa, writing in English, constructs a sweeping, multi-generational saga that externalizes trauma, transforming it into a collective epic of endurance. Her work insists on the unbroken thread of memory, where the homeland is preserved in the sensory details of olive trees, familial recipes, and the embodied suffering and resilience of women. In stark contrast, Meruane, writing in Spanish, internalizes the quest, offering a fractured, self-reflexive meditation on the very possibility of belonging. Her narrative embraces the uncertainty of postmemory, where the homeland is not a recovered past but a labyrinth of borrowed stories, archival ghosts, and the profound alienation of the returning outsider.

Despite these distinct approaches, both authors achieve a profound decolonial intervention by weaponizing their chosen languages. Abulhawa infuses English with the rhythms and untranslated residues of Arabic, bending the colonial tongue to carry the weight of Palestinian history and demand global witness. Meruane, meanwhile, leverages the colonial history of Spanish in Latin America to forge a critical, ironic voice that provincializes her own gaze and highlights the transnational circuits of dispossession. For both, language is never a neutral medium but a contested homeland, the one territory that cannot be occupied, where identity is continuously authored and reauthored. Furthermore, their gendered lens crucially redefines the political landscape of exile. They relocate agency from the public, masculine sphere of nationalist rhetoric to the intimate, domestic, and corporeal realms. The female body, in their works, becomes the ultimate archive, inscribed with trauma through childbirth, violence, and illness, but also serving as the resilient vessel for cultural transmission and silent protest.

Ultimately, this study underscores that the significance of Abulhawa and Meruane extends beyond the Palestinian context, offering a vital blueprint for understanding diasporic and postcolonial literature at large. They exemplify how narrative can function as a form of epistemological

resistance, challenging hegemonic histories and creating counter-archives from the margins. Their works demonstrate that in the absence of territorial sovereignty, sovereignty of voice becomes paramount. Storytelling is reconceived not as mere recollection but as an ethical and political act, a means of working through trauma, of demanding grievability for lost lives, and of imagining community across chasms of time and space. By navigating the complex intersections of gender, memory, and translingual expression, they articulate a dynamic model of identity that is neither rooted in a romanticized past nor assimilated into a monolithic present, but perpetually forged in the creative, painful, and necessary act of telling. In doing so, they confirm that while the map of Palestine may be scarred by erasure, its most enduring and liberated topography is being drawn, line by line, in the defiant literature of its diaspora.

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