

Quest for Identity in Sahar Khalifeh's Wild Thorns

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Abstract—Sahar Khalifeh's *Wild Thorns* (Al-Subbar, 1976) is a landmark Palestinian novel that critically examines the crisis of identity experienced by Palestinians living under Israeli occupation. Set in the occupied West Bank after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, the novel explores the political, psychological, cultural, and economic dimensions of Palestinian existence. Through characters such as Usama, Adil, Zuhdi, and various female figures, Khalifeh portrays the fragmentation of Palestinian society under colonial domination and the tension between resistance and survival. This paper investigates the theme of identity through postcolonial and resistance literature frameworks, emphasizing nationalism, alienation, labor exploitation, gender consciousness, exile, and collective memory. The paper argues that Khalifeh presents identity as fluid and contested rather than stable, revealing how occupation reshapes both individual consciousness and collective belonging. The study further demonstrates that *Wild Thorns* transcends political propaganda and instead offers a deeply human representation of Palestinians struggling to preserve dignity and selfhood in a colonized society.

Index Terms—occupation, existence, resistance, alienation, identity.

I. INTRODUCTION

Palestinian literature occupies a unique position in modern Arabic literature because it emerges from historical trauma, exile, occupation, and resistance. Since the Nakba of 1948 and the subsequent displacement of Palestinians, literature has become an important tool for preserving memory and asserting national identity. Palestinian writers such as Ghassan Kanafani, Mahmoud Darwish, Emile Habibi, and Sahar Khalifeh have transformed literature into a site of resistance against cultural erasure.

Among these writers, Sahar Khalifeh stands out for her realistic and critical depiction of Palestinian society. Unlike nationalist literature that often glorifies

resistance, Khalifeh portrays the complexities, contradictions, and divisions within Palestinian life. Her novel *Wild Thorns* is particularly significant because it captures the psychological consequences of Israeli occupation on ordinary Palestinians.

Published in 1976, *Wild Thorns* examines the condition of Palestinians in the West Bank who are forced to work in Israel for economic survival while simultaneously experiencing humiliation and exploitation. The novel centers around Usama, a Palestinian returning from the Gulf with revolutionary ideals, and his confrontation with a society trapped between resistance and economic dependency.

Identity in *Wild Thorns* is not merely personal but deeply political. It is connected to land, labor, nationalism, memory, gender, and resistance. The novel reflects the crisis faced by colonized people who struggle to maintain dignity under systems of domination. This paper analyzes how Khalifeh constructs the theme of identity and demonstrates the ways occupation fractures yet simultaneously strengthen Palestinian consciousness.

II. POSTCOLONIAL FRAMEWORK AND IDENTITY

Postcolonial theory provides a useful framework for understanding identity in *Wild Thorns*. Colonialism does not only occupy land; it also attempts to control culture, memory, and identity. Edward Said argues that imperial powers define colonized people through stereotypes and representations that justify domination (Said, *Orientalism* 40). Palestinians, under occupation, are therefore engaged not only in political resistance but also in the struggle to preserve their identity.

Frantz Fanon explains that colonialism creates psychological alienation among the colonized. The colonized subject becomes divided between selfhood and imposed inferiority (Fanon 18). This

fragmentation is evident throughout Khalifeh's novel. Palestinians are caught between survival and resistance, adaptation and nationalism, despair and hope.

Homi Bhabha's concept of "hybridity" is also relevant. Colonial situations create identities that exist in an unstable "third space" where individuals constantly negotiate contradictory realities (Bhabha 55). Khalifeh's characters inhabit such a space. They are neither fully submissive nor entirely revolutionary. Instead, their identities are shaped by compromise, fear, resistance, and endurance.

III. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: OCCUPATION AND SOCIAL CRISIS

The Six-Day War of 1967 dramatically altered Palestinian society. Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza Strip, creating economic dependency and political instability. Palestinians lost control over land, movement, and employment opportunities.

Many Palestinians began working inside Israel due to economic necessity. While these jobs provided income, they also created humiliation because workers labored for the same system that oppressed them. This situation produced deep divisions within Palestinian society.

Khalifeh's *Wild Thorns* reflects this reality with remarkable honesty. The novel does not portray Palestinians as united heroes. Instead, it presents conflicting attitudes toward resistance, labor, and nationalism. Through these conflicts, Khalifeh explores the crisis of Palestinian identity.

The occupation also affects social relationships. Fear, surveillance, poverty, and political repression create fragmentation within families and communities. Khalifeh demonstrates that colonialism operates not only through military control but also through psychological and social disruption.

Usama symbolizes militant nationalism and revolutionary identity. After living abroad, he returns to Palestine determined to participate in armed resistance. He believes that true Palestinian identity depends upon rejecting all forms of cooperation with Israel.

However, Usama's ideals quickly clash with reality. He is shocked to discover that many Palestinians work in Israeli factories and construction sites. To him, such

labor represents betrayal. He views economic dependency as surrender to colonial power.

Usama's frustration reflects the tension between ideology and lived experience. While he dreams of revolution, ordinary Palestinians are concerned with feeding their families and surviving occupation. Khalifeh uses this conflict to question rigid nationalist discourse.

At the same time, Usama's commitment reflects the persistence of Palestinian resistance. Despite disappointment, he refuses to abandon his ideals. His identity is shaped by the belief that liberation requires sacrifice.

Frantz Fanon argues that violence often becomes a means through which colonized people reclaim identity and dignity (Fanon 51). Usama embodies this revolutionary impulse. Yet Khalifeh complicates this position by showing its limitations. Usama fails to fully understand the everyday struggles of workers and families living under occupation.

Adil represents another dimension of Palestinian identity: survival under occupation. Unlike Usama, Adil works inside Israel to support his family. He understands the humiliation involved, but he sees no alternative.

Adil's character illustrates the moral complexity of life under colonialism. He is not politically indifferent, yet economic necessity forces compromise. Through Adil, Khalifeh critiques simplistic definitions of patriotism. The Israeli labor system creates psychological alienation. Palestinian workers contribute to the economy of the occupier while experiencing discrimination and exploitation. Labor becomes both survival and subjugation.

Marxist critics often discuss how labor can shape identity under systems of domination. In *Wild Thorns*, labor becomes a site of internal conflict. Workers lose dignity yet continue working because poverty leaves no choice.

Adil's struggle reflects the broader Palestinian dilemma. How can one maintain national identity while participating in structures imposed by occupation? Khalifeh does not offer easy answers. Instead, she portrays identity as fragmented and unstable.

Adil's humanity makes him one of the novel's most compelling characters. He embodies the silent suffering of ordinary Palestinians whose resistance lies not in heroic acts but in daily endurance.

IV. ALIENATION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL FRAGMENTATION

Alienation is central to *Wild Thorns*. Almost every character experience some form of displacement or psychological fragmentation. Palestinians are alienated from their land, political freedom, and sense of security. Usama feels alienated because his revolutionary expectations do not match reality. Workers feel alienated because their labor benefits the occupier. Women feel alienated within patriarchal social systems. Even family relationships are affected by fear and political division.

This fragmentation reflects Fanon's argument that colonialism destroys the psychological unity of colonized societies (Fanon 210). Occupation creates distrust, insecurity, and isolation. Khalifeh also portrays urban spaces as symbols of alienation. Checkpoints, factories, military presence, and economic control reshape everyday life. Palestinians move through spaces marked by surveillance and restriction. The title *Wild Thorns* symbolizes this condition. Thorns represent pain and resistance simultaneously. Like thorny plants surviving in harsh environments, Palestinians endure despite suffering.

V. WOMEN AND GENDERED IDENTITY

One of Khalifeh's greatest contributions to Palestinian literature is her feminist perspective. Unlike many male nationalist writers, she examines how women experience both colonial oppression and patriarchal restrictions. Female characters in *Wild Thorns* play crucial roles in preserving cultural identity and emotional stability. Women maintain family structures, traditions, and collective memory despite political instability. Khalifeh rejects the idea that women should remain passive symbols of nationalism. Instead, she portrays them as active participants in social and political life. Their struggles parallel the national struggle for liberation. The occupation intensifies gender inequality because political instability often reinforces patriarchal control. Yet women also become sources of resilience and continuity. Through female characters, Khalifeh broadens the concept of resistance. Resistance is not limited to armed struggle; it also includes emotional endurance, caregiving, education, and cultural preservation.

VI. MEMORY, LAND, AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

Memory plays a crucial role in Palestinian identity. In *Wild Thorns*, characters frequently remember villages, traditions, landscapes, and life before occupation. These memories become acts of resistance against erasure.

Edward Said argues that the Palestinian struggle is deeply connected to narrative and historical memory (Said, *Culture and Imperialism* xiii). Khalifeh's novel itself functions as a form of cultural preservation. Land occupies symbolic importance in Palestinian literature. It represents belonging, dignity, and continuity. The occupation threatens not only physical land but also emotional attachment to homeland.

Characters in *Wild Thorns* experience grief because occupation disrupts their relationship with place. Yet memory allows them to maintain identity despite displacement. Cultural practices such as language, storytelling, food, and family traditions also strengthen collective identity. Khalifeh suggests that identity survives through shared cultural memory even under oppressive conditions.

VII. RESISTANCE LITERATURE AND PALESTINIAN CONSCIOUSNESS

Wild Thorns belongs to the tradition of Palestinian resistance literature (*adab al-muqawama*). This literary movement emerged after 1948 as writers sought to preserve national consciousness. Ghassan Kanafani defined resistance literature as literature that refuses silence and affirms Palestinian existence (Kanafani 65). Khalifeh continues this tradition but introduces greater realism and complexity.

Unlike romantic nationalist texts, *Wild Thorns* acknowledges internal divisions within Palestinian society. Khalifeh portrays class tensions, ideological disagreements, and personal conflicts. This realism strengthens the novel's political significance. By depicting ordinary people rather than idealized heroes, Khalifeh humanizes the Palestinian struggle.

Resistance in the novel appears in multiple forms: Armed struggle, Economic endurance Preservation of culture, Emotional resilience, Memory and storytelling Thus, identity and resistance become interconnected processes.

VIII. KHALIFEH'S NARRATIVE STYLE

Khalifeh employs realism to depict Palestinian life authentically. Her narrative style avoids excessive sentimentality or propaganda. She uses multiple perspectives to show the diversity of Palestinian experiences. This technique prevents simplistic interpretations of identity. Dialogue in the novel reflects social tensions and ideological conflicts. Characters speak from different political and class positions, creating a rich and nuanced portrayal of society. Khalifeh's prose is direct yet emotionally powerful. She combines political critique with psychological depth, making *Wild Thorns* both a political and literary achievement.

IX. CONCLUSION

Sahar Khalifeh's *Wild Thorns* is a profound exploration of Palestinian identity under occupation. Through characters such as Usama and Adil, the novel reveals the tensions between resistance and survival, ideology and reality, nationalism and economic dependency.

Khalifeh demonstrates that identity is not fixed but continuously shaped by political oppression, memory, labor, exile, and cultural resistance. Colonialism fragment's identity, yet Palestinians continue to preserve dignity through resilience and collective consciousness. The novel challenges simplistic nationalist narratives by portraying the human complexities of occupation. Khalifeh's feminist perspective further expands the meaning of resistance to include emotional endurance and cultural preservation.

Ultimately, *Wild Thorns* remains one of the most important postcolonial novels in Arabic literature because it captures both the political and psychological dimensions of Palestinian existence. The quest for identity in the novel reflects the broader Palestinian struggle for recognition, belonging, and liberation.

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