

Unjust Identity Quest: Sahar Khalife's the Inheritance: A Post-Colonial Study

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Abstract

In Sahar Khalifeh's novel *The Inheritance*, fact and fiction parallel each other while a post-Oslo picture of life in Ghaza is delineated with a particular focus on the lives of four Palestinian women. The constriction that blocks their lives because of the Israeli occupation is similar in effect to the obsolete social pressures on them. In portraying their struggles inside the general plight of the Palestinian people, Khalifeh condemns both the colonial military forces and the similarly oppressive patriarchal rules.

Keywords: Sahar Khalifeh, Palestinian Literature, Third world women, postcolonialism, *The Inheritance*.

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Introduction

Postcolonial feminist criticism as used in the present study examines how women are subjugated in a colonial patriarchal post-Oslo Palestine. *The Inheritance* critiques assumptions made about Palestinian women in either literature or society. Women continue to be marginalized, subordinated, and stereotyped. The novel also corrects approaches assuming that all women share a common identity based on a shared experience of oppression. Audre Lodra, the black feminist, states that “*White women focus upon their oppression as women and ignore differences of race, class and age. There’s a pretense to homogeneity of experience covered by the word sisterhood that does not in fact exist*” (Lodre, 1984, p.116). Likely, Khalifeh is aware of the uniqueness of Palestinian women crisis inside the general plight of Third World women. Postcolonial feminists challenge the idea of ‘global sisterhood’ showing the intention of Western feminism to treat Third World women as ‘other’. Third world women are only a broad category, within which postcolonial feminists can explore particular histories and struggles of postcolonial women against colonialism, racism, sexism, and economic forces. As *The Inheritance* conveys, Palestinian women are doubly subjugated; first as women in patriarchal societies and second as politically colonized women. The current paper argues

That the experience of Palestinian women under the Israeli occupation and the unfair social rules of their society makes their identity quest harder than normal and self-fulfillment more or less impossible.

Body

In *The Inheritance*, Sahar Khalife offers a sharp examination into the lives of Palestinians both in exile countries and the homeland in a post Oslo world in the nineties. It is also a world when the first Gulf war has recently taken place and a great number of Palestinians who used to work in either Kuwait or Iraq have returned home. Khalifeh’s real success in this novel is giving voice to different Palestinian characters of various circumstances; most important of who are female characters who are rarely heard in literature before.

The Inheritance is the story of Zaynab or Zayna. Born to a Palestinian father and an American mother, Zayna leads a life tormented between two cultures in the US. Pregnant at fifteen, something her father was about to kill her for, she leaves both her father and his Arabic culture and goes to live with her American grandmother. She enforces the American side in her character to become an accomplished anthropologist. Zayna’s fulfilled professional life does not heal a basic split in her character caused by the past’s wounds, though. In her forties, she decides to go back to Palestine to see her dying father and discover her roots.

I didn’t say I was Arab because I wasn’t. Who am I then? Despite my mother’s citizenship, my birth certificate, my school certificate, my books, my accent, my clothes, and everything about my life, I was not truly American. The depths of my mind were inhabited by visions and pictures, love songs, those Arabic mawals moving like the

passage of a breeze, the scent of violets, the fragrance of memories, all leaving behind a honey-sweet solution in the heart.

(Khalifeh, 1997, p. 17)

Zayna has a deeper ideological split as well. She belongs to no religion in particular. “I was neither Christian nor Moslem. Concerned, my grandmother repeated constantly, ‘You need an ideology, you need faith.’ ” (Khalifeh, 1997, p. 20)

Home in Palestine, Zayna meets her uncle Abu Jabber: the father of two exiled refugees unable to come back, Mazen an idealistic rebel named Guevara, Kamal, a German scientist, Said a slow-minded merchant and finally Nahleh, a bitter-fifty-year-old spinster who had given up her entire career working in Kuwait for the sake of her family. Zayna meets other people as well like Violet, a pretty sensitive single Christian woman fed up with her inability to settle down and marry Mazen and suffocated by people’s gossip. She also meets Futna her young step-mother who gets artificially inseminated from her husband (Zayna’s father) in an Israeli hospital to guarantee a bigger share of the inheritance. She meets Sitt Amira, Futna’s mother who represents the older generation that lived in a pre-colonial Palestine and witnessed Alnakkbah: Jerusalem’s occupation. Amira and Abu Jabber still embrace many values that are lost to the time of the novel.

The characters reveal themselves slowly as events occur and intertwine. Some chapters are told by Zayna in the first person singular while others are told by an omniscient narrator. Futna’s pregnancy via artificial insemination and what it brings of the inheritance issue, the sewage factory designed by Kamal to initiate an economic renaissance in Palestine, and the cultural center launched by Mazen and Zayna to combat the colonial erasure of indigenous culture are three lines that control the plot. The setting where all this takes place is Wadi Alrihan which is tensely opposed by Kirat Rahil, a Jewish settlement. On the one hand, Wadi Alrihan is a place that lacks security and infrastructure. It is a time after the first Intifada and people are tired of too many deaths and hoping for better lives. On the other hand, the money lovers are hoping for bigger shares of the cake and are involved in all sorts of economic projects. It is a time of change and promising renaissance when both militants and liberal women seem to be undesired.

The sewage factory becomes an environmental disaster after Kamal the scientist gives up on it. The inauguration of the cultural center turns into catastrophe when they forget to number the tickets/seats and huge crowds enter by force. Stray rats from the factory tamper with people in the celebration and it ends up with complete chaos. Because of the closeness between Wadi Alrihan and the Jewish settlement Kirat Rahil, the Israeli security forces besiege the area to prevent troubles. Futna gives birth in the middle of the celebration and starts bleeding. Because of the Israeli blockade, she bleeds to death. The novel ends with Sitt Amira handing her grandson to the fierce Israeli soldiers in the blockade sarcastically thanking them for their effort both in the insemination process and in killing her daughter, “Thank you very much, this is your share.” (Khalifeh, 1997, p. 251)

Zayna

In the stories of Zayna (and Kamal as well), Khalifeh tackles the different and difficult political and social circumstances that Palestinians in the Diaspora are subjected to. Zayna's father never became a true American despite being married to one. Because his daughter abused "his honor" being pregnant at fifteen, he forces her to live a dubious life and become a permanent alien by his violent threats. It is all for his masculine 'honor'. The same thing happens with a girl named Huda who elopes for fear of her life after becoming pregnant as a teen-ager. It is the dilemma of living in one place using the mentality of another. A similar incident takes place in Palestine when the fifty-year-old Nahleh has an affair with the realtor and is disgraced by her brother Mazen. The fiery males in the three incidents are usually given the very same freedom they deny their females. Khalifeh critiques the double standard of morality that pushes the women to lead diasporic lives.

Making Zayna the main narrator of the novel is significant. As a professional anthropologist she is an expert in studying people and their lives. "...here I am a grown up, coming to gather the details of his life like someone collecting grains of sand." (Khalife 44) Her scientific way in tracing events/lives/histories and roots prove very efficient for the narrative. She forces the reader to think in the same detached manner. The anthropologist's fate, is typically alienated, however. In her difficult research, Zayna and the reader are purposefully lost. "I no longer knew what information to collect or what I had come looking for in my country of origin. In the midst of this overwhelming welter of people's problems and worries, I lost track of my objectives, which scattered in many directions.

(Khalife, 1997, p. 52)

She realizes that language is the first tool to understand people and begins to learn her native language using tapes and books. Spoken language proves insufficient for the quest, so she learns classical Arabic only to discover that Classical Arabic does not best express personal feelings and worries; only colloquial language does. She returns to colloquial losing her way between classical and colloquial eventually. It is as if Khalifeh argues the evasive nature of language especially for women who are often pushed to silence. Zayna begins as a woman caught between two worlds and ends between two worlds as well. In Wadi Alrihan, Zayna awakens to her situation as a single Palestinian woman in that particular society and sees the similarity between herself, Futna, Nahleh, and Violet: a victim to the double oppressors.

Khalife's is mainly an existential pose to life. Zayna's alienation never ends. It only deepens and widens in spite of few glimpses of warmth and understanding. The characters remain restless and insecure throughout the whole novel. This applies to Zayna as well as Mazen, Kamal, Violet, Nahleh, Futna, and even the older generation in Abu Jabber and Sitt Amira.

Nahleh

Nahleh is Sahar Khalifeh's achievement. The voice she gives to ordinary women's innermost feelings and deepest ideas in a colonized place like Palestine is part of her feminist anticolonial attitude that the novel marvels in. Nahleh represents a great number of Palestinian women who sacrificed everything for the sake of their families. She dedicated her entire youth working as a teacher in Kuwait to support the family coming back home only for vacations. Then, when the first Gulf war took place she returned home to be met only by ingratitude and inferiority. It was acceptable to let her lead an independent life all by herself in Kuwait but once back home, Nahleh has to abide by the rules and become a second hand citizen.

Is this what I get n life, is this what I spent my youth for—living in exile! Is this why I gave him hard-earned money and sweated in Kuwait! Is this what I end up with? He and they, all of them, all squeezed me like a lemon and then left me behind. They loved and hated, had relationships with more women than the hairs in their beards. They became engineers, with God's grace, while I worked in Kuwait, being milked like a cow, teaching and bringing them up, but they paid no attention to me and did what they wanted.

(Khalife, 1997,p. 50-51)

At fifty it is almost impossible for her to find a suitable match while her life is slipping away or as she says: "I woke up to find myself old, without a husband, without a house, and no one to call me mama. This is how I ended." (Khalife 52) Nahleh's despair pushes her to imagine she is in love with a seventy-year old married realtor who marries her against the wish of his children. Disgraced by her brother Mazen in public for this relation, and faced by the realtor's cowardice in front of his sons, Nahleh is torn up between two different lives as a second hand citizen. She picks what displeases her less.

Nahleh is the only daughter in a family full of sons. Like so many Palestinian women she needed to prove her validity in the tough times of war and hardship. As Bamia says "Traditionally shunned because they could not perpetuate the family name, girls carried the torch of national struggle" (Bamia, 2000, p. 180) Nahleh carried the struggle she could handle: working to support the family and help her brothers. Of her brothers there was the militant fighting for the motherland, the genius studying in Europe, and the merchant keeping the country's economy. She thought she was acquiring a sense of recognition for keeping them all going. However, discovering the double standards of morality that governs the society, Nahleh willingly and despairingly adheres to the same standards lest she should be outcast. Her rebellion only amounts to being the second wife of an old man. Khalifeh makes it hard for the reader to condemn or judge Nahleh. In picturing the complicated life she has led in a society crumbling with invalid traditions as well as occupation, Nahleh has probably had no other way to behave. "What makes Khalifa's characters real is the absence of heroism in their attitude and a semblance of weakness that transpires through their hesitation in various situations" (Bamia, 2000, p. 184)

Violet

Being Christian in love with a Moslem does not help alleviate Violet's anxieties as a pretty single woman in a patriarchal society. Wadi Alrihan with its continuous gossip is too suffocating for her. This is a problem Khalifeh deals with in other works as well.

Parallel to the portrayal of women's involvement in the political action, Khalifa undertook the criticism of the customs and traditions of her society as hampering factors in women's emancipation. She seems concerned with the misconceptions of society toward beautiful, unmarried women who were always a subject of suspicion without a cause." (Bamia, 2000, p. 183)

This is why Violet is eager to immigrate to the US. Violet confirms the ambivalent situation of men towards women in the novel. Mazen, though a rebel who had cast away all the social traditions and lived freedom to the utmost, still traditionally looks at women. First, he disgraces his sister Nahleh for her relation with the realtor. Second, he uses Violet as a great emotional distraction that can be used but not married. When one male sets this rule, others follow and violet is approached by others who want the same sexual satisfaction from her. One can sense, thus, a glimpse of hope in Violet's determination to leave him and Ghaza altogether. She decides that there is no hope in such a crumbling society and it is not crumbling only because of occupation.

In the juxtaposing destinies of Nahleh and Violet, one clearly understands Khalifeh's message that "As long as love/marriage was a refuge, it held women back and emancipation could not take place. Yet when women decided to face those who tied their hands behind their backs in the name of protection, there was hope." (Bamia, 200, p. 184-185)

Futna and Sitt Amira

Futna is a slow-headed woman who only cares about her attire and material comfort. The reader is not given enough glimpses to her motives in marrying Zayna's aging father but her desperate concern for the inheritance suggests that she married him for his money. Futna's honorable semi-feudal social class has likely lost its financial ability though not its pride or prestige. Futna, however, is kind-hearted, generous and amiable. Her mother, Sitt Amira is a conscientious woman, reliable and meticulous; a woman who keeps things where they should be. When Futna is artificially inseminated from her husband in an Israeli hospital, Sitt Amira cannot accept the idea of her daughter's body being invaded by 'the enemy'. But when Futna dies, Amira takes full responsibility of her grandchild who must be raised the way she raised her own kids. In Sitt Amira's perseverant promise to care for her grandchild there is a clear message that in reality Israel and Palestine exist together unquestionably. Through this very maternal metaphor of this hybrid baby it is as if Khalifeh acquires a new understanding of the situation as well as women's fates under the double oppressors.

Because no women can be free in a generally restrictive society, Khalifeh presents an equally disturbing reality for the male characters in the novel. The end result is a deep impression of injustice and futility of life under the current circumstances: occupation and frail social customs. The female characters, however, are surely superior to their male counterparts. The pressure on them is greater and so is their suffering. Khalifeh has been through most of what her female characters are subjected to and so she pictures them with a first-hand experience. "...Khalifeh learned that the existence of females was seen solely for "miserable, useless, worthless sex," ... Growing up female meant that there would be many rules surrounding her life. As an escape, she resorted to reading, writing, and painting." (Koy, 2006, p. 1)

Mazen

Mazen is a handsome fiery man who has fought in Lebanon and been named Guevara because of his revolutionary nature. Mazen in post Oslo Palestine has nothing to do; he had no real life before the revolution to go back to.

After Beirut and its lights came Wadi al-Rihan! This prison called Wadi al-Rihan, this Oppression known as Wadi al-Rihan, this desperation, those people, the misery and the backwardness of Wadi al-Rihan. My soul is there, I was there, how did I get here?
(Khalifeh, 1997, p. 47)

Zayna is amazed by Mazen's nature that turns every event or action into intense slogan. Violet, on the other hand, has a real insight into his character. She explains that Mazen's fondness with Alatlal's song is a reflection of defeat. "The first time he asked to listen to al-Atlal I thought I understood the message: there was Salma, Beirut, and the revolution, but now there is no Salma, no Beirut, and no revolution, they've become ruins." (Khalifeh 107) Violet knows that Mazen is "a defeated man" and can change anyone into defeated people like him. Mazen's enthusiasm in the inauguration of the cultural center and forgetting to number the seats is a reflection of his idealistic nature and incompetence to run things in a realistic way. Drunk, Mazen opens up to his brother Kamal one night
You're lucky Kamal, that you didn't squander your life. I squandered mine over nonsense and there's nothing left in me but a breath of life. I used to swear at you and Jabber, calling you merchants and slaves. I used to call you opportunists, upstarts, and bourgeois. I used to tell myself that even Said was better than you because he stuck to the land, and I thought naturally, that Guevara was the master of the world because he was the freedom fighter with the belt of death around his waist. I was the one whose life was in the balance of the homeland. Now there is no life left and no homeland. (Khalifeh, 1997, p. 217- 218)

Mazen the militant is a burden to this society that is promised peace and prosperity. Oppressed by colonialism, Mazen goes on living as an oppressor of women; namely, Nahleh and Violet.

Kamal

The first time we hear of Kamal is through Nahleh's eyes who comes back home to be surprised by his unexpected visit from Germany. Her thoughts convey a lot of the nature of the relation between those who chose to live outside home and the homeland: a pragmatic one.

Or was he here to study the situation of the country like other businessmen, and catch the worm before the veterans arrive? Of course he had, he had come to be the first to take advantage of the promising conditions for the future....The returnees would usually bend down and touch the earth with their forehead, and declare before the cameras and the journalists with tears in their eyes, that the homeland was like the lap of the mother and without it they were nothing. ... Now, they wanted a share in the cake."

(Khalife, 1997 94-95)

Though this is true, Kamal's relation to the homeland is deeper. He is seriously stuck in the middle between an economically cold exile and a deteriorating passionate homeland. What would he get from this world and from a life in exile? He had worked many years in exile, in sophisticated laboratories that looked like space stations, he had been given all the advantages, but he had never felt like one of them. The Germans gave him a house, cars, and a bank account, health insurance and a pension yet every morning as he rode the university bus or the metro, he felt his loneliness and estrangement that never stopped growing."

(Khalife, 1997, p. 153)

Kamal thought of himself as a practical scientist who can never be affected by emotions but deep inside he is probably as emotional as Mazen. Apparently Kamal has been suffering deep inside long ago. He once sent to his father complaining "Father, their world is merciless." But the father begged him not to be back. "DO not make the mistake of coming back. I have enough dealing with Mazen and his problems. Here, we have unemployment and war worries. Please please for my sake be wise and do not make rash decisions."

(Khalifeh, 1997, p. 155)

On the one hand, Kamal's plight reflects and confirms Zayan's. He is faced with the dilemma of having to face the meaninglessness and rootlessness of his life abroad against the chaos of the homeland. "In Germany he had felt he was living a superficial, rootless life, but now after discovering the taste of his homeland, he felt like an orphan."

(Khalifeh, 1997, p. 188)

On the other hand, Kamal's work experience in Palestine reveals the inapplicability of the Oslo accords. He could not understand the system which divides all responsibilities between the Authority and the authority. The 'Authority' is the new Palestinian government while the 'authority' is the ones who really rule, the Israeli security forces. The Oslo accords prove to be failure because the Palestinian Authority cannot seriously extend its power over the country. Things are run in a strange bureaucratic way and the

place lacks infrastructure and an autonomous administrative structure away from the military. Only the realtor can handle this because his mind is as corrupt as the system itself. All the permits and paperwork for this project are done by him. When you have business to do in Wadi Alrihan, you need to deal with

The Palestinian Authority in power and the authority over its power, in other words, an authority that rules but does not govern. If a person satisfies Authority, he might upset the power, and if the power is not pleased, it will not trust you or provide you with facilities to deal with the environment and its sewage. It won't even allow you to enter the municipality. As a result you would become entangled in multiple layers that would only lead to headaches.

(Khalifeh, 1997, p. 99)

Like Nahleh who had to choose the least displeasing of two lives, Kamal chooses his European exile to the chaos of the homeland.

Abu Jabber

Abu Jabber represents a disillusioned older generation. Two of his sons are permanently exiled refugees, one is a useless militant, one is a genius living abroad, one is slow-minded merchant and finally there is an ungrateful daughter. The man's disappointment exceeds his family to his country.

He had hoped for things to improve with the Oslo Accords but nothing had changed, the settlement was still on top of the hill, surrounding the plain and his farm, crawling towards the valley and the neighboring villages. Was this the solution? Were those his children? Was this what his generation had dreamt of and rushed to fulfill? Was this what Nasser had announced during the days of glory and the 'Voice of the Arabs?' Was it, was it?"

(Khalifeh, 1997, p. 190-191)

Though his disillusionment and shock remain till the very end, one gets the feeling that he will probably continue doing the right thing in spite of his sure despair. The older generation, represented by Abu Jabber and Sitt Amira, is equally lost between two worlds. Most of the time they cannot believe how degrading things have become.

As Koy points out, the liberation of Palestine had been a dream of the people of Palestine. However, their reality has been to endure more suffering while under Israeli occupation with checkpoints, curfews, and oppression. It is this realization which Khalifeh writes about in her later works. (Koy, 2006, p.,4) *The Inheritance*, then, is a story of Palestinian women who sacrifice much for the men in their lives and their country, while their own lives are lost and forgotten. The colonial situation persists and with it the "nationally endorsed cultural practices that impose and perpetuate the subordination of women" also persist. (Hena, 2009, p.6)

Khalifeh is such a conscientious writer who is deeply concerned about her nation's problems. Most of her fiction closely follows reality in Palestine.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has not been a simplistic two-state solution. There are many complicated facets which make up the prolonged violent conflict between the two sides. There is a long history between Israel and Palestine which is the backdrop for Khalifeh's book. This turmoil still exists today.

(Koy, 2006, p. 4).

She is equally concerned with exploring and expressing the problems of third world women. Asked why she did not want to be like Sagan she answered: "because she would not express the problems of life relevant to the third world people—people who suffer from exploitation, from imperialism, from colonialism, sickness, backwardness... she was not aware of them." (Nazareh, 1980, p. 68) When it comes to women's exploitation, Khalifeh sees the responsibility of colonialism exactly as she is aware of the inherent cultural constriction.

Though fully aware of the Israeli role in the degradation of conditions of her society, Khalifa casts a critical look at her people not to condemn them but to help them assume their responsibilities. Lessons abound in her novels, expressed, mostly through her socialist ideology in less than subtle ways. She seems to imply that women will save the future, after men have destroyed the past, a prospect to watch.

(Bamia, 2000, p. 185)

Part of Khalifeh's concern for the Third world women is her critique of the moral dichotomy as to the concept of honor. As Alhwamdeh explores in his paper on Crimes of Honor "...males play the role of the guardians of honor and victimize their women in cases of violation or breach to the discourse of honor. Ironically, the concept of honor is associated only with the practices of women whereas the males are not responsible to observe their morality and behavior..." (Alhwamdelh, 2015, p.105). This is true for Zayna's father who caused her elopement and permanent alienation as it is for Mazen who caused his sister's embarrassment and awkward situation while both men have been free to pursue sexual satisfaction in as many relations or marriages as they wanted.

Palestine is never seen separately from the female plight in Khalifeh's novel. The last horrifying scene that shows Futna's dead body—having been invaded by the enemy through artificial insemination to protect the inheritance— suggests that Khalifeh sees the female body as infected by colonialism together with patriarchy. The reader is given no consolation after that except for Zayna's tearful departure to the States. So, what now? The question hangs on the reader's mind for a long time bringing Futna's corpse alive to question the world's sanity and justice over and over again.

Conclusion

The Inheritance presents a world that keeps rewarding the characters' attempts at self fulfilment with either blockades or exiles. This is as true for men as it is for women except that women are doubly subjugated. Most of the characters try one way or another to end their alienation and improve their emotional deprivation but they end in more alienation and new exiles. It is as if identity quest in this colonized situation is more or less an unjust activity to the characters: prohibited and invasive to others and so is doomed to failure.

Khalifeh's narrative counteracts nationalism, patriotism, patriarchy as well as Israeli colonialism and the Western empire behind it. Her main concern is with the disempowered; namely women and she critiques whatever disempowers them. In her fiction, there is an implicit rejection of the indigenous culture accompanied by an insistence on the individuality and uniqueness of the characters' plights in question. A uniqueness that refuses to be categorized nor does it ask for sympathy or glorification. It is depicted to be reflected upon, highlighted and sharply remembered.

Khlaifeh adopts a feminist postcolonial attitude that challenges the colonial/national/patriarchal constructions of women as single fixed identity. In *The Inheritance*, she delineates different female characters and shows the reader their innermost troubles as well as the reasons of the troubles. Their plights are presented within the more general Palestinian one. It is as if Khalifeh always has an eye on the female subject and the other on Palestine. Though futility hovers over the scene, there is triumph in exposing the cruel injustice the characters are subjected to.

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