

A non-linear, fragmentary narrative, *Velvet* tells the story of one Palestinian refugee family in al-Baqa’a camp on the outskirts of Amman, Jordan. This is one of the camps created for the Palestinian refugees who fled the pre-emptive Israeli war against Egypt, Jordan, and Syria in 1967, known as the Six-Day War. At the center of the narrative is the female protagonist Hawwa, the Arabic name for Eve, through whose eyes, sense, and sensibility we perceive the world of the camp and its inhabitants. First, a comment about the prologue is in order.

In the prologue, Habayeb sets up the narrative tone through her linguistic mastery and deep sensorial knowledge. We read about the rain beating down the naked lives of the refugees and the arid earth, like daggers of the ancients, with no respite to human suffering. It’s as if nature is complicit with the wars that have afflicted the land and the refugees whose sorrow and rancor lay deeply within their bodies and souls. Consonant with the cruelty of the wars they have endured, nature’s cruelty affects the refugees viscerally. Hails of bullets, black water mixed with mud, and the filth of sewer pipes, “terrified windows” (p. 1) are interwoven with people’s feelings of betrayal by both natural and man-made disasters. Earth itself explodes in pus that leaves a putrid smell of humidity, decay, disintegration. Amid this wasteland, the people’s pale faces emit fear, exhaustion, and anger; they walk hunched over, with their backs and heads down. Their feelings hidden. They search and wait for radiant, sunny, cloudless skies, in vain! But not Hawwa.

Hawwa is different: “She prefers the clouds angry, overcast, and frowning, pouring out rain” (p. 4). Her heart remains open: she walks through the misery of the lanes and streets observing the mud, filth, and slime; but she looks up at the sky and sees the beauty of colors, sounds, and scents. “Her breast fills with the breath of dewy jasmine hung in her soul and stored, in her senses, since ancient times.
Hawwa’s imagination and sensorial awareness are grounded in her experience. It’s as if she never left the homeland. The smell of jasmine is still in her nostrils. And when she is introduced by the fashion designer Jamila, Sitt Qamar, to the world of fabric, Hawwa’s imagination is nurtured. As she smells the aroma, and feels and touches the velvet fabric, she is transported to a world of beauty that bypasses the violence of camp and homelessness. Some may call it resilience or steadfastness. I think Hawwa’s humanness is simply being open to the world!

Although the traumas of Palestinian history are mentioned in passing – the Nakba Catastrophe of 1948, the Naksa Setback of 1967, and Black September of 1970. The narrative does not dwell on Palestinian dispossession, loss, or fragmentation. It’s about their affects, physically, psychologically, and morally. It’s also about the power of the human spirit and the imagination, embodied in Hawwa. Velvet bypasses the nightmare of history and the brutality Palestinian refugees face on a daily basis. The novel is a search for beauty in small objects – natural and man-made. Hawwa, the new Eve, locates a different world through the imaginary, her outpouring emotionality, and compassionate generosity toward others. Habayeb’s third novel is captivating in its linguistic mastery that blends natural beauty with the primordial world of the senses. The result is a beauty that summons “beautiful faces, all places, and all feelings, in bright, glowing, life-like forms” (p. 43). This is an imagination that exudes love and warmth for people and life; evidence of the author’s control of her craft and her faith in humanity. Velvet is a pleasure to read.


Given contemporary concerns about the dangers of the proliferation of nuclear weapons and the controversy over Iran’s access to them, this updated 3rd edition of Nuclear Weapons is timely. The book comprises seven chapters, a preface, a list of illustrations, references, suggested further readings, and an index. The preface tells of the updates to the 3rd edition, reiterating that “the bomb still matters,” and that the hydrogen bomb revolutionized the “entire foundation of human affairs,” as Winston Churchill put it (pp. xvii and xix). This brief review will summarize some of the book’s major findings.

Chapters 1 and 2 are historical in nature. While the first relates the history of the development of nuclear weapons, the second narrates the process of building the bomb. We learn about the structure of the atom, Einstein’s theory of relativity