“A HISTORY BURIED ALIVE”: RESISTING AMNESIA AND RECLAIMING NATIVE PALESTINIAN ECOLOGY IN THE WORKS OF SUSAN ABULHAWA

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Abstract: “A land without people for a people without land” was the Zionist slogan used to justify the Jewish settlement in historical Palestine. To prove that historical Palestine was unoccupied, Zionists have attempted to erase its native population from their land and from historical records, through the propagation of the myth that the Jews made “the desert bloom,” obliterating the agricultural practices of Palestinian Arabs. This article studies the deliberate attempts to use ecology as a means of cultural amnesia and its resistance by Palestinian writers. By examining the novels of Susan Abulhawa for remembrances that combat the strategy of forced amnesia of Palestinian ecology, this article finds that literature becomes lieux de mémoire that helps to resist erasure.

Keywords: amnesia, ecology, Zionism, Palestinian literature, remembering, lieux de mémoire

“Every tree here was planted by us.”

David Ben Gurion, the first Prime Minister of Israel

Making the Desert Bloom: Zionist Propaganda

Tall claims would require taller proofs. Preferably as tall as pines, entire forests of which were used to cover up the remnants of Palestinian villages in order to supplement evidence for the Zionist claim that Palestine is “a land without people

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for a people without land.” This afforestation undertaken by the Jewish National Fund (JNF), however, is much celebrated as the redemption of land and its restoration to Biblical fruitfulness after years of “neglect” by Arab inhabitants that had denuded the land and left it barren. In addition to the JNF forests that were planned maneuvers to “reclaim” land in Palestine and prepare it for Jewish settlement, trees are planted in Israel even today to mark birthdays, weddings, anniversaries, bar mitzvahs, births, and deaths of Jews worldwide. Coupled with the vandalism of Palestinian agricultural land, this afforestation serves as a cover for the erasure of the native population of Palestine from historical records, just as they were forcefully evicted from their land.

One of the tools used to this effect was the propagation of the myth that the Jews made the desert “bloom,” negating years of agricultural practices of Palestinian Arabs (Levi Eshkol, interview in Jerusalem Post, February 17, 1969, qtd. in Berdugo, 2020). Historical accounts, travelogues, and statistics show that Palestine was rich in olives, figs, oranges, and prickly pear cactuses, and known for exporting barley, wheat, sesame, and cotton in addition. This article studies the negation of Palestinian ecology by Zionists and the attempts by Palestinian writers like Susan Abulhawa to unearth “a history buried alive,” using remembrances of Palestinian agricultural heritage to counter the strategy of forced amnesia used by the settlers (Abulhawa, 2011: 35).

The Jewish National Fund and Afforestation

The Jewish National Fund, according to its website, was founded in 1901 “as a dream and vision to reestablish a homeland in Israel for Jewish people everywhere.” By collecting coins in “iconic JNF Blue Boxes” to purchase land and plant trees, the Jewish National Fund claims to have helped the Jews worldwide to make “their dream of a Jewish homeland … a reality” (www.jnf.org, Jewish National Fund US, accessed July 14, 2023). They also claim that they are redeeming land in Israel by protecting the environment, “reclaiming” land for agriculture, and caring for natural woodlands. However, under the label of an “environmentally friendly charity” that avails tax exemptions, the JNF has played a central role in the elimination and replacement of Palestinian ecologies since its formation (Sharif, 2016: 22).

Speaking at length about the ways in which the narrative of redemption adopted by Israel to justify their occupation of historic Palestine has eventually evolved to mean land redemption, leading to the afforestation and cultivation of land, Yoav Galai agrees with Ilan Pappe’s statement that the true mission of the JNF has been to conceal the remains of Palestinian villages by planting trees over them, as well as by creating narratives to deny their existence (Pappe, 2007: 228). The JNF
promotes exclusive Jewish cultivation, propelling the much-reiterated Zionist myth of Jews making the desert bloom (Galai, 2017: 277). Afforestation thus becomes “an act of erasure and re-narration,” extending the act of expropriation of land physically by familiarizing and naturalizing the landscape, and symbolically by “enveloping it in recognizable and established discursive formations” (Galai, 2017: 280).

It is a widely known secret that more than half of Israeli forests and a large number of Israeli parks conceal the ruins of Arab villages. For instance, the 6 million trees that were planted to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust in the Martyr’s Forest in Jerusalem conceal the remains of five Palestinian villages – Aqqur, Bayt Umm al-Mays, Dayr ’Amr, Kasla, and Khirbat al-‘Umur – which are presented to visitors as “nondescript ruins” (Galai, 2017: 280). Ironically, what is an act of remembrance for one thus becomes an act of obliteration for another, making this practice of afforestation over Palestinian remains a “physical forgetting,” according to the Israeli sociologist Uri Ram (2009: 376), or “memoricide,” in the words of the Israeli historian Ilan Pappe (2007: 225).

Considering the JNF afforestation as a literal obscurement of the evidence of Palestinian ecologies that existed before 1948, Lila Sharif condemns the JNF for greenwashing the history and legacy of Israeli colonization and occupation of Palestine (2016: 23). The JNF has systematically planted over 240 million trees since 1901, most of which are pine trees, even though they are unsuitable for the Palestinian environment due to their high water consumption which disrupts the production of olives and other fruit trees. Pine trees are deliberately chosen to Europeanize the landscape, and to remove any physical trace of Palestinian heritage in the land (Jaber, 2018: 2). Sharif denounces the planting of eucalyptus trees as well, for its role in “eco-occupation”: this Australian tree is found all over Israel, preferred for their ability to grow fast and for drying the swamps (23). Jaber calls this facet of settler colonialism “acts of ecocide,” in order to imply the magnitude of “the destruction and devastation of the ecology” (3). By restricting farmers from planting new trees in place of trees that perished or were uprooted, ensuring this through strict aerial monitoring of the agricultural land, and even confiscating land for violations of this rule, Israel is not only stunting the growth of Palestinian agriculture, but also consequently destroying Palestinian ecology (10).

Galai analyzes the way in which the JNF adopted an ecological narrative in 2011 instead of the earlier Zionist one, despite the criticisms directed at its policy of monocultural afforestation for its unsuitability to the local climate. In an attempt to transpose “a European arboreal landscape onto the Mediterranean space,” they have planted “pine deserts,” a term coined by environmentalists to point to the lack of biodiversity (279). The JNF uses trees as an effective method of preventing
land alienation, second only to human settlement. Trees are used to physically restrict the native population’s access to the land, alongside zoning. The JNF also believed that forests can effectively prevent Bedouin penetration in areas devoid of settlements. In 2002, the JNF began Blueprint Negev whereby the government leased contested lands in the Negev region to the JNF, claiming that afforestation was necessary to “protect” state land. Even as Israel celebrates the “redemption” of deserts through afforestation, studies show that forests in the Negev region have a negative impact on the natural ecosystem as they cause more warming than cooling (Galai, 2017: 281–283).

In an effort to promote the Zionist enterprise, the JNF has actively produced propaganda, most of which is agriculturally themed, highlighting “environmental stewardship,” land reclamation, and the necessity of Jewish return to revitalize the land (Shutek, 2013: 23). Using various mediums such as the Blue Box fundraiser, the Golden Book, filmstrips, stamps, memorial stones, and posters to educate Israeli Jews, the Jewish Diaspora, as well as the international community, the JNF attempts to reinforce political, economic as well as ideological support for Eretz Israel (Shutek, 2013: 21–23). By creating memorial forests, the JNF augments “the imagination of a community of suffering which involves all Jews in … shared memories of past trauma” and disseminates ideas of inalienable historical and religious ties between the Jewish people and the land of Israel (Shutek, 2013: 25). The JNF propaganda posters use trees as symbols of “rootedness, longevity, and memorialization of the dead” to convey claims to the land of Israel as well as the central role of Eretz Israel in the flourishing of Jewish people and trees (Shutek, 2013: 25). In yet another act of dissemination, the JNF introduced the ritual of tree planting in Israel on the occasion of Tu Bishvat, which is a Jewish holiday known as the New Year for Trees, although it deviated from the traditional observance of the holiday (Braverman, 2009: 331). Most of these campaigns target the Jewish Diaspora, whose contributions to the JNF for planting a forest, grove, or sapling, intended to reaffirm their connection as Jewish people with the nation of Israel, inadvertently aided in the erasure of Palestinian presence from the landscape (Grunebaum, 2014: 216).

“Palestine Remembered”: Native Agricultural Practices

Ahad Ha’am, a Hebrew journalist and Zionist thinker, found on visiting Palestine that it was hard to find tillable land that was not already cultivated in the entire country. In his work Enclosure: Palestinian Landscapes in a Historical Mirror, Gary Fields describes Ha’am’s disillusionment on finding that Eretz Israel wasn’t as desolate as they were accustomed to believing from abroad (2017: 209). In the words of one of the residents of al-Araqib:
We made the desert green. We planted everything green here. We planted wheat and olives. But the JNF destroyed our green — destroyed the Arabs’ green and planted a new history on our land. They want to delete the Arabs’ history, and so with their trees they plant a new history and try to make us disappear. (qtd. in Fields, 2017: 281–282)

Marwan Buheiry also challenges Zionist claims by affirming that Palestine has always produced and exported agricultural commodities, and was in the process of agricultural expansion when the first wave of Jewish colonists arrived, most of whom had to seek the help of Arab labor to maintain their farms. He goes back to the tenth-century Palestinian geographer al-Maqdisi who had brought attention to Palestine’s olive, cotton, grape and sugar cane, as well as the manufacture of silk and cotton cloths, oil and soap. Major crops during the Ottoman period were wheat, barley, sesame, millet, dura, beans, fenugreek, chickpeas, olives, grapes, cotton and oranges. By 1911, Palestine had been exporting around 9,000 to 14,000 tons of sesame seeds (Buheiry, 1981: 64–65). Other export items included wheat, barley, citrus fruit, olive oil and soap. barley from Gaza was in great demand in England, Scotland, and Germany because of its high quality, and for a decade from 1890, its annual production for export was more than 40,000 tons in Gaza alone, with another 10,000–12,000 tons from the rest of Palestine (Buheiry, 1981: 68). These statistics show that this “barren,” “desolate” land had yielded significant agricultural products, the exports of which helped to finance the Ottoman Public Debt long before the Zionists started their civilizing mission (Buheiry, 1981: 74).

As historical sources mostly tend to favor the Zionist narrative, Palestinians writing about their past rely on their own memories, which are narrated in the traditional Arab style. Reconstruction of Palestinian experiences and lives would be impossible without these personal accounts. By telling their stories and writing village books, Palestinians turn oral testimony into narratives whose structures “rarely conform to Western historical forms” (Davis, 2011: 148).

The village books of different villages that were destroyed during the Nakba describe in detail crops and places they were cultivated in – the grapes of Khirbat Yunis and al-Masliyya, figs and almonds of Tirat Haifa, and bananas and pomegranates of Wadi Fallah, the orchards of ’Almaniyya, and wheat, corn and oranges of Mallaha, to name a few (Davis, 2011: 157). The neglect and/or vandalism of trees planted by villagers are also mentioned, as in the village book of Dayr Aban. Only the cactus survives and remains as a landmark of the village, saying, according to ’Abd al-‘Aziz Abu Hadba, “Here was an Arab village, and here Arabs lived” (qtd. in Davis, 2011: 170). The palm trees that once adorned the entrance to the house of the village chief and the stone of the olive press serve as sole reminders.
of the village’s past in al-Ghabisiyya, a Palestinian village currently buried under a JNF pine forest (Davis, 2011: 171). These descriptions that function as maps with ecological markers indicate “a village farming culture that was dependent on the land and on people’s knowledge of it to survive” (Davis, 2011: 159). Village terms used by Palestinian villagers to describe different types of agricultural land, such as al-maris, al-jisr, al-jura, al-diba, al-ta’mira, and al-misha, suggest intimate knowledge of the terrain that can only be obtained (and made use of) by peasants who farm the land (Davis, 2011: 160).

Yet another record of Palestinian agricultural practices comes from the website *Palestine Remembered*, which was begun in 1999 to “preserve the memories and the experiences of the Palestinian people around the world” and amplify their voice in cyberspace (https://www.palestineremembered.com/index.html, Palestine Remembered, accessed May 2, 2023). Responding to the Zionist adage that Palestine was a land without people, the website provides pictures, stories, movies, and memories of the displaced people and had launched the *al-Nakba’s Oral History Project* in 2003, which records the memories of Palestinians who have experienced the *Nakba*, collected through interviews. The website lists statistical data of every district in Palestine before the Occupation, including their agriculture, livestock, plantations, rivers and swamps, areas of arable and non-arable lands, and irrigated plantations, all sourced from the Village Statistics of the British Mandate. Cereals were grown in almost every district but other crops were not evenly distributed – the leading crops were olives, watermelons, and vegetables in Acre, citrus in Baysan, Gaza, Jericho, and Jenin, olives in Bethlehem and Nablus, citrus and banana in Jaffa and olives, watermelon and vegetables in Haifa. Today, Palestinian agriculture is limited to the West Bank and Gaza, and the prominent crops of these regions are olives, citrus, cereals, watermelons and pumpkins in the West Bank, and citrus, watermelons, strawberries and dates in Gaza.

**Forced Amnesia of Native Ecology**

The native ecology of Palestine and its indigenous agricultural practices faced two kinds of erasures simultaneously. On the one hand, there was the propagation of the myth of Jews making the desert bloom, as explained above, and on the other, a state-supported move to forcefully limit Palestinian agriculture.

According to the Israeli environmental politician and activist Alon Tal, indigenous Palestinian Arab farming declined due to various difficulties like lack of capital to upgrade the limited infrastructure, farming illiteracy and competition from an increasingly prosperous Jewish sector. Empowered by state support, Jewish agriculture expanded significantly within a short time, and cultivated and
irrigated lands increased as settlers zealously reclaimed “areas that have been written off for millennia as desert” as arable lands (Tal, 2007: 236). In contrast, the Arab population in Israel fared poorly in farming, due to impediments such as limited resources including water, hostility from the state as well as Jewish settlers and restricted access to their land (Tal, 2007: 237). Even when they had access to their fields, they were allowed very little water and electricity compared to the Jewish agricultural settlements and were excluded from marketing cooperatives (Asadi, 1990: 375). Many Arab farmers gave up agriculture and underwent depeasantization (Tal, 2007: 238).

In a study in 2019, Braverman talks about the water regulations in place in the Occupied Territories, by which 80% of water resources are reserved for Israelis and 20% for the Palestinians, and their impact on Palestinian lives and agriculture. Once an area is declared as a natural park or reserve, Palestinians are denied access to the land even if they own it. For instance, Abraham’s Spring in Hebron, once it has been renamed thus, was made inaccessible to its legal Palestinian owners, which inadvertently prohibited them from tending to “the ancient olive groves that surround it so that the settlers may ‘safely’ perform rituals of purification there” (Braverman, 2019: 16).

Environment is also a casualty in the frequent assaults that Israel carries out on the Occupied Territories. For instance, the Gaza Genocide of 2023 is taking a heavy toll on Palestinian agriculture. Whereas in the Gaza Strip, this devastation takes the form of bombing farmland, destroying thousands of trees, and bulldozing agricultural areas – over 21% of cultivated land in Gaza has been damaged – which renders the soil unsuitable for future farming, in the West Bank, it has led to increased settler violence against Palestinian farmers (www.pcbs.gov.ps, Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, accessed February 24, 2024). As the Hamas operation coincided with the olive harvest, Israel revoked the “prior coordination” – which are military permissions to access the land – of Palestinian farmers, leaving 96,800 dunams of land unharvested and affecting the livelihoods of 160,000 people (www.ochaopt.org/content/olive-harvest-2023-hindered-access-afflicts-palestinian-farmers-west-bank, “Olive Harvest 2023,” accessed February 24, 2024). Around 2,000 olive trees have been vandalized by settlers under military protection since October, adding to the 800,000 uprooted since 1967 (Shehadeh, 2023). Around 22% of Gaza’s agricultural land has been affected, destroying livelihoods and leaving indelible marks on the Palestinian ecology (Pearce, 2024). The deliberate destruction of Palestinian green spaces like orchards, fields, parks and greenhouses is also aimed at defamiliarizing the landscape, to obstruct the return of the displaced people.

According to Lila Sharif, a complex yet systematic process of “environmental transformation, replacement, and disappearance” played a key role in Israeli settler colonialism (18). She coined the term “vanishment” to refer to “the processes...
of erasure that rely on the appropriation of the earth’s elements, the removal and replacement of native landscapes, and the erasure of indigenous culture through a system of conditional inclusion” (18–19). Hence the appropriation of the olive tree as the national tree of Israel and the Jaffa orange as the cultural emblem of Israel. Critiques of settler colonialism, when it does occur, are usually limited to “spectacular moments of violence rather than everyday acts of vanishment” (Sharif, 2016: 20). However, the situation in Palestine often stretches beyond the spectacular to the mundane; apartheid, restrictive laws, surveillance of Palestinian land, eco-occupation and forced amnesia are no less crimes than genocide and ethnic cleansing.

Sharif advocates the foregrounding of native writing as an alternative to contest “the violence of eco-occupation” (19). She also highlights the role of native literature in combating environmental racism in the context of settler colonialism, by offering a platform for subjective expressions of the experiences of the colonized. Palestinian literature thus becomes a site of memory, lieu de mémoire, to document the continued oppression of colonial settlements.

**Literature as Sites of Memory**

*Lieux de mémoire*, or sites of memory, is an important concept in memory studies put forth by Pierre Nora. Having actively distinguished between memory and history, the former as constantly evolving between the dialectics of remembering and forgetting, and the latter as an incomplete representation of the past, Nora proposed the concept of *lieux de mémoire* as what survives the disappearance of an immense amount of memory when it is assimilated into history. *Lieux de mémoire* is the deliberate attempt to “create archives, maintain anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and notarize bills” before these privileged memories are lost under the expanse of history (Nora, 1989: 12). In the face of various forms of political and cultural selectivity such as neglect (intentional or otherwise), suppression and destruction of documents and other traces, *lieux de mémoire* serve the fundamental function of blocking “the work of forgetting” (Nora, 1989: 19).

Though traditionally forgetfulness has been viewed as the opposite of remembering, amnesiology, put forth by Liedeke Plate, explores it as “a made condition, produced and reproduced,” that should be studied with its own set of tools, in and for itself (2016: 144). While certain things or events are forgotten accidentally and some because they were lost, certain things or events were deliberately “forgotten” in what can only be called collective amnesia. Techniques used to induce collective amnesia include locking or burning of archives, destruction of sites, forced disappearances of people, and the circulation of alternate stories. Plate
believes that oblivion is produced both politically and culturally, and maintained through silence, misremembering, disremembering, misrepresenting and rewriting (148). Society determines which memory is worth remembering and which is to be forgotten, and it is this selective process of remembrance that sets the track for oblivion. As a tool for analyzing the politics of induced cultural amnesia, amnesiology inquires into the cultural dynamics of remembering and forgetting and recognizes the role of language in inducing forgetfulness, by determining what is worthy of expression and thereby commitment to memory. As an expression using language, literature too plays a pivotal role in cultural explorations of forgetting as well as in dismantling forced amnesia. By constructing a counter-memory that gives voice to those memories that have been previously silenced, literature can function as lieux de mémoire and reveal how collective memory is created and how it functions.

Much of Palestinian literature deals with the loss of the country after the 1948 war and the ensuing denial of rights. Naeema Alhosani notes that even prior to the Oslo Accords, the Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani had pioneered the trend of commemoration of pre-Israel Palestine in fiction (Alhosani, 2021: 22). This trend, perfected by Mourid Barghouti, Ghada Karmi, and Edward Said, continues even today through writers like Raja Shehadeh, Susan Abulhawa, and Hala Alyan.

Susan Abulhawa, a Palestinian-American writer, retaliates against the appropriation of Palestinian culture and memories, including the hijacking of Palestinian ecology, in all three of her novels. She believes that Israel’s narrative that has dominated literature since the publication of Exodus is now being challenged by a new generation of writers finally telling their story in their own voice. Abulhawa’s works weave together the personal and the political, in order to explore the Palestinian experience of displacement and celebrate the resilience of the Palestinian people. Mornings in Jenin (2011) is a poignant tale of the Abulheja family’s forced migration from their village, highlighting the trauma caused by the loss of land, and its representation of trees as symbols of the Palestinian sense of belonging has been subjected to a study in 2020. The Blue Between the Sky and Water (Abulhawa 2015) follows the lives of the Baraka family and the challenges they face after their relocation from Beit Daras to Gaza. Against the Loveless World (Abulhawa 2021) has at its heart a refugee who finds a purpose in life when she settles in Palestine.

The Bond with the Land

Subverting the dominant narratives that reinforce the Jews’ connection to the land and their natural instinct for farming, Abulhawa foregrounds, time and time again, the bond that Palestinian people have with the land and their concern for their abandoned
farms. Her first novel, *Mornings in Jenin*, is centered around the lives of a Palestinian family of farmers whose quiet lives in the village of Ein Hod are upended by the rising Zionist activities in its neighborhoods. After the state of Israel was established in May 1948 and the villagers were forced to leave, even in the panic of dispossession, the farmer in Yehya kept hoping for rain “as his trees needed water” (Abulhawa, 2011: 32). When it becomes clear the next day that there is no going back, Yehya laments the loss of land, “forty generations with their imprinted memories” leaving behind “architecture, orchards, wells, flowers, and charm” for Jewish immigrants from Europe and elsewhere (35). In the initial days at the refugee camp in Jenin, when people retained some hope for return, they used to worry about the state of their houses as well as their “lemon and almond trees” (40).

One day in November of 1953, Yehya hears the call of the land: “*The olives are ready … The grapes and figs have surely fallen by now and are rotting on the land … October’s rains have loosened the ground*” (42–43). He grooms himself and sets out for his fields, in spite of his friend’s pleading, “I know what you’re doing. It’s November and we’re all feeling it but it’s too dangerous” (43). Yehya is undeterred as “that terrain is in [his] blood” and unlike the soldiers, he knows “every tree and every bird.” He roams his fields for days, “greeting his carob and fig trees with the excitement of a man reuniting with his family.” When he returns 16 days later with “as much fruit and as many olives as he could carry in his kaffiyeh, his pockets, and his hands,” he is received festively like a hero (44). Years later, his grandson Yousef recalls his jiddo’s happiness in unwrapping “a bundle of figs, lemons, grapes, carobs, and olives … as though he were bringing a million gold dinars.” People are delighted to taste again “those fruits of forty generations of toil” (45). He describes the abandoned state of the olive press, which was eventually transformed into an art gallery. When Yehya returned to his land two weeks later, he was shot dead for trespassing, a heavy price to pay for walking on one’s own property and eating “the fruits of forty generations of his ancestors’ toil.” His body was found “with three olives in his hand and some figs in his pockets” (48).

Abulhawa emphasizes women’s connection with the land and is all praise for their gardens. In *Mornings in Jenin*, she describes Basima’s garden as “her empire of enchanted herbs” (20). Basima is excited to teach her daughter-in-law the uses of various plants. She also had a rose garden, which Dalia took over after her death, crossing roses for color and fragrance as Basima had taught her. Hearing of the increasing attacks, the village women “prematurely picked the figs and grapes, drying them to make raisins and syrup, and … pickled vegetables to sustain their families through a prolonged siege by the hidden snipers” (27). When the permanence of the refugee camp becomes clear, Dalia grows grape vines on her terrace in a “stubborn attempt to duplicate the glory of her gardens in Ein Hod” (57). In *The Blue Between Sky and Water*, the beekeeper’s widow could not stay for long
without growing something that “within weeks of moving into a refugee’s life, she had collected her broken heart and scoured the landscape for an open plot of land where she could plant a small garden” (Abulhawa, 2015: 47). In *Against the Loveless World*, Bilal’s mother gifts her friends fruits and vegetables from her own garden. Produce from this garden is what helps Nahr and Bilal to survive during the months of curfew.

**The Symbol of Olive**

“The olive in Palestine is not just agricultural property,” says Barghouti in his memoir *I Was Born Here, I Was Born There* (Barghouti 2011: 10). Braverman explores the cultural and historical factors that have led to the solidification of the olive tree as a symbol of Palestinian resistance, in addition to its unique status in the economic and cultural lives of Palestinian people. She observes that “the olive’s erasure from the landscape is perceived as necessary to make space for an alternative and exclusive Jewish presence” in Israel (Braverman 2009: 240). The constant subjection of olive trees to brutalities and vandalism by Israeli Occupation Forces as well as settlers has reinstated the role of olive trees in the Palestinian nationalist narrative as a symbol of its people uprooted from their land. Olive farming, which has always been an important part of the Palestinian economy, gained momentum since the Second Intifada in 2000, when Israel revoked the work permits of many Palestinians and most of the newly unemployed turned to cultivating the land. Since Israeli restrictions make it increasingly hard for the Palestinians to get to their farms and tend to the crops, most Palestinians opt for olives as they need less care and are resilient even in harsh environments. Olive trees have also been prominent in the construction of memory maps of Palestinian villages that were destroyed in 1948 and 1967. Since the 1980s, the olive tree has also been regarded as a symbol of rootedness for the Palestinian people, which became a common theme in Palestinian literature (Hamdi, 2023: 168).

*Mornings in Jenin* begins with the olive harvest of 1941 in Ein Hod, “a small village east of Haifa [that] lived quietly on figs and olives” (Abulhawa, 2011: 3). Abulhawa describes the harvest in detail, emphasizing its importance in Palestinian lives. For them, it is a festival of sorts, where people gather at the break of dawn as a community to reap “that noble fruit,” the air full of sounds of “the thumps of farmer’s sticks striking branches, the shuddering of the leaves, the plop of fruit falling onto the old tarps and blankets that had been laid beneath the trees,” accompanied by centuries-old ballads sung by women and the noises of small children playing (4). The novel revolves around the Abulheja family, descendants of “the original founders of Ein Hod,” with “great stretches
of cultivated land, orchards, and five impressive olive groves” which are surrounded by snags of cactus (12). Young men like Hasan and Darweesh Abulheja climb up the trees, swinging sticks to knock the olives loose. Baskets of fresh olives would be sent to be pressed on the day of harvest itself lest the oil develop a rancid taste (6). Families would also seek the help of migrants and Bedouins during harvest. Prayers and lunch would all take place at the grove itself, during small breaks.

The harvest is recounted in Against the Loveless World as well, as a community event: “the whole village picked, sorted and pressed the olives,” the yield of a good harvest despite increasing settler attacks (Abulhawa, 2021: 254). Hajjeh Um Mhammad never misses the annual trek to the olive groves to take part in the harvest. The elder kinfolk would gather to “sort the olives, bake bread, and prepare food” (261). Women carried baskets of olives on their heads, to be sorted. Nahr is taught the proper way to pick olives, one at a time: “Some of the lazy boys try to just shake and hit the branches to make the olives fall, but that’s wrong … it’s wrong to beat a tree that’s giving you blessings.” Five or six people worked at each tree, some picking and some “sorting the olives into baskets according to color and ripeness,” all the while talking, singing or playing songs on the radio (262).

When Yehya goes back after the Nakba on a stolen visit to his land, he notices that “the olives were still there … but they were in need of care from people who knew how to care for them”:

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 and if it isn’t pruned back it will produce buds that become new slender sprigs by winter. The truth that an olive’s worst biological enemy is a small lacy-winged fly and that sheep are good to keep around because they supply the soil with needed nitrogen. Yehya’s hands knew those facts from a lifetime devoted to trees and their earth. (Abulhawa, 2011: 46)

Abulhawa also uses the olive tree as a symbol of the rootedness of Palestinian people in the land. Yehya’s granddaughter Amal who grew up at the camp in Jenin loves climbing on “Old Lady,” “a fifteen-hundred-year-old olive tree with serpentine arms that twisted into the air … Fruit dangled from hundreds of knobby little twigs on an enormous misshapen trunk, which was also a resting spot for local shepherds” (62). According to Hasan, “This old girl was here long before any of us, and she’ll be here long after we’re gone.” He believes that even if the land is in one’s name, “no one can own a tree … It can belong to you, as you can belong to it. We come from the land, give our love and labor to her, and
she nurtures us in return” (62). Amal loved to gaze at “miles of pasture carpeting valleys nestled amid waves of olive groves. Trees like beckoning grandparents, hundreds of years old, wrinkled and stooped with heavy arms that stretched to every direction, as if in prayer.” She seethes at the thought that “those who took that glorious land, which had glistened green beside the blue Mediterranean waters since before Moses, claimed that it had been a ‘desert’ that they had ‘made bloom’” (117).

**Holding on to the Roots**

Lila Sharif argues that native writing can be the tool to recover those memories that have been condemned to oblivion, or what she calls “vanishment” (18). Often in Palestinian narratives, the history of the place as well as the personal memories of its inhabitants converge in their descriptions of their trees and fruit. After olives, figs occupy a privileged position in the Palestinian memoryscape. From Palestinian-American poet Naomi Shihab Nye’s poem about her father’s memories of fig trees to Barghouti’s description in *I Saw Ramallah* of “a huge fig tree with a massive trunk and spreading branches” that “dominated both house and courtyard” and fed their fathers and grandfathers, fig tree is a predominant image in Palestinian literature (Barghouti, 2005: 54).

In Abulhawa’s *Mornings in Jenin*, as an immigrant in the United States, Amal would find that “without warning, the weeping willows of Rittenhouse Square would turn into Jenin’s fig trees reaching down to offer [her] their fruit” (2011: 175). In *Against the Loveless World*, when Nahr goes to Haifa to see the house where her mother grew up, she finds next to it “a small tree farm surrounded by a low stone wall with an old wooden gate” (Abulhawa, 2021: 161). Nahr recognizes the trees from her Mama’s photos, though the trees were not as mature in them, and identifies them as the trees her “great-grandfather had planted for his children and grandchildren”:

> My grandfather would have planted some for me and Jehad had our destiny not been stolen. I began walking among those trees, looking for the carvings my mother had told me about, but I saw none. At the far edge of the garden was a sycamore fig tree. It bore red fruit close to the bark, unlike the green and brown figs I’d imagined. I looked around before hiking myself up on its trunk to pick one. It was fragrant and much sweeter than regular figs. I climbed as best I could, grabbing fistfuls of fruit and tucking them into my purse as I searched for evidence that this was my mother’s tree.

While grabbing the last bundle of figs, she saw some jagged lines on the branch and pulled away some vines to reveal the carving: “Rashida, habibit Baba.
Rashida, Daddy’s girl. That’s how my grandfather had referred to my mother. This was her fig tree.” Nahr feels that “this tree was a member of [her] family.” She says, “I belonged to it. All the trees in that garden were my family” (161–162).

In a conscious effort at commemoration, Abulhawa mentions the varieties of Palestinian fauna. Picking “wild za’atar together and [plucking] the occasional pomegranate wherever [she] found them,” Nahr muses that “life didn’t grow wild like this in Kuwait, or Amman” (160). She is mesmerized by “the vivid wild poppies … that carpet the land in burgundy velvet,” announcing the coming of spring (221). She notices the diversity of wildflowers – “red, white, and purple anemones and pink and white cyclamen,” “poppies, buttercups, and red everlasting,” blue lupine, yellow corn marigold, crocuses, squill, hyacinth, daisies, narcissus and even “rare wild tulips.” Honeysuckle crept over bushes and trees, and “bull mallow, Jerusalem sage, mustard, and thyme” grew around rocks and boulders (292). “Wild plum, peach, pear, fig, medlar, mulberry, date, and almond trees” bloomed on the hills, while loquats and pomegranates flourished in Hajjeh Um Mhammed’s garden (296).

Like memories, traditional knowledge is also passed down through generations. Just as Basima teaches Dalia, Bilal teaches Nahr “to identify individual plants … which usually had associated folklore, culinary uses, and medicinal value” on her first visit to Palestine: “this is wild Venus-hair, kuzbarat el ajooz” (159, 193). Before him, his mother had also taught Nahr “the names of the plants and their medicinal values,” saying that God has given us medicines for all illnesses (292). After her death, Nahr regrets not recording this information and is somewhat consoled by the fact that Bilal too has much indigenous knowledge about their botanical heritage.

Abulhawa believes that Israeli history, cuisine, architecture and artifacts are all “contrived from the bones and traditions of Palestinians” (2011: 263). The Europeans who settled in Israel “had no old photographs or ancient drawings of their ancestry living on the land, loving it, and planting it.” Just as they claimed hummus and falafel, and Canaanite, Roman and Ottoman coins as their own, they claimed Palestinian ecology as well: “They came to Jaffa and found oranges the size of watermelons and said, ‘Behold! The Jews are known for their oranges.’ But those oranges were the culmination of centuries of Palestinian farmers perfecting the art of citrus growing” (263). For Palestinians, the orange thus came to signify their robbed nationhood. This representation which originated from the narratives of Palestinian refugees later extended to other Palestinian communities, symbolizing their collective experience of loss.

**Environmental Apartheid**

Mahmoud Darwish, the national poet of Palestine, once wrote, “If the Olive Trees knew the hands that planted them, Their Oil would become Tears”
The appropriation of land and ecology is just one of the various methods employed by Israel to support Zionist claims. In an effort to erase Palestinian traces from the land and establish Jewish settlements, Israel has engaged in environmental apartheid, by which they systematically exploit the Palestinian environment through discriminatory practices like water and land restrictions, destruction of agricultural land, and uprooting or burning of trees. Israeli uprooting and/or burning of olive trees for building the Separation barrier as well as for the illegal settlements have evoked varied responses from Jews worldwide, as it is against the Jewish law to destroy trees.

Abulhawa has been vocal against such vandalism. In *Mornings in Jenin*, Abulhawa laments that the greenery of the West Bank did not last: it was changed “one home, one farm, one village at a time,” razed due to “the ceaseless appropriation of Palestinian land” and reduced to “barren wastelands, littered with the rubble of old homes, burned tires, spent bullet casings and struggling olive saplings” (2011: 113).

In *The Blue Between Sky and Water*, the Baraka family was relocated from Beit Daras to Gaza following the Nakba. When the hills were confiscated and Jewish-only settler colonies were assembled “on the most fertile soil,” Palestinians who were “once proud farmers” were forced to become “desperate workers far from their lands” (Abulhawa, 2015: 59). Mamdouh, the brother, used to work for a beekeeper “whose jars of honey were sold throughout the country and beyond to Egypt, Turkey, and reaching even to Mali and Senegal.” It was his family business, handed down to him over generations. Mamdouh is rendered jobless when the village is depopulated, its forests set to fire:

Little did he know that in less than three years the centuries of bees, apiaries, beeswax, hives, honeycombs, and beekeepers that marshaled his life would be gone, as if history had never been there. All that would remain would be his love of bees. (13)

In *Against the Loveless World*, Nahr’s grandmother’s village, Ein el-Sultan, now considered a World Heritage Site, had once been “arable farmland, but Israel’s siphoning of water had left it nearly barren” (Abulhawa, 2021: 202). Bilal explains to Nahr that “Israel rationed water to Palestinians, especially farmers, and would then move in to confiscate farms and groves of dying trees for being neglected” (247).
Settlers sabotage the olive harvest under the protection of the armed forces and even burn the trees. In the novel, just as the villagers were going to have lunch on the first day of harvest, Jewish settlers came up to the grove, children throwing rocks while their fathers pointed rifles, all flanked by Israeli soldiers. Knowing that olives are “the mainstay and centerpiece” of Palestinian economic and cultural presence for millennia, the settlers are particularly menacing during the harvest season. They are infuriated by “the unbroken continuity of [their] indigenous traditions” (263). They arrest some men and shoot at others, including children. After an 8-year-old boy who was shot by the settlers died, the harvest continued without the previous day’s cheer. Whereas “the plop of hundreds of olives falling at once from the trees all around” sounded “like rain from clear blue skies” the day before, the child’s death made it sound bitter and mournful the next day (262). On the second and third days, “some internationals came to help pick olives and offer their bodies and cameras as shields against another attack” by the masked settlers (264). However, they were unable to do much except film when, on the third day, the settlers set fire to the trees and the soldiers prevented the sole fire truck from reaching the site. Though the villagers knew it was ineffective to try to put out the fire without help, they did their best, as “to stand and watch the land burn would have been more painful than the burns on [their] skin and the smoke in [their] lungs” (265). Relief came in the form of rain, yet a small part of the grove was destroyed. The burned trees were wrapped with white cloth “to reflect the sun and hold in moisture” (271).

Abulhawa says that the trees being set aflame by settlers during the harvest had become so common that in the last decade, “international aid organizations had been established for the sole purpose of defending Palestinian farmers” (266). These groups also helped replant trees and replenish the soil. Bilal’s family and friends do their best to salvage the grove: “trees aren’t much different from people in that way. You protect the burned parts from the elements, keep hydrating and nourishing the body, and wait for life to heal itself” (271). When curfews are imposed, Bilal and Nahr have to wait until it is lifted to water their almond and olive trees. The unending curfews during the Second Intifada resulted in many farmers losing their crops, which in turn led to the confiscation of their lands (317).

Resisting Erasure

The erasure of native ecology was a calculated move to give credit to the Zionist claims of an unoccupied land, and the natives had to either accept erasure or fight it through all means. Throughout the novels, we find attempts at resisting the eco-occupation, from Yehya’s secret return to his farm and Nahr’s visit to her mother’s fig tree, but an active struggle against this forced amnesia is seen in the character of Bilal.
When almonds started dying off, Bilal changed the configuration of trees, planting “the water-intensive almonds … behind the more drought-resistant olives to prevent Israel from seizing the land on the pretext of dying trees” (Abulhawa, 2021: 271). When rainfall did not suffice, he had to fill the water barrel for irrigation using expensive water-truck deliveries. Bilal paid a friend of his who “worked on the settlement water pipeline … to drill two holes in the pipe and run narrow tubing from it to water the almonds” (247). He did the rest of the work himself, with the help of Nahr and Ghassan. This irrigation method lets most water go to the almonds, making them healthy and blooming again. “Stealing from the thieves” is what Nahr calls it, whereas Bilal considers it as “taking back a bit of what’s ours” (251). When Bilal and Ghassan are held without trial or charge and tortured in detention, Nahr seethes at the injustice of it: “all of this just to secure a bit of water for the trees” (254).

Nahr has the idea to “reverse the pump and send our sewage into their pipeline,” which inspires Bilal to come up with a plan to send phthalates to the water supply for the settlement (251). Their anti-androgenic properties would wreak havoc on the settlers who consume this water. In his defense, Bilal says that “these people are trying to wipe away all traces of us … they pump poison and sewage into our wells and springs, all I’m trying to do is spook them enough to make them leave” (306–307). When this is found out, Nahr is sentenced to life – Bilal evaded capture – and their tree groves and orchards were destroyed completely, along with their home.

Conclusion

Palestinian works that challenge Zionist narratives are inevitably accused of antisemitism – however, there are narratives from Israel itself that allude to the Palestinian heritage in what is now regarded as Israeli agriculture as well as ecology, from A. B. Yehoshua’s short story “Facing the Forest” (1968) that mentions the presence of a Palestinian village under the Negev Forest that the protagonist is assigned to guard over, to Alon Hilu’s novel The House of Rajani (2010) which portrays the Palestinian role in the flourish that Jews brought to the land. There have also been documentaries, like The Village under the Forest (2013) and My Tree (2021), that explore the extent to which supporting JNF implicates Jews in the crime of “obliterating the traces of life, people, history and place” (Grunebaum, 2014: 213). Highlighting the complex layers of memory and history, these narratives foreground the realities of the willful erasure of the physical traces of Palestinian ecology. Recognizing the need to confront these erasures is in itself an acknowledgment of the debt that history owes to Palestinians displaced by the Nakba.

This article has analyzed the works of Susan Abulhawa to study the erasure of Palestinian ecology in dominant narratives on Palestine/Israel, and the techniques used
by the author to commemorate the agricultural heritage of Palestine. By emphasizing the Palestinian people’s connection with their land, Abulhawa has subverted the Zionist claims that the formation of Israel was necessary for the region to flourish. She has used her writing as a tool to combat amnesia by giving voice to Palestinian memories of their land and heritage. The olive tree in particular has been highlighted as the symbol of Palestinian rootedness and resistance. The author also brings attention to the environmental apartheid that the Palestinians are subjected to by their colonizers and their attempts, however unorganized, to resist it. Like the character Haj Salem in *Mornings in Jenin*, Abulhawa too tries “to keep [her] people linked to history, so [they] do not become amnesiac creatures living arbitrarily at the whim of injustice,” making her works *lieux de mémoire* that block forced forgetfulness (2011: 133).

**References**


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