

Toni Morrison and Susan Abulhawa Writing Female Characters Amidst Conflict and Warzones: Towards a Literary Matrilineal Lineage

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Abstract—The present article examines cases of sexual violence that are projected from wars and conflicts on women in Morrison’s *Beloved* (1997) and Abulhawa’s *The Blue Between Sky and Water* (2015). As we intend to study the violence projected on some female characters and trace the connection between Morrison’s Sethe and Ella and Abulhawa’s Nazmiyeh and Nur in light of Gilbert and Gubar’s theory “The Anxiety of Authorship” (2000), we endeavour as well to trace the connection between Morrison and Abulhawa’s treatment of “high themes” such as sexual harassment which, in return, helps ascertain their “artful foliage” as Gilbert and Gubar argue and overcome the hierarchical literary tradition of their forefathers to establish a literary matriarchal tradition that is inclusive of ethnic diversity.

Index Terms—the female pen, sexual violence, madwoman, trifecta jeopardy, literary matrilineality

I. INTRODUCTION

By digging deeper into the histories of African Americans and Palestinians living in the United States today, we encounter stories about the pain, torment, and agony the two races have had to endure inside and outside their homelands. The African American Toni Morrison and the Arab American Susan Abulhawa echo the dark experiences their peoples share into their fiction, sometimes through intoxicating expressions, to depict that world that is full of aching human souls. They have found their way to writing literary works that would live forever about a permanent pain with such moral and emotional vehemence and through a wild imagination. They have not only re-written their peoples’ histories, but they have also translated the pain the white man’s version of history has kept hidden into artistic creations so peculiar to express their peoples’ tormenting psychological struggle. Indeed, through their literary works, they have played an integral role in correcting many of the circulated misconceptions about the African American and the Palestinian cultures in the American society.

Regardless of their different cultural backgrounds and generations, both writers share a marginalized position in the white American society due to their being non-white women writers. As women, they have suffered several restrictions enforced on them by the patriarchal society they live in. As writers, their fiction has not been given the same critical consideration as other white writers have been in the American literary canon. It becomes clearly noticeable, in this regard, that a shrewd link can be drawn between the fiction of the two writers, specifically in relation to the traumatic events which have shaped their peoples’ histories. To this end, the article explores Morrison’s *Beloved* (1997) and Abulhawa’s *The Blue Between Sky and Water* (2015) with the aim of establishing a comparative reading of these two novels, specifically in relation to the theme of rape and sexual violence. This reading will be conducted in the context of Sandra Gilbert (1936-) and Susan Gubar’s (1944-) theory “the Anxiety of Authorship” (1979) which they initiated in the second half of the twentieth century. Employing this theory will help consider the possibility of drawing a lens of positive influence and connection between Morrison and Abulhawa through tracing the thematic pattern of rape and sexual abuse in warzones in the two novels under study.

II. GILBERT AND GUBAR AND THE CONCEPT OF THE FEMALE LITERARY INFLUENCE

In the process of discussing the concept of influence, Gilbert and Gubar’s theory “the Anxiety of Authorship” (2000) spring up in order to create a new space for female writers who have undergone a struggle not from the precursors, but from the suppressive patriarchal society that prevented them from achieving greatness in writing. Gilbert and Gubar (2000) reject Bloom’s Freudian conception of father-son relationship (1973) and bring the mother-daughter relationship into the centre. As the male writer struggles with the greatness of his precursors, the female writer, surprisingly enough,

struggles with isolation which could later turn into a form of madness or permanent anxiety. Nevertheless, this is not always the case as the female writer searches for another female model to strengthen and hence deepen her rebelliousness and defiance towards the injustices of the outer patriarchal world. Gilbert and Gubar's theory of "the Anxiety of Authorship" (2000) becomes, therefore, the main guide that will illustrate a tradition of female creation and influence between female writers.

The same idea can be applied in this study as Morrison and Abulhawa are noticed to have grown stronger with their defiant and rebellious pen. Bringing them together does not only accentuate the influence that the one has upon the other, but it also stresses their universality as well. As we attempt to make of Gilbert and Guabra's theory of "the Anxiety of Authorship" (2000) the main guide that would illustrate a tradition of female creation and influence between the two writers, we tend at the same time to make the whole theory contemporarily befitting. To this end, a number of the images Gilbert and Gubar (2000) employ in their theory are listed and explained below to be later integrated into the discussion:

A. *The Queen's Looking Glass*

This is one of the most famous images that we as readers would confront in the Grimm tale of "little snow white" in which the mysterious voice of the looking glass plays a crucial role in and outside of the story. It is through the mad monstrous Queen (rebelliousness) and the angelic Snow-white (passiveness or the perfect example of the 19th-century woman) that the dichotomy of angle and monster comes to the fore. Gilbert and Gubar, accordingly, elucidate the extent to which this image can have such a great impact and influence on the female pen.

B. *The Metaphor of the Cave*

Gilbert and Gubar employ the parables of the cave for their metaphorical significance. If we perceive the cave as an objectification of the female's mind, we will ultimately imagine the darkness, the dimness, and the obscurity of the female's knowledge. However, amidst the darkness, there must exist a beacon of light. It is indeed through the metaphor of the cave that one can apprehend the female poets' trip from darkness to brightness.

C. *The Womb*

Gilbert and Gubar employ the maternal womb as a symbol of fertility, a symbol that carries shades of vivacious positive connotations. Assuredly, it has always been the function of culture to teach society that we are different from nature. Nevertheless, Gilbert and Gubar use the nature of the human body (male/female) to defy the cultural foundations by referring to the pen as a metaphorical "penis". They associate the male's artistic creativity with the male's sexuality and analyse it as the essence of his literary power. So, if we want to find an alternative, it should be an organ too. Gilbert and Gubar introduce, correspondingly, the pen as a metaphorical "womb".

D. *The Queen's Mad Tarantella*

"Tarantella" is an Italian dance that is known to have a cultural and metaphorical signification. For the Italians, the tarantella comes from a spider's poisonous bite known as "the tarantula". Gilbert and Gubar in *The Madwoman in The Attic* use the term emblematically to express that tremendous fear of the male poets of the female imagination. The queen's tarantella dance echoes the possibility of the female's revolutionary creativity and imagination, as her suicidal dance of death becomes a dance of artistic freedom and victory.

III. FROM THE TRAUMA OF DOUBLE JEOPARDY TO THE TRAUMA OF TRIFECTA JEOPARDY

In analyzing how Morrison and Abulhawa portray their female characters amidst wars and conflict zones, we consider that the term "double jeopardy" does not serve its chief intentions. We, therefore, intend to use the term "trifecta" rather than the term "double". These two female writers are exceptionally burdened with what we name a "trifecta jeopardy"; first, for being forced to leave their homelands and become members of diasporic groups (ethnicity); second, for being female writers who are subject to a patriarchal system (gender); third, for being traumatized due to racial oppression caused by the white supremacy against the African Americans and Israeli occupation against the Palestinians (racism and colonialism). These are the main three elements that create a trifecta literary bond between Morrison and Abulhawa using Gilbert and Gubar's fundamental images.

Morrison (1997) and Abulhawa (2015) perceive external sexual abuse as one form among other multifarious forms of violence the female is exposed to. By bringing into the picture the questions of sexual harassment and rape, they choose not only to stare at "the looking glass", but also to walk through it holding tight to new critical directions. Walking through "the looking glass" can be seen as an act that involves the female writer in a challenging battle to bring forth an outshining "female pen" that makes the hidden truths known. This idea is well represented by Gilbert and Gubar in *The Mad Woman in the Attic and the Nineteenth-Century Imagination* (2000) as the following:

The female writer's battle for self-creation involves her in a revisionary process. Her battle, however, is not against her (male) precursor's reading of the world but his reading of her. In order to define herself as an author she must redefine the terms of her socialization. (Gubar, 2000, p. 49)

Though Gilbert and Gubar's *Madwoman in The Attic* (2000) analyses the female poetics, imagination, and limitations of nineteenth-century women, digging deeper into its content shows that their theoretical perceptions are

contemporarily weighty and applicable. Through their contemporary writing, both Morrison (1997) and Abulhawa (2015) have exhibited undefeatable determination to swim against mainstream culture by enhancing and heightening their creative capacities and attempting to overcome the anxiety caused by the scarcity of their foremothers' literary productions. They have also managed to create out of their suffering a shared tradition of connection and literary influence that would serve to bring them together despite their different cultural backgrounds. Through the eyes of Gilbert and Gubar (2000), Morrison (1997) and Abulhawa (2015) believe in maternal power, transcend "the crystal surface" of the nineteenth century that have cast its female writers into the margins, enlighten "the cave" of their minds, and dare to dance "the Queen's mad tarantella" to bolster their female pen.

Rape and sexual harassment are one of "the high thematic" motifs that can help trace matrilineal transatlantic influence and connection between the two writers. It can as well explicate how the duplicity, the isolation, and the so-called female madness caused by the extremity of the traumatic shock the female characters in the two novels understudy in this article experience can turn into healthy and vigorous artistry. It is necessary to draw a link between three main aspects that would help us bring together Morrison and Abulhawa's treatment of the theme of rape and sexual abuse in war and conflict zones: first, there is a need to study the psychological and intellectual traumas experienced by the two female writers; second, there is a need to direct the study to the way they reflect such tremendous political, cultural, social, and psychological calamities on their female characters; finally, there is a need to draw attention to the way the two writers reconstruct the events in their novels to reflect the power of the "female pen".

Using women as a weapon against the nation by controlling fertility and attempting to annihilate the African and the Palestinian race is the reason sexual assault and rape are common in regions torn by war and conflicts. Cases of rape and sexual assault are present in Morrison and Abulhawa's novels and this creates possibilities of influence and matrilineal continuity between them. As they have created their own space beyond "the Anxiety of Authorship" (2000) experienced by the nineteenth-century female writers, they have as well collaborated in the process of strengthening "the female pen" by questioning what appears to the world and the mainstream writers as acceptable. Both Morrison and Abulhawa have been attached to history, both have made their revolutionary and revisionary journeys into the African/Palestinian body and land by "setting fire to the darkness" (Gubar, 2000, p. 101) and revitalizing what has been deadened by patriarchy; it is that kind of revitalization that comes only from "the womb". In this case, and through the eyes of the two ethnic female American writers, the phenomenon of rape and sexual assault shall be unmasked and hence debunked.

Rape and sexual assault are broad and include multi-chromatic shades of violence. Susan Brownmiller (1975) asserts that rape in war zones is familiar and hence an inevitable act; according to her "rape becomes an unfortunate but inevitable by-product of the necessary game called war. Women, by this reasoning, are simply regrettable victims of incidental, unavoidable casualties" (Brownmiller, 1975, p. 32). Undeniably, rape has a history. It is accordingly significant to dig into its connection to wars and conflicts zones. Is society, with all its cultural and social norms, blamed for contributing to the externalization and the perpetuation of such a phenomenon? How do Morrison and Abulhawa invest this into their female characters? As we dig deeper into their fiction, this transformation becomes clear for both writer's concerns are about how to make their female characters go through Gilbert and Gubar's "looking glass" because on the surface there is a reflection of a victimized female character, which they have to take the challenge of transcending with a certain power that would lead to survivorship.

IV. SETHE, ELLA, NAZMIYEH, AND NUR INTO AN EVERLASTING TRIFECTA JEOPARDY

In their fiction, Morrison (1997) and Abulhawa (2015) move from victimhood to survivorship, by creating female characters who dance "the death dance" to mark their survivorship in the hardest conditions. Sethe and Ella in Morrison's *Beloved* (1997) and Nazmiye and Nur in Abulhawa's *The Blue Between Sky and Water* (2015) are two female survivors of sexual enslavement and war atrocities. To better comprehend their stories and perceive the traumas they go through, a detailed background of their lives is necessary.

At the age of thirteen years old, Sethe finds herself enslaved in Sweet Home for a plantation in Kentucky. At eighteen, she accepts to marry Halle Suggs and gives birth to three children: Howard, Buglar, and Beloved. The brutality of the schoolteacher who owns Sweet Home's slaves drives them to escape. Sethe's mysterious strength lies in her crime and in her capacity to survive all the violence and sexual abuse. Two main sexual abuse episodes in Sethe's life explain the nature of her suffering as well as her crime against her child. First, the brutal beating and mammary rape scene while pregnant by the schoolteacher's nephews can be seen as a retaliation for her escape from Sweet Home plantation. Second, the act of prostitution with the engraver to name her child's grave can be seen as a form of sexual enslavement that Sethe must endure, since prostitution, as has been mentioned earlier, can be considered as another form of rape:

Just once, could it say, no thank you? I just hold another bite. I'm full god damn it off. Two boys with mossy teeth, one sucking on my breasts the other holding me down, their book-reading teacher watching and writing it up. I am still full of that, God damn it, I can't go back and add more. (Morrison, 1997, p. 83)

Sethe's witnesses of the sexual abuse of her body turn into what Cathy Caruth describes in *Trauma Explorations in Memory* (1995) as a "psychic trauma [that] involves intense personal suffering" (Caruth, 1995, p. vii). The enormity and the malice of the sexual abuse Sethe experiences and the intense feelings she relives every time she tells her story to

reinforce the truth that she is engulfed by “trifecta” struggle and agony. As she narrates her story, Sethe invites the reader not only to imagine it but also to feel it, to “feel how it feels to be a colored woman roaming the roads with anything God made liable to jump on you. Feel that” (Morrison, *Beloved*, 1997, p. 80). After Sethe’s escape from Sweet Home and reunion with Baby Suggs and her children in Cincinnati thinking that they are finally secure, the schoolteacher and the slave catchers come to recapture her and her children to return them to the brutal slavery of Sweet Home. Sethe’s immediate resolution is surprisingly to halt the life of her children, beginning with her younger daughter Beloved by slicing her throat.

One of the traumatic symptoms of rape and sexual assault that she endures is well heralded in the first chapter with the act of infanticide. This is one of “the high themes” that the “female pen” tackles, illustrating what Gilbert and Gubar call “the suicide tarantella of the female creativity” (Gubar, 2000, p. 56). So, one might ask, what would make a mother kill her daughter, but not her son? These questions would intensify the edge of Sethe’s bold and unnatural crime of cutting the throat of her daughter to save her from slavery and most particularly from sexual enslavement or rape. From a patriarchal point of view, Sethe is perceived as a dangerous madwoman. Her crime is, hence, considered as an act of weakness rather than an act of strength. By surprising the patriarchal forefathers and dancing that literary artistic “death dance”, Morrison pushes one of her strongest female characters Sethe as far as she can by rendering her act as anomalous and incensed without minding to what extent the madness accompanying it can be overwhelming.

The question shall be as follows: as the contemporary female writer digs into the darkest part of “the cave” of her mind and brings into her narratives an immense nastiness, do these attempts of the pen help to “alleviate suffering” (Caruth, 1995, p. vii) to heal the injuries and restore the intactness of the female’s body? Does Morrison’s journeying into the memories of her characters and especially Sethe’s memory help to mitigate and diminish trauma caused by racist practices? These questions come up to mind because of what Gilbert and Gubar (2000) call “the duplicity” and “the inconstancy” of the female poet’s writing process which has been regarded as a negative quality by male writers that has pushed women’s fiction into the margins. Nevertheless, in this study, by following Gilbert and Gubar’s thread of positive connectivity and influence, we shall prove the contrary:

Her strained relationship with her art is thus determined almost entirely by her gender so that from both her anxieties and her strategies for overcoming them we can extrapolate a number of the crucial ways in which women’s art has been radically qualified by their femaleness. (Gubar, 2000, p. 82)

It is in that “duplicity” and “inconstancy” that a dangerously rebellious “female pen” emerges to conquer the previous “master narratives”. Indeed, we need to comprehend how the power of “the female pen” can turn discontinuity to continuity and hence victimhood to survivorship. Sethe is imprisoned within her “cave” that encompasses the darkest memories and might echo shades of inconstancies into the outer world. In a conversation with Paul D, one can perceive the depth of Sethe’s trauma:

Then they know what it’s like to send your children off when your breasts are full.
We was talking 'bout a tree, Sethe.

After I left you, those boys came in there and took my milk. (Morrison, 1997, p. 35)

Indeed, “to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (Caruth, 1995, p. 5) and that is why it “cannot be interpreted, simply, as a distortion of reality, nor as the lending of unconscious meaning to a reality it wishes to ignore, nor as the repression of what once was wished” (Caruth, 1995, p. 5).

Caruth (1995), accordingly, focuses on “the structure of the experience”; the way it turns into memory and transforms into a permanent trauma through a process of repetition. The way Sethe recalls her experience in a simple conversation with Paul D reveals the weight of her trauma. She cannot maintain a conversation without being lost in the memories of her past. She becomes, therefore, trapped in “the blue”. Sethe’s milk can be seen as a metaphorical element that echoes the trauma of rape and sexual abuse, which is the main cause that denies her the right to become not only a woman but also a mother. The trifecta consciousness that we attempt to make the *de facto* of the study envelops Sethe, and we shall see later with Ella, politically, psychologically, and physically amidst war and conflict and forces her not only to kill her child for love and protection but also to sell her body to the engraver for the sake of naming the grave of the daughter she killed. Indeed, this is a “love too thick” and extraordinary to be fully apprehended:

Ten minutes for seven letters. with another ten could she have gotten “Dearly” too? She had not thought to ask him and it bothered her still that it might have been possible that for twenty minutes, a half-hour, say, she could have had the whole thing, every word the preacher say at the funeral (and all there was to say, surely) engraved on her baby’s headstone (Morrison, 1997, p. 5)

“Something like [Sethe’s experience] had happened to Ella” (Morrison, 1997, p. 222), except that Ella is raped by two white men, a father, and a son. Though Morrison does not provide us with much detail about Ella; she is one of the female characters who are assaulted, traumatized, and poisoned by white patriarchy. She is Baby Suggs’s neighbor in Cincinnati and the one who participates in saving Sethe and Denver to arrive safely at Baby Suggs’s home. Being sexually enslaved to these white men helps explain the magnitude of the trauma of rape in conflict zones, all along with the struggle to push away that traumatic memory she “remembered every bit of it” and which “kept her locked in a room” (Morrison, 1997, p. 223). Notwithstanding, she has always wanted to bury the past in the past, by resolving to have that impossible fight with memories. Even in relation to the traumatic experiences of Sethe, she does not “like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present” (Morrison, 1997, p. 468). Besides the fact of being sexually

enslaved and raped by white men, Ella is one of the resilient minor characters Morrison creates in *Beloved* (1997). Ella has lived her adolescence years in a house where she has been shared by a father and a son; a father and a son whom she repetitively calls “the lowest yet”:

Her puberty was spent in a house where she was shared by father and son, whom she called “the lowest yet.” It was “the lowest yet” who gave her a disgust for sex and against whom she measured all atrocities. A killing, a kidnap, a rape--whatever, she listened and nodded. Nothing compared to “the lowest yet”. (Morrison, 1997, p. 467)

We consider, accordingly, the expression “the lowest yet” that Ella keeps uttering each time she recalls her traumatic experience a suggestive one that needs profound meditation on the effects it has on her psyche. So, what does Morrison insinuate by “the lowest yet”? She delineates Ella’s potency of mutinous articulation in retelling her history and grasping her traumatic experience and turning it into a phase of survivorship. Morrison maintains “It was Ella more than anyone who convinced the others that rescue was in order” (Morrison, 1997, p. 467), which makes the reader realize how Ella, despite the sexual brutality she has endured which can lead to an ultimate madness, is still capable of grasping her female personal identity and hence “the part of her that was clean” (Morrison, 1997, p. 456).

Ella’s momentous shock does not solely lie in her experience of rape by two white men but also in giving birth to a white child which intensifies the abhorrence of her body and what she calls “the thing” she brings to life and which she refuses to nurse: “She had delivered, but would not nurse, a hairy white thing, fathered by “the lowest yet.” (Morrison, 1997, p. 486) The traumatic shock that inhabits Ella makes some of the fundamental feelings in the human life such as love confusing. In an instance when she holds Sethe’s baby, she says, “if anybody was to ask me, I’d say, ‘Don’t love nothing’” (Morrison, 1997, p. 175) and this leads to the conclusion that Ella is unable to love her child. In one of her conversations, Morrison describes Ella’s expression as “one of the most devastating things” (Toni Morrison the Last Interview and other Conversations, 2020, p. 41) as love becomes the source of pain instead of relief and support. It is indeed the trauma of the sexual enslavement that she has experienced that makes her construct that puzzling perception of love.

Nazmieyh is one of the strongest characters Abulhawa creates in *The Blue Between Sky and Water* (2015). The strength Nazmieyh shows in dealing with the most traumatic mannerisms towards events stemming from the outer violence she has lived resembles that of Sethe and Ella in *Beloved* (1997). Nazmieyh “was the sassiest girl in Beit Daras” (Abulhawa, 2015, p.31) most adventurous, rebellious, and humorous. Like Sethe, Nazmieyh has developed the fiercest motherly protective traits. She fights sharply for the safekeeping of her family especially her little sister Mariam, the intelligent magical little girl with exceptional eyes. On the day of the Nakba, “the Catastrophe that inaugurated the erasure of Palestine” (Abulhawa, 2015, p. 49), as the Palestinian families of Beit Daras are leaving their town to flee the brutality of the Zionist to Gaza, Nazmieyh realizes that Mariam has not escaped with the other members of the family and stayed in Beit Daras. Nazmieyh goes back to rescue her and bring her back and it is there where her greatest trauma begins as she is raped by a group of Zionist soldiers in the filthiest way. Like Ella, Nazmieyh gives birth to a baby boy from one of her rapists whose eyes “gray slits in sacks of fat” (Abulhawa, 2015, p. 59) and considers him as a devilish thing.

The detailed description of the rape scene in which Nazmieyh, though being sexually harassed, tries hard to protect her little sister forces the reader to share the feelings of intimidation and frightfulness Nazmieyh has experienced through “rape”. It is indeed one of the most traumatic scenes that shape the direction of the whole novel. It starts like the following:

From the window, they could see some villagers in the distance being allowed to leave. Soldiers were taking their belongings and jewelry, but they were allowed to leave. Nazmieyh felt hopeful. She had been right to come back. To have had faith in Allah. (Abulhawa, 2015, p. 57)

This is a glimpse of the Palestinian lifestyle, the life of people whose earth has never been settled under their feet. In a state of war, the Palestinians can give anything precious they have just for the sake of guarantying their physical safety and security

Guns, bombs, and all the explosive devices that soldiers use can never be as destructive and ruinous as rape and sexual harassment. Thus, the way Abulhawa describes how people are being stolen, killed, tortured is never the same as she describes the raping scenes. It is through her “female pen” that the reader can grasp most profoundly the tremendous trifecta pain of a woman who is torn between her being a female and living in war and conflict zones at the same time. It is very important to take into consideration the notions of “duplicity” and “inconstancy” that Abulhawa echoes as an ethnic American female writer. Gilbert and Gubar explicate in their theoretical thesis *The Mad Woman in The Attic: The Woman Writer and The Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (2000), that duplicity and inconstancy have led female writers to a long revisionary process, a battle for self-creation that is being fused into female characters such as Nazmieyh who struggles with the triple pain of colonization, gender, and rape

How would a woman as helpless as Nazmieyh fight back weaponless against such colonial brutality? She would fight back, we would say, through the utmost forms of resistance possible: “Nazmieyh ordered Mariam to turn away and close her eyes and ears as tightly as she could. She said that it would all be over soon, and they would go on their way. She could endure this, she thought” (Abulhawa, 2015, p. 37). One thing that might explain the act of rape amidst war is the fact that women like Nazmieyh, Sethe, and Ella, (and Nur as we shall see later) can also be considered as part of the

colonized property that the conqueror can benefit from. This is one of the main psychological reasons that triplicate Nazmiyeh's struggle in the Palestinian war. One comes to ask the principal question: how can Nazmiyeh be empowered and inspired by her trifecta jeopardy? The freedom of Morrison and Abulhawa's imagination allows her to break "the crystal surface" of the looking glass. If women were accused of "inconstancy" that has been considered as "an attack on the irrepressible interiority of women who cannot be contained within the images provided by patriarchal culture" (Gubar, 2000, p. 228), then we presume that with Gilbert and Gubar's revolutionary theory and with the writing of "positive role mothers" (Gubar, 2000, p. 51) like Morrison, Abulhawa is able to construct from the trifecta jeopardy of her female characters a road to their survivorship. Due to the rape incident, Nazmiyeh experiences a psychological fracture. This vigilant episode becomes a remarkable turning point in her life. The colonizers do not use such a weapon heedlessly or thoughtlessly; they study the targeted nation that they colonize with deep attention to all the details of its culture and religion and employ this demolishing tool to weaken it. Why would the Zionist soldier neglect the gold and the material wealth and turn to Nazmiyeh's body? To settle a land, is it indispensable to settle the women's body? Indeed, these philosophical questions require deep thinking about the whole situation, for the act of rape here acquires metaphorical significance.

Nazmiyeh is put in a situation where she does not "understand what the soldier yelled before forcing himself into her. She clenched her teeth, biting the agony of rape lest it escapes from her voice and reaches Mariam's ears" (Abulhawa, 2015, p. 37). She could not comprehend the motives of such an act at a time when she could have given all the gold she has just, as the other Palestinians have done peacefully. Why would a soldier practice his animalistic sexual behavior against a weak woman with no weapon to defend herself or fight back? To better explicate the situation, we consider the following episode as a metaphorical analogy that shows that settling the female body is as dangerous as settling a land. The female's body is a metaphorical representation of the land. It is, correspondingly, important to note that even though the Palestinian culture is patriarchal, the role of the woman is very significant in the Palestinian community. Women are put at the forefront of society no matter how physically strong the Palestinian men are; they derive a large part of their masculine and inner power from their women. The sacredness of the female presence in Palestinian life makes them a source of power which, once destroyed, leads to the destruction of the whole nation, for "a crime committed against her body became a crime committed against the male estate" (Brownmiller, 1975, p. 17) This makes us wonder about the relationship between biology and culture concerning sexual harassment and rape. The problem is not in the way biology scientifically defines gender differences; the problem lies in the way culture and society shape these biological tendencies. In view of that, Susan Brownmiller (1975) dwells on the issue of rape amidst wars and conflicts in her book *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* where she elucidates that:

No zoologist, as far as I know, has ever observed that animals rape in their natural habitat, the wild. Sex in the animal world, including those species that are our closest relations, the primates, is more properly called "mating," and it is cyclical activity set off by biologic signals the female puts out. Mating is initiated and "controlled" it would seem, by the female estrous cycle (Brownmiller, 1975, p. 13)

It can be seen that the phenomenon of rape amidst war and conflict zones is not biologically generated, for it is not even linked to a normal animal behavior. In this case, it becomes the most efficient fear-making tool for the colonizer to claim ownership of both the body and the land. This suggests as well that "these struggles led first to the rape of women, later to the enslaving of conquered men. The women became laborers and objects of pleasure for the conqueror; their males became slaves" (Brownmiller, 1975, p. 13)

Overall, in the second part of Abulhawa's *The Blue Between Sky and Water* (2015) after her grandfather Mamdouh dies and leaves her with her mother as a young girl. Nur lives in the United States of America, another part of the world far from the blasts of the Israeli-Palestinian war; however, she has always had that conversation with Khaled (the supernatural figure and the main narrator of *The Blue Between Sky and Water*), and with the place where she truly belongs through "the missing link" (Abulhawa, 2015, p. 98), her dreams and imaginations. Nur's greatest traumatic stigma stems from the sexual abuse she has experienced as a very young child by her mother's partner Sam.

Though different to some extent from Sethe, Ella, and even Nazmiyeh as far as the nature of the traumatic experiences is concerned, it is worth mentioning that Nur shares their strong character. A deeper interpretation can be derived from the way Nur is sexually brutalized from a very young age. The act of her being raped by her mother's partner who is not originally Palestinian can be considered as an intended attempt through which Abulhawa engraves into her readers' memories another kind of betrayal. Khaled like many other Palestinians has thought that "the American do-good enthusiasm" is thought to be the hope that would "fix broken people like [Khaled and Nur] and heal wounded places like Gaza" (Abulhawa, 2015, p. 150). It is, accordingly, important to pay attention to the way Khaled, the narrator of the story, introduces Nur to the readers: "then Nur came, her mouth full of Arabic words that were sawed off and sanded at the edges with the curly accent of a foreigner" (Abulhawa, 2015, p. 15). In another instance of his description, Khaled situates Nur with the colors which create that beacon of light and bring back the faith and the optimism for a better future. For him, Nur is "the extra clothespin Teta Nazmiyeh needed when she hung the sky" (Abulhawa, 2015, p. 98). The description of Nur, in this case, becomes metaphorical. How can a foreigner's intrusion overwhelmingly corrupt the genuineness of Palestine? In the same way, we perceive Nur's rape episode as a young child by Sam as a metaphorical rape of the nation.

Mamdouh, Nur's grandfather, has lived in the United States with "the weight of exile's untouchable loneliness" (Abulhawa, 2015, p. 139) (and Nzinga the guardian of Nur and the one who is assigned to her case after the death of her grandfather) and with the fear "deposited in his eyes" that one day he will leave Nur alone in a strange country. Before his death, Mamdouh makes all that he can to protect Nur in the strange country and from the cruel mother who had no interest in her daughter. He assigns Nzinga to be the guardian of Nur and the one who helps her to go back to Gaza. It might seem unreasonable that Mamdouh associates Nur's well-being with her presence in Palestine which is undergoing an infinite war rather than with her presence in the United States. On the surface, Abulhawa puts Nur in America and gives her all the possibilities of a promising life that the Palestinians have always aspired to have. Behind the surface, however, there is filth and a reality that stinks:

Nur had everything we wanted. We thought all Americans did. But for all the security and freedom and opportunity she had; for all the learning and good grades; for all the ways she excelled, Nur was the most devastated person we knew. There was no place in the world for her to be. She could be tolerated, maybe even accepted, as long as she was good. But when she wasn't, she was sent away, abandoned. (Abulhawa, 2015, p. 141)

Like some Palestinian families who have fled Beit Daras to Gaza in the wake of the Nakba, other Palestinian families like that of Mamdouh and Yasmine, the grandparents of Nur, have fled Palestine to America in the hope of seeking a securer asylum and assuring a better future. To shed light on the trauma that she goes through as a young girl, Abulhawa places Nur between Palestine and America and makes her return to her homeland a shattered traumatized being.

V. SETHE, ELLA, NAZMIYEH, AND NUR FROM SEXUAL SERVITUDE TO RESISTANT SURVIVORSHIP

Each of Morrison and Abulhawa's female survivors sinks in "the blue" after going through a traumatizing experience. Yet, this traumatizing experience reinforces the strength and the capacity of each woman to go beyond "the crystal surface" and illuminate the dark "cave". Morrison's Sethe and Ella and Abulhawa's Nazmiyeh and Nur might differ as far as their Arab and African American cultural backgrounds are concerned; nevertheless, the similarities that their traumatic experiences cause and the triple jeopardy they live force them to dwell in "the blue" to come out stronger. Henceforth, it is here where we encounter the power of "the female pen". It is at this point that the influence and the matrilineal lineage between Morrison and Abulhawa lies. This act of furthering the process of female psychological, physical, and intellectual empowerment shall stand as an influential point that would draw a literary matrilineal lineage between the two ethnic female writers.

The more we get to the details of the traumatic experiences Sethe, Ella, Nazmiyeh, and Nur endure, the more we realize that the theme of "rape" is treated metaphorically by Morrison and Abulhawa. Events in *Beloved* (1997) and *The Blue Between Sky and Water* (2015) are disturbed by rape and sexual abuse, two forms of extrinsically constructed political violence that women experience. Predominantly, Sethe and Ella, Nazmiyeh, and Nur find themselves fixed in the past. Thus, by connecting these four characters, we shall find ourselves confronted with the traumatic memories of slavery and colonization.

Sethe kills her daughter to save her from slavery and sexual enslavement, Ella does not accept to nurse her white child, Nazmiyeh rejects the fact that one of her sons is the product of the brutal rape by the Zionists, and Nur encounters the trauma of rejection of her mother and the trauma of rape as a young child in a foreign land. In *Beloved* (1997), Morrison does not present things simplistically; what the reader encounters is not just the racism that he/she has read about in history, and the same applies to colonialism when we come to Abulhawa.

Since the study approaches the phenomenon of rape and sexual harassment as a "high theme", it means that it goes beyond being simply an act of violence against colonized women. In the case of African American women, rape can be considered as a war waged against women, particularly, the power of "the womb" that gives life and perpetuates its race. As Oplak Palmer Aisa explains in her article "Undeclared War: African American Women Writers Explicating Rape" (1992), "Past and present analysis shows that rape is not a crime of uncontrollable sexual passion, but one used to vent misogyny and to exert physical, political, and economic control" (p. 364). Living in a society torn by conflicts and wars, the female is forced to find an alternative space in which she can speak out and voice up her abuse. Can her own body become that battlefield? Aisa (1992), correspondingly, asserts that "since the woman's body is the battlefield, she must make it the source of her resistance" (p. 367), and here comes the idea of the power of the woman's "womb", its metaphorical representation as the act of giving birth and survival after an elongated journey of resistance.

As Morrison (1997) dances "the death dance", she creates a beacon of light amidst the sullenness of "the cave" of her mind, cherishing its corners with the unspoken secrets, and owning the story with unshakeable authority, for "owning one's story is as important as the ownership of the physical space", as Abulhawa (2015) emphasizes. Morrison probes the interiority of her characters and therefore owns the whole story and breaks "the master-narrative". Sethe, Ella, Nazmiyeh, and Nur are not just denied a land or belonging, but more than that, they are denied being women, they are denied their bodies.

Analyzing the characters of Sethe, Ella, Nazmiyeh, and Nur in light of Gilbert and Gubar's "metaphor of the cave", a question comes to our minds: can they be the contemporary version of "the madwoman in the attic"? Our answer to this question is yes. Today's we consider Sethe, Ella, Nazmiyeh, and Nur the contemporary ethnic "madwomen" in war and

conflict zones. Nevertheless, the concept of “madness” in the case of these contemporary ethnic “madwomen” should be taken from the positive edge that Gilbert and Gubar (2000) extract from their profound analysis of “the infection of the sentence” in the canonical “master narratives” by nineteenth-century female writers. It is that “madness” that does not put limits to resistance, confrontation, interior, and exterior battles with outer powers. Morrison and Abulhawa do create female characters who undergo that kind of madness, but that madness is something that is bred by their creation of a very strong agitating interior life that resembles the impossible or the unnatural. It becomes abundantly clear that Morrison and Abulhawa have managed, through their fiction, to challenge the restrictions their patriarchal forefathers have imposed on “the female pen” by applying Gilbert and Gubar’s key fundamentals to construct a powerful “female pen”.

Rape and sexual violence are incidents that set things against the ordinary rules of human nature, but the state of war the female characters live in turns things topsy-turvy and breeds anomalous human experiences, amongst which is the trauma of rape and sexual assault. Sethe’s fear intensifies as she becomes incapable of protecting her child not only from slavery, but also from a higher form of violence that is destructive physically, psychologically, and politically. Ella’s abhorrence of the whites intensifies as she gives birth to a white child which reminds her of the cruelty and the brutality she has experienced. Just like the abhorrence that emanates from Nazmiyeh’s heart the minute when she sees her new born child with the gray eyes of her rapist. This creates a solid link between Sethe, Ella, and Nazmiyeh as they go through almost the same traumatic shock. It is only the notion of acceptance of and resistance to their realities that sets them apart. The scars engendered by the trauma of rape and sexual abuse remain in their memories, and sometimes that past becomes the only present they can live, for “[their] brain was not interested in the future. Loaded with the past and hungry for more, it left her no room to imagine, let alone plan for, the next day” (Morrison, 1997, p. 83)

The logic behind rape and sexual violence is represented in the colonizer’s belief that the African American and the Palestinian female bodies can be colonized the same way the African American and the Palestinian land have been colonized. “More soldiers moved in and out of [Nazmiyeh’s] body” (Abulhawa, 2015, p. 39) just like they moved in and out of the Palestinian soil after denying it to its indigenous people leaving it “a hallow carved-out thing” (Abulhawa, 2015, p. 39). Similarly, the whites “moved in and out” of Sethe, Ella, and other slave women. Exceptionally, Nur’s rape experience is more metaphorical. The irony lies in the fact that she lives far from Palestine, in a country of promising opportunities which she leaves as a shattered human being. We consider, accordingly, Nur’s rape a political rape that targets the Palestinian nation as a whole.

VI. CONCLUSION

On the whole, the theme of rape and sexual abuse amidst war and conflict zones draws a lens of positive influence and connection between Morrison (1997) and Abulhawa (2015). This thematic similarity serves the study as it helps to explore what Fairman (2009) calls “figurations of sisterhood” (R.Federico, 2009, p. 30) or what we call literary matrilineal lineage between the two female writers. Morrison and Abulhawa have been once considered as minor writers whose fiction does not belong to mainstream literature. “The metaphors of the cave”, “the crystal surface”, and “the tarantella dance” are the literary tactics that can be traced in their fiction in relation to this theme. By dancing the revolutionary dance and having that venturesome spirit, the two authors are able to speak out the silenced truths about the strength of “the female pen” as well as the possibilities of reviving a powerful resistant image of the female character. It is all about the process of healing and giving logical interpretations and motives to the presumed madness of their female characters, offering wider possibilities of healing than those found in other slave and colonial narratives. What connects Morrison and Abulhawa in the same room of that universal intra-feminist literary creativity, regardless of their different ethnicities, is their creative use of the process of “health-giving” or “life-giving” (vis a vis the metaphorical connotations the word “womb” enlists) amidst tumultuous calamities.

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