

Spaces of Resistance and Identity: Exploring Female Spatiality in Susan Abulhawa's *The Blue Between Sky and Water*

Amanda N. Alazzam

Department of English Language and Literature, University of Jordan, Amman, Jordan

Eman K. Mukattash

Department of English Language and Literature, University of Jordan, Amman, Jordan

Abstract—This paper explores the intersection of space, gender, and identity through the lens of spatial feminism in Susan Abulhawa's *The Blue Between Sky and Water* (2015). It examines how the novel's female protagonists, Nazmiyeh and Nur, navigate and transform spaces shaped by patriarchal, political, and social constraints. The study highlights how spaces function not merely as static backdrops but as dynamic, relational constructs that shape and are shaped by the identities of those who inhabit them. It also delves into the use of magical realism as a narrative device that transcends physical and social boundaries, enabling resistance and identity reclamation. Through the lens of spatial feminism, this paper situates Abulhawa's novel within the broader contexts of diaspora studies and Palestinian literature, emphasizing how women's resilience and agency emerge in the face of oppression and displacement. The analysis underscores the pivotal role of storytelling and memory in preserving cultural identity, asserting that women in Abulhawa's work are central to reclaiming spaces and histories. Ultimately, this study argues that the dynamic nature of space profoundly shapes female identities, offering insights into the transformative potential of spatiality in literature and reality.

Index Terms—spatiality, feminism, journey, diaspora, identity

I. INTRODUCTION

The intersection of space, gender, and identity has emerged as a significant area of inquiry within feminist literary studies, particularly through the lens of spatial theory. Spatial Feminism explores how spaces—both physical and metaphysical—are intricately linked to the formation of female identities, emphasizing the dynamic and relational nature of space. These spaces are not neutral; they are constructed through social, cultural, and historical interactions, often shaped by patriarchal and political constraints. This study applies the theory of spatiality to Susan Abulhawa's *The Blue Between Sky and Water* (2015), examining how the novel's female protagonists navigate and reshape the spaces they inhabit while confronting social, political, and personal challenges.

The research focuses on two central characters, Nazmiyeh and Nur, whose transformative journeys illustrate the profound impact of space on identity formation. Through the framework of spatiality, this study investigates how these female characters construct resilience and agency within dynamic and often oppressive spaces. Drawing on Massey's conceptualization of space as fluid and relational, the paper highlights how the identities of these women evolve in response to the shifting social and political landscapes they encounter. Furthermore, the study explores the role of magical realism in transcending spatial and societal boundaries, demonstrating how it serves as a form of resistance and a tool for reclaiming identity.

By situating *The Blue Between Sky and Water* within the broader context of spatial feminism and diaspora studies, this paper highlights the interplay between journey, space, and female identity. The analysis reveals how the novel portrays women as central to the preservation of cultural memory and resilience, using storytelling and community-building as acts of defiance against patriarchal and colonial oppression. This paper ultimately argues that the dynamic nature of space is pivotal in shaping female identities, offering a nuanced understanding of how women navigate and transform the spaces they inhabit in both literature and reality.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis of Abulhawa's *The Blue Between Sky and Water* (2015) to explore the relationship between space, gender, and identity. Grounded in the theoretical framework of Spatial Feminism, the analysis draws on key concepts from Gillian Rose, Doreen Massey and Theda Wrede, particularly the notions of space as dynamic, relational, and socially constructed. These ideas are used to examine how the novel's female characters navigate and transform the spaces they inhabit, often in response to patriarchal and political constraints.

The analysis focuses on two protagonists, Nazmiyeh and Nur, highlighting their journeys and the ways in which shifting spaces shape their identities. Particular attention is given to the role of magical realism as a narrative device that transcends physical and metaphysical boundaries, enabling resistance and identity reclamation. Through situating the novel within its broader cultural and historical context, this paper facilitates a deeper understanding of how space functions as both a site of oppression and a medium for resilience and agency in the lives of Palestinian women.

III. SPATIAL FEMINISM

This study draws on the theory of Spatial Feminism to explore the relationship between space, gender, and identity in Abulhawa's *The Blue Between Sky and Water*, with a focus on the dynamic interplay between female spatiality and diaspora. Spatial Feminism examines how space transcends its physical dimensions to become a dynamic construct shaped by social, cultural, and political interactions. Scholars such as Doreen Massey and Theda Wrede argue that space is inherently relational and socially constructed, challenging static and neutral perceptions of spatiality. These concepts provide the framework for analyzing how spaces in the novel are gendered, politicized, and intertwined with the female characters' identities.

Massey (2004) conceptualizes space as fluid, dynamic, and relational, emphasizing that it is constructed through interactions and shaped by historical and cultural forces. Massey's work highlights the interconnectedness of global and local scales, asserting that events in one space are often the result of decisions made elsewhere. This perspective is particularly relevant to understanding the spaces inhabited by Abulhawa's characters, as their lives are profoundly affected by broader political conflicts and patriarchal structures. Massey also emphasizes that identities, like spaces, are not fixed but constantly shifting in response to relational and historical contexts.

Wrede (2015) extends these ideas by arguing that "space is never neutral but always discursively constructed" (p. 11). According to Wrede, spaces are articulated through cultural discourse, including gender discourse, making them sites of power struggles and contestation. This understanding is critical for analyzing the experiences of Nazmiyeh and Nur, whose identities are shaped by the patriarchal and political limitations imposed on the spaces they occupy. Wrede's perspective allows for a nuanced analysis of how spaces are both sites of oppression and platforms for resistance.

Rose (1993), in *Feminism and Geography*, furthers the discourse by critiquing the masculinist underpinnings of geographical knowledge. Rose argues that traditional geography operates from a "masculine subject position" that claims universality while erasing embodied, emotional, and relational experiences. This creates a dualistic framework in which public spaces are masculinized, while private spaces are feminized, reinforcing patriarchal spatial hierarchies. Rose's critique challenges the dichotomy of "public versus private" and advocates for an ambivalent, paradoxical space that disrupts these binaries. She draws on the work of Teresa de Lauretis to emphasize that resistance to patriarchal structures occurs not outside these systems but within their interstices. This "paradoxical space" allows for the reworking of power dynamics by inhabiting and transforming the margins of dominant discourses (p. 140).

In diasporic contexts, the interplay between space and identity offers a lens to understand how women navigate displacement, marginalization, and cultural negotiation. Female spatiality in diaspora sheds light on the ways women create spaces of belonging and agency, even while contending with the constraints of broader sociopolitical forces (Parveen, 2017). This dynamic is vividly portrayed in *The Blue Between Sky and Water*, where characters like Nazmiyeh and Nur reshape spaces of oppression into opportunities for empowerment. Through their actions and relationships, they assert agency and push back against the limits imposed by patriarchal and political systems. This study highlights how space is not just a setting but a dynamic force that actively influences identity and resistance through examining these experiences through the framework of Spatial Feminism.

IV. SUSAN ABULHAWA'S *THE BLUE BETWEEN SKY AND WATER* (2015)

Susan Abulhawa's *The Blue Between Sky and Water* (2015) portrays the struggles and displacements of a Palestinian family from the West Bank. Every family member has experienced displacement since the day they were forced to leave their village, Beit Daras, in 1948. The novel depicts the suffering and dislocation endured under the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, impacting a four-generation family from the time of Nakba in Beit Daras until 2011 when a prisoner exchange occurred. During Nakba, many Palestinian farmers, women, and children are killed, and those who survived have had to flee to refugee camps.

The novel is narrated by Khaled, the great grandson of the single mother Um Mamdoh who is seen as crazy by everyone in Beit Daras until they discover she can communicate with a spirit called Sulayman. Nazmiyeh, Um Mamdoh's daughter, flees with the other women but then goes back to Beit Daras to save her sister, Mariam. The journey she takes on her feet to save her sister starts the suffering of four generations to follow. After finding her sister, Nazmiyeh is raped by an Israeli gang and her sister is killed. Nazmiyeh is known in Beit Dares to be reckless, headstrong and a very sharp tongued. After the Nakba, Nazmiyeh starts changing to become a wiser woman seeking the guidance of her sister Mariam.

The atrocities of the Nakba leave Nazmiyeh disparate, especially after the birth of her first child whose eyes remind her a lot of one of the rapists. She desperately wants a daughter, whom she gives birth to after eleven sons. Woven between the story of Um Mmdouh, Nazmiyeh and Alwan is the heartbreaking story of Nur who is the granddaughter of Nazmiyeh's brother Mamdouh. Nur is long lost in America and chance brings her back to Gaza to save Alwan's son Khaled who is

believed to be trapped inside himself in what is called the Locked-in Syndrome. Nur is trying to gain the trust of the family. She shares with Nazmieyh a sense of loneliness, fear of loss and longing for love. These shared emotions create a sense of sisterhood. Nur eventually discovers that she is back to the family her “jiddo” Mamdouh told her about. After years of suffering in America she is back to the suffering of Gaza. In Gaza, Nur finds a family but has to work hard to be within their enclosed circle. Nonetheless, she suffers from love by being deceived by Dr. Jamal.

Abulhawa’s novel reflects a personal story of diaspora and exile. Abulhawa’s family had to flee Palestine after the conflicts with Israel. The family has also been relocated in different parts of the world and Abulhawa herself has experienced similar issues related to identity and belonging like Nur. The novel portrays how different female characters change through the discourse of the novel; this change is coupled with different spaces. From their happiest place, the idyllic Beit Dares, where the Baraka family live their happiest days, to the refugee camps where they suffer and try to adapt, to other parts of the world like Cairo and America, females are the strongest characters who hold their homes together under the oppression of society and the masculine oppressive power. The study looks at these female characters through the lens of feminist spatiality. It also looks at how the author turns place into more than a physical location by connecting it to the reformation of a female’s identity.

V. DISCUSSION

Women are at the centre of the struggle, upholding the narrative of the novel under study. Nazmieyh and Nur exemplify the resilience of Palestinian women as they navigate and overcome challenges to shape their identities amidst a chaotic web of conflict and adversity. These women face gender and social discrimination while striving to make sense of their marginalized position in a world shaped by dynamic, ever-shifting spaces. Nazmieyh and Nur experience personal transformation as they navigate various spaces throughout their journeys. Their identities are influenced by the environments they occupy—whether willingly or due to compulsion— while facing patriarchal and societal restrictions. Recent events in Gaza have demonstrated how war crimes impact both the living and the nonliving. Watching the news, it is sadly unsurprising to hear that most of the martyrs are women and children. Women bear the brunt of suffering; they are either mothers, wives, daughters, or sisters of martyrs—or martyrs themselves. Their journeys often force them to shoulder the immense burden of creating a livable environment for those around them. Throughout their journeys, women are seen rebuilding spaces amidst destruction. They fashion tents, cook what would otherwise be inedible, and teach the virtues of Palestinian identity and resilience. In doing so, women embody the essence of Palestinian society, holding its very fabric together.

The shift in circumstances and surroundings profoundly impacts the formation of female identity. Massey (2004) argues that identities, like spaces, are dynamic and relational. Spaces are constructed through relations and interactions, and these dynamic spaces, in turn, form spatial identities that are equally fluid and relational. This reconceptualization of space and spatial identities positions spaces not as static backdrops for events but as vibrant, dynamic paradigms shaped by human relationships and interactions. Massey emphasizes the interconnectedness of global and local scales, highlighting that events in one space often result from decisions made elsewhere. For instance, decisions made by the American presidency can significantly impact the lives of people in the Middle East. This interconnectedness underscores the fluidity of identities, which cannot be understood in isolation from their surroundings and historical contexts.

This perspective imposes ethical and political responsibility on individuals, as actions and decisions are interwoven across scales. Massey underscores the “potential agency of the local” and advocates for “a local politics on the global scale” (p. 11). This interconnectedness compels individuals to act, recognizing their capacity to influence broader systems and contribute to meaningful change.

Abulhawa’s novel introduces female characters whose identities are constructed in relation to the places they inhabit. Consequently, their identities are spatially shaped through the interplay of social and global relations. The two female characters, Nazmieyh and Nur, are deeply tied to the spaces they occupy, as these are influenced by their historical and cultural backgrounds, as well as the social events and political conditions in their homelands. Massey (1995) elaborates on this concept, arguing that the identity of a place is constructed not only temporally but spatially as well. She emphasizes that place-based identity transcends time, forming connections across spaces instead:

can be understood as articulations of social relationships some of which will be to the beyond (the global), and these global relationships as much as the internal relationships of an area will influence its character, its ‘identity’. Moreover, this constitution through interconnection with other places is not something which is new (with our newly-appreciated globalisation, with foreign food on the High Street, or ‘immigrants’ in the neighbourhood); it has been as true of the past as it is true of today (although clearly the intensity, depth and direction of connections and influences all change over time). (Massey, 1995, p. 186)

Massey underscores the relational nature of identity, emphasizing how both local and global connections shape the character of spaces and the identities formed within them. The interconnection between historical, cultural, and social dynamics and their influence on spaces illustrates the complex process of identity formation, particularly for women navigating patriarchal and political constraints.

Massey’s *Space, Place, and Gender* (1994), explains that spaces are constructed through social relations within a physical place. This makes the “identity of a place” fluid, reflecting the dynamic nature of social relations, which are

characterized by a “lack of fixity” (p. 169). In the novel under study, places similarly lack a sense of fixity, as each space takes on a different identity shaped by present and past events.

As Massey (2004) elaborates, the identities of spaces affect gender differently, as males and females experience their connection to the world in distinct ways. In patriarchal societies, the sense of identity a man constructs often depends on separation from the mother, who remains connected to and shaped by the same society. Massey argues that because spaces are gendered, they impose boundaries on women, relegating them to marginalized positions socially and politically. This idea is evident in *The Blue Between Sky and Water*, where social restrictions imposed by a male-dominated society significantly constrain the female characters.

This study demonstrates that women are subject to social and patriarchal boundaries and are deeply connected to the identity of their societies. Both Nazmiyeh and Nur are shaped by the cultural and social constructs of their environments, with their identities evolving in response to these influences. Their journeys illustrate how female identity is not static but shifts in alignment with the changing dynamics of their social and cultural surroundings. Through these characters, the study highlights the interplay between individual agency and the societal forces that mold female identities.

As discussed earlier, the identities of female characters are transformed by changes in spaces. This transformation is evident in the novel, where traveling and shifting places play a pivotal role. Travel literature has long been a prominent narrative mode in Arabic literary tradition, serving as a medium for self-discovery and the acquisition of knowledge. It is well understood that traveling broadens perspectives and aids in the processes of self-discovery and identity formation. The travel genre encompasses both physical and metaphysical journeys, which “involve individuals’ inward and outward mobility for the sake of self-knowledge and self-discovery.” The term *rahil*, as defined in the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, means “a journey, voyage, travel: also, a travelogue” (as cited in El-Shihibi, 1998, p. 2). In this novel, the journeys through different spaces shape the protagonists’ identities and their resilience. These journeys are not merely physical but also social and emotional.

Tally (2013), in his book *Spatiality*, emphasizes the significance of travel in the construction of literary works. He explains that place is no longer something fixed and states that:

...movement emphasized geographical difference; that is, one’s place could not simply be taken for granted any longer. The traveller, whether forced into exile or willingly engaged in tourism, cannot help but be more aware of the distinctiveness of a given place, and of the remarkable differences between places. The displaced person is understandably more attuned to matters of place. (Tally, 2013, p. 13)

This quotation captures the essence of movement in relation to spatiality. Tally explains that movement provides travellers with a broader understanding and greater knowledge, whether they are displaced by force or by choice. Travelers gain deeper insights due to their exposure to different spaces and cultures. Spaces, therefore, transcend their physical boundaries, becoming repositories of stories and key contributors to the formation of identities.

Massey (2003) also emphasizes that movement is both temporal and spatial. She argues that spaces are imbued with countless stories and rejects the notion that any space is “a static slice orthogonal to time and defined in opposition to it” (p. 2). This perspective aligns with the current study’s focus on how, like time, space is dynamic. For female characters, the dynamic nature of space is critical, as different spaces impose unique restrictions while offering distinct possibilities for connection and transformation. Massey further explains:

you can’t go back in space: the myth of the return... You can’t hold places and things still. What you can do is meet up with them, catch up with where another’s history has got to ‘now’, and acknowledge that ‘now’ is itself constituted by that meeting up. ‘Here’, in that sense, is not a place on a map. It is that intersection of trajectories, the meeting-up of stories; an encounter. Every ‘here’ is a here-and-now. (Massey, 2003, p. 2)

This perspective is particularly relevant to the experiences of female characters, whose interactions with space are often shaped by intersecting social, cultural, and historical forces. Massey’s emphasis on space as an intersection of trajectories highlights the transformative potential of encounters within dynamic spaces. For women, these spaces are not fixed or static but are instead sites of negotiation and redefinition, where identities and relationships are constantly reshaped. This underscores the importance of understanding space not merely as a physical setting but as an active, fluid element that influences and is influenced by the characters’ movements, decisions, and connections.

A. *Nazmiyeh: Resilience, Memory, and the Reclamation of Space*

Some journeys take place back and forth through the same physical locations; however, the space is never truly the same. Although Nazmiyeh returns to Beit Daras to save her little sister, these places transform into entirely different spaces. Not only do the spaces change, but Nazmiyeh herself is profoundly altered. Each time she travels the same road, she experiences a different reality, shaped by a new history and a transformed identity. Similarly, Massey (1994) links gender and geography, explaining that gender relations vary across spaces, with the uniqueness of each space influencing the roles and restrictions imposed on women. In the homeland, women are initially confined to the domestic sphere. In the novels, the female characters strive to overcome both the patriarchal social order and the political conflicts imposed upon them through resilience. Nazmiyeh establishes a new household and endeavors to pass on her memories and sense of belonging to her homeland to future generations. She defies social norms and resists political and social pressures by sharing her stories, preserving the memory of her homeland, and instilling that legacy in the minds of the coming generations.

Wrede (2015) explains that space imposes a kind of control because spaces are constructed by dominating powers and “forms of knowledge” (p. 2). This suggests that spaces are shaped by social relations and “cultural discourse” (p. 2). Throughout a journey, spaces undergo transformation, and so does the female’s connection to these spaces. The article explores the relationship between gender and movement, emphasizing that different spaces impose varying restrictions and limitations on the movement of female characters. However, this connection also reveals the female’s resilience and her ability to gain power in different social spaces. As Wrede explains, “The understanding of space as multiple, shifting, heterogeneous, situational, and contested may help subvert the oppressor-oppressed paradigm, the opposition between those with power to shape knowledge and spatial practice and those who suffer them” (p. 10). The distribution of power in different spaces demonstrates diverse forms of resilience. The home is often a space where females feel a sense of control; even after their lives are disrupted by external forces, managing the domestic space and upholding cultural traditions within their families enables some women to defy and resist certain restrictions. Similarly, Nazmiyeh establishes a household in asylum, regaining control over her domestic space. She also constructs her own liminal space, and in this state of betweenness, she seeks to make sense of her identity while staying rooted in her Palestinian heritage.

In Abulhawa’s novel, Nazmiyeh is portrayed as a strong and sharp-tongued woman: “For though her tongue could be the charm to melt a heart, it could be a poisonous sting or path to appalling impropriety. People loved and hated her for that” (p. 10). Nonetheless, her voice becomes locked in her throat after the journey she takes to save her sister. She returns to Beit Daras but leaves her voice and vibrant personality behind. Following the rape and murder of her beloved younger sister, Mariam, Nazmiyeh is reduced to a hollow, colorless figure: “She stood on borrowed strength ... and walked away with broken steps, without looking back” (p. 39). When Nazmiyeh becomes conscious of her surroundings, she has already walked six kilometers. She is no longer the same woman and will never be the same again.

Trying to call out for the remaining members of her family, she finds her “sound was still locked in her throat.” When she finally releases her voice, it carries “a promise from another time and another place” (p. 40)—a promise Mariam made to have a daughter named Alwan. Nazmiyeh becomes detached from the present, later insisting to her husband that Mariam continues to speak to her and guide her, and that this connection is the reason she is still alive: “Do not doubt an existence merely because you cannot see or hear it, husband” (p. 44).

Before her first journey, Nazmiyeh was the one who guided and protected her sister. Afterward, it is the spirit of Mariam that guides her. Nazmiyeh waits for Alwan to be born, and with each birth of a son, she seeks Mariam’s guidance. Following the traumatic war crime in Beit Daras, Nazmiyeh becomes as silent as a mouse, “pushing out one baby after another since the war” (p. 5).

Massey’s (2003) concept of the myth of the return resonates with Nazmiyeh’s situation in the aftermath of the war. Her transformation from a strong, sharp-tongued woman to one who is silent and singularly focused on fulfilling a prophecy given by her deceased sister underscores the profound impact of trauma on both Nazmiyeh and Gaza. The same places are now imbued with different stories and layered histories. Palestinians from all over the world strive to preserve their heritage by sharing stories about their homeland before the war, attempting to salvage what remains of these spaces. Through storytelling, Palestinians enact a form of resistance, defying political conflicts and countering the Zionist agenda to erase the name and history of Palestine.

Stories about physical and emotional journeys are told to ensure the remembrance of specific spaces at specific times. “When Teta Nazmiyeh talked about her brother Mamdouh, or my khalo Maze, her eyes would change. They [became] empty rooms that she would enter and hurry to furnish with their stories. It was not nostalgia, but a chore of memory, a task to keep them near” (p. 53). Nazmiyeh’s journey is both physical and emotional; her story reflects the struggles and traumatic experiences Palestinians endure. The traumatic experience of forced displacement during the Nakbah marks a turning point in her life, initiating both a social and emotional shift. In the aftermath of the Nakbah, the trauma initially renders Nazmiyeh unable to speak, but she eventually gathers what remains of her hollow soul and calls out for the surviving members of her family.

After the Nakbah, Nazmiyeh becomes a resilient and formidable figure, upholding and controlling the core of her domestic space. She raises her children with unwavering determination, instilling in them resilience and Palestinian traditions. She continuously shares stories of her hometown, Beit Daras, and her beloved family members. Nazmiyeh is pregnant with her fifth child when her brother Mamdouh leaves for Kuwait. Tearfully, she kisses him goodbye, echoing the words of her sister Mariam: “We will always be together” (p. 52). This poignant image of Nazmiyeh and her brother is reminiscent of the aftermath of October 7. The stories narrated during the Nakbah are now being lived again, with every detail eerily familiar.

Many Palestinian women, like Nazmiyeh, rebel against their circumstances by building households in the midst of destruction, often in tents. Despite enduring immense trauma, they gather themselves and their families, forging strong, resilient identities as they continue forward under the gaze of the watching world.

And once again, history repeats itself: “ISRAEL’S BOMBING OF GAZA altered the clock. As if time had been wounded” (p. 152). Once more, the now-called Hajje Nazmiyeh “collected some of her pots, random papers flying about that could be used for schoolwork, broken pencils that might still be of use” (p. 153). This time, however, Nazmiyeh’s hard work and strength have paid off. Tents are provided for Nazmiyeh’s family, along with other families whose houses have been destroyed by the Israeli attacks. Nonetheless, Nazmiyeh stays at one of her children’s houses while waiting for her sons to rebuild the house where she and Alwan live.

The story repeats itself and continues to echo even today: “The women worked alongside the men, clearing rubble, repairing, and building anew. They cleaned and cooked and baked and organized the children’s chores” (p. 154). Women, hand in hand with men, rebuild and stand against the atrocities of war. Through this process, women gain greater social freedom after the war, breaking away from the patriarchal boundaries imposed on them. Their rebellion is reflected in their efforts to rebuild their households and regain control over their domestic spaces, asserting their strength and resilience in the face of destruction.

Magical realism blurs the boundaries between the physical and the metaphysical creating fluid and transformative spaces that mirror the dynamic nature of identity formation. In this narrative mode, spaces are unfixed, shifting in response to the characters’ journeys, just as female identities evolve through their interactions with these mutable environments. Its use creates fluid spaces and offers characters the opportunity to inhabit different boundaries and construct alternate identities. In the novel, Abulhawa employs magical realism to craft spaces that transcend the physical, challenging conventional social relationships and portraying resistance against patriarchal and colonial constraints. Nazmiyeh embodies a profound connection to her heritage, family, and homeland; she resists the physical through the metaphysical, using magical realism to strengthen her bond with her family and land. Hart and Ouyang (2005) argue that magical realism serves as a form of resistance:

Particularly for writers in countries which had recently escaped from the clutches of colonialism, magical realism appeared to offer a literary idiom which could reflect the raw political tension which accompanied the movement toward nationhood, this particularly so during the 1980s and early 1990s which may be seen as the highwater mark of globalised magical realism. (Hart & Ouyang, 2005, p. 11)

Abulhawa’s use of magical realism in the novel provides a means for the women of the Baraka family to assert a sense of continuity they deeply seek. Through this technique, they connect life and death, the present and the past. Abulhawa employs magical realism to underscore female resistance and the urgent need to preserve Palestinian heritage across generations. This approach ensures that Palestinian history is never confined by colonial narratives and emphasizes the enduring connection of Palestinians to the same history and land through time. Abulhawa’s blending of myth and reality transforms physical spaces of suffering into agents of identity reclamation and memory preservation. In this way, magical realism facilitates spiritual journeys across generations, enabling female characters to transcend oppression and social boundaries. Furthermore, magical realism connects characters in the novel who are physically separated by geography, creating bonds that defy spatial limitations.

After the killing of Mariam, she “rose from the corpse on the ground and crouched before Nazmiyeh. She cupped her sister’s swollen, tearful face in her small bony hands, gently, and repeated words that had passed between them before: ‘You are the most spectacular person I have ever known, my big sister. Don’t ever forget how special you are, or how loved you are. We will always be together’” (p. 39). This promise resonates throughout the novel, as Mariam remains with Nazmiyeh in spirit, guiding her through difficult times. Nazmiyeh often seeks Mariam’s guidance, and this enduring connection between the living and the dead exemplifies magical realism at its finest.

Nazmiyeh defies the trauma she endures by transcending the physical and embracing the metaphysical. She clings to “a promise from another time and another place” (p. 40) to survive and deepen her connection to her family and homeland. Through this metaphysical bond, she transforms her pain into a source of resilience and resistance. Nazmiyeh’s legs would sometimes simply stop functioning, a physical condition that could last anywhere from a few minutes to several days. During the Israeli attack on Egypt, which lasted six days, Nazmiyeh encountered a Zionist soldier whose young face “was infected with power and coated with the filth of invasion as he pointed his rifle with forbidding authority” (p. 57). Her legs gave way beneath her, and she lost the ability to move them for more than three years. Yet, she believes that Mariam intervened to save her life in that moment; otherwise, she would have been shot.

Nazmiyeh interprets her life through supernatural events, using these elements to make sense of her experiences and to tell stories. Storytelling is a vital element in the novel—it serves as a means of preserving culture and keeping memories alive for future generations. Through storytelling, Nazmiyeh ensures that the struggles and resilience of her people are remembered and passed down.

B. Nur: Diaspora, Belonging, and the Search for Identity

Similarly, Nur’s jiddo, Mamdouh, would share countless stories about their homeland, Beit Daras, with her, instilling in her a deep love for the place that “burned in his heart” (p. 69). Her curiosity pleased him, and he was determined that she “know and never forget” the homeland he cherished. He insisted that they only speak in Arabic, emphasizing the importance of preserving their heritage through language and storytelling. As he once told Nur, “Stories matter. We are composed of our stories. The human heart is made of the words we put in it” (p. 69). These stories became the foundation of Nur’s longing, driving her desire to take a physical journey to Palestine, the land of her jiddo’s memories, and to search for her long-lost family.

Although Mamdouh chose to leave Palestine, he feels an enduring urge to retell the stories of Beit Daras to his granddaughter, preserving the history of his hometown and ensuring it is remembered, even from afar. His narratives not only safeguard the past but also defy the social restrictions imposed on him as a Palestinian living in the West. His decision to narrate these stories in Arabic is an act of resistance, a deliberate effort to pass down the full legacy of Beit Daras to his granddaughter. Through his stories, Nur develops a deep connection to and nostalgia for a place she has never seen, and these stories fuel her longing to visit Palestine and reconnect with her family.

The resilience that Mamdouh and his wife, Yasmine, embody in their identities is passed on to Nur, demonstrating that Palestinian identity is an inheritance, transmitted across generations. For Nur, her journey is marked by a profound sense of alienation and loss, particularly after the death of her beloved *jiddo*. This sense of displacement drives her to travel in search of a place she can call home. As a Palestinian-American, Nur struggles to find a sense of belonging and peace, facing discrimination and exclusion. In the U.S., she feels lost, perpetually out of place, and embarks on a quest to discover herself.

Both Nur and her *jiddo* find solace in their bond. After the loss of his wife, Yasmine, and his son Mohammad, Nur's father, Mamdouh often breaks down in tears, begging Nur's mother for permission to see her. Their mutual asylum in each other highlights the enduring strength of familial connections, even in the face of profound loss and displacement.

Nur was all he had left, and her mother would surely never allow him to see her again. He pleaded with her, crying like a child. He hired lawyers and went to court. In the end, money got him what he wanted. It took all he had, everything he had worked for and saved up. But he had his Nur, and that was enough. He called his sister, my *teta* Nazmiyeh, to tell her they were coming home, at last. (Abulhawa, 2016, p. 73)

Tragically, Nur's *jiddo* dies before he gets the chance to return to his home, to the place where he belongs. His absence leaves a profound void in Nur's life, as it "made her heart hurt" (p. 77), and "the thing in her chest now felt like a monster." Her *jiddo* had always been the one to make monsters disappear from under the bed and banish them from closets. After his death, Nur suffers deeply, her fragile world shattered by a monstrous mother and an even worse stepfather. She finds refuge in her room, spending hours there, listening to the house beyond her door: "She remained in her room for hours, listening to the house beyond her door" (p. 88).

However, when her mother leaves and the house becomes quiet—"The quiet of a spooned-out hole in the heart" (p. 88)—Nur ventures out of her sanctuary and goes to her mother's room, knowing her stepfather, Sam, is waiting for her. Nur's mother marries Sam the day before Nur's ninth birthday, believing that the best gift she can give her daughter is a father. Nur, however, develops a mysterious illness, which her mother dismisses as a desperate attempt to seek attention. The person who should have been her safe haven—her mother—becomes the one who causes her the greatest harm.

By the age of eight, Nur loses the ability to cry, a poignant symbol of her emotional repression and trauma. It is only later, on the shores of Gaza, with "the Mediterranean caressing her feet" (p. 90), that she regains the ability to weep, marking a moment of release and connection to her roots.

Nur is torn between many spaces during this period of her life. She loses her sense of self the day before her ninth birthday, and the spiritual and physical journeys she embarks on help her regain self-recognition and form her identity. Her journey is fraught with difficulty, as she struggles between foster homes, always striving to behave properly to be accepted and avoid being sent away. Nur suffers greatly, feeling as though nothing holds her together.

Her path to rediscovering herself begins with studying Arabic in college. As an adult, Nur's heart "wasn't smart enough as to set limits on its generosity. Maybe that is what rejection by one's mother does. It retards the heart. Makes it love wrong, love fast, without limits" (p. 163). This lack of boundaries influences her journey to Gaza later in the story. She meets a doctor from Gaza named Jamal, and they exchange many letters, discussing a wide range of topics—none of which mention that he is married. Upon arriving at the Gaza border, Nur discovers the truth: "The word wife stepped gently into the space that Nur had made from words and letters and longings" (170). This revelation adds another layer of complexity to her already tumultuous journey.

Nur's journey as an abused child in an unwelcoming country shapes her identity and profoundly affects her personality. "She is no more the little girl by the river with me and Mariam, but an American woman with a purpose" (p. 178). The lively child who once listened with enthusiasm to her *jiddo*'s stories is now long gone, replaced by a hollow figure consumed by self-abuse and self-loathing. Nur punishes herself through grueling hours of work, an attempt to regain a sense of control over her chaotic life:

She was even methodical in the excavation of her stomach, filling it with junk and emptying it by provoking a gag reflex with two fingers, then brushing her teeth immediately in a consistent pattern that brought regimen and precision to self-abuse and self-loathing. She worked endless hours, paid or volunteer, perfecting the habits of loneliness and escape by rescuing others. And daily she tamed her wild mismatched eyes with the strict symmetry of brown lenses. (Abulhawa, 2015, p. 165)

After many years of being lost and disconnected, Nur finally takes her first physical step by crossing the Egypt-Rafah border. This journey, carefully planned in her mind, is built on dreams and hopes of finding the family her *jiddo* had told her about. Before crossing the border, Nur dreams of reuniting with her family: "She imagined finding an older woman in Gaza with her eyes; being surrounded by her big family; finding the place where she belongs" (p. 170). Once there, she begins to experience a sense of connection: "The affection Nur felt for her surroundings edged against the walls of their merriment. She smiled silently, watching ordinary love unpack itself, hoping its splash would land on her" (p. 180).

Nur herself experiences magical realism through her connections with Mariam and Khaled in her dreams. During her darkest days, Khaled reveals to her that she will study Arabic in college—a prediction that comes true. Nur manages to break away from the darkness and oppression she endures in a Western society and from her Western mother. Her escape lies in the stories her *jiddo* tells her, stories that continue to guide her even after his death. Although Nur loses some of her supernatural abilities over time, she maintains her connection with Mariam and Khaled. Ultimately, she travels to

Gaza to help treat Khaled's condition, where she finally reunites with her long-lost family and discovers a place where she truly belongs.

...a young man yell, "Idiot! She's not a foreigner! That's Hajje Nazmiyeh's kin... The sun was still in the sky and life was bobbing along... Tea and coffee and various sweets and snacks were passed around. It was her first home-coming she had ever had. The first time she had returned to a place that embraced her. She had always been compelled to move away. To leave and hope the next place would be better. (Abulhawa, 2015, p. 278)

Nur's story concludes in peace as she settles and finds her place in the world. She is able to construct an identity in a land that, like her, is struggling to define itself. Nur's journey demonstrates how different spaces shape individuals in unique ways. In America, she was always lonely and lost, but as Hajje Nazmiyeh declares, Nur "is not American anymore" (p. 285). Nur now belongs to a space where social relations are formed, and stories are shared. There, in the blue between sky and water, they live, bond, and flow together forever, like a river.

VI. CONCLUSION

Abulhawa's *The Blue Between Sky and Water* deeply explores female spatiality, illustrating how dynamic and interconnected spaces influence the identities of its female protagonists, Nazmiyeh and Nur. Through the theoretical framework of spatial feminism, this study reveals how these characters navigate and transform spaces imbued with patriarchal, political, and social constraints. The novel portrays space not merely as a physical setting but as an active, relational construct that shapes and is shaped by human experiences.

Nazmiyeh's resilience and agency emerge from her ability to reconstruct spaces of oppression into places of memory and community, demonstrating the transformative power of storytelling and magical realism. Her character embodies the essence of Palestinian resistance, preserving cultural identity and heritage amidst displacement and trauma. Similarly, Nur's journey underscores the complex interplay between personal loss, exile, and the search for belonging. Her eventual reconnection with her family and homeland affirms the potential for spaces to serve as sites of healing and self-discovery.

Through its depiction of these women's lives, Abulhawa's novel emphasizes the intersection of gender, space, and identity as a crucial lens for understanding resilience and agency. By traversing the physical and metaphysical boundaries of space, Nazmiyeh and Nur reframe their marginalized positions and claim ownership over their identities. This study thus underscores the pivotal role of spatiality in shaping female narratives, offering a richer understanding of how women navigate and transform the spaces they inhabit. Abulhawa's work reminds us of the enduring power of memory, identity, and resistance, asserting the vital role of women in reclaiming spaces and histories in the face of oppression.

REFERENCES

- [1] Abulhawa, S. (2015). *The blue between sky and water*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- [2] El-Shihibi, F. (1998). *Travel genre in Arabic literature: A selective literary and historical study* (Order No. 9818707). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (304433486). <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/travel-genre-arabic-literature-selective-literary/docview/304433486/se-2>
- [3] Hart, S. M., & Ouyang, W.-C. (2005). *A companion to magical realism*. Tamesis.
- [4] Massey, D. (1994). *Space, Place, and Gender*. University of Minnesota Press.
- [5] Massey, D. (1995). Places and Their Pasts. *History Workshop Journal*, 39(1), 182–192. <https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/39.1.182>
- [6] Massey, D. (2003). *Some Times of Space*. Retrieved January 11, 2025, from <https://cast.b-ap.net/reflexivearchitecturemachines/wp-content/uploads/sites/18/2009/09/Massey.pdf>
- [7] Massey, D. (2004). Geographies of responsibility. *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*, 86(1), 5–18. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0435-3684.2004.00150.x>
- [8] Parveen, R. (2017). *Space, Time and Female Empowerment in Diaspora*. In: *Recipes and Songs*. Palgrave Studies in Literary Anthropology. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-50246-5_5
- [9] Rose, G. (1993). *Feminism and Geography: The limits of geographical knowledge*. Minneapolis, MN, University of Minnesota Press.
- [10] Tally, R. T. (2013). *Spatiality*. Routledge.
- [11] Wrede, T. (2015). Introduction to Special Issue: "Theorizing Space and Gender in the 21st Century." *Rocky Mountain Review*, 69(1), 10–17. <https://doi.org/10.1353/rmr.2015.a580801>

Amanda N. Alazzam is currently an instructor in the Department of Basic Sciences at Al-Balqa' Applied University in Jordan. She received her MA in English Literature from Lancaster University in England and her BA in English Language and Literature from the University of Jordan. She worked as an instructor in the Department of English Language and Translation at the Applied Science University before becoming an instructor at Al-Balqa' Applied University. She is interested in Feminist Spatiality and Diaspora.

Eman K. Mukattash is an Associate Professor of English literature at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, University of Jordan, Amman-Jordan. She obtained her PhD degree in English literature from the University of Jordan in 2013. Her research focuses on literary theory and criticism, psychoanalysis, and Arab diasporic literature. She has published a number of articles in several internationally accredited academic journals. Among these are: "The Democratic Vistas of the Body: Rereading the Body in Herman

Melville's Typee", "Journeying In and Out: Revisiting the Concept of the 'Journey' in the Works of Naomi Shihab Nye", and "The Politics of Identity in Mahmoud Darwish's Absent Presence: A Textual Act of Resistance".