

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Susan Abulhawa, *Mornings in Jenin* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010)

Mornings in Jenin is a poignant and confronting novel, an excellent introduction to the historical events that still plague the Middle East. The novel complements the work of Hanan Ashrawi, a Palestinian legislator and scholar, Edward Said, the Palestinian literary academic and critic and Robert Fisk, the journalist and writer specialising on the Middle East. Indeed, Susan Abulhawa quotes from Fisk and acknowledges the support of Ashrawi and the influence of Said in depicting the dislocation of the Abulheja family from their land after the Israelis occupied Palestine in 1947 to establish a Jewish State. Abulhawa, through the eyes of Amal, draws on her own experiences as a Palestinian refugee now living in America. Abulhawa's use of words portrays the pathos of individuals coping with the brutal events of dispossession.

The novel opens with a stunning prelude set in Jenin in 2002. Here Amal, the granddaughter of the patriarch of the family Yehya, looks directly into the soldier's eyes. He is about to kill her:

He had killed before, but never while looking his victim in the eyes. Amal saw that, and she felt his troubled soul amid the carnage around them ... She knew, from the soldier's blink, that she would live ... The petitions of memory pulled her back, and still back, to a home she had never known. (xiii)

The prelude immediately engages the reader who meets the Abulheja family in 1941 enjoying their annual harvest:

In a distant time, before history marched over the hills and shattered present and future, before wind grabbed the land at one corner and shook it of its name and character, before Amal was born. A small village west of Haifa lived quietly on figs and olives, open frontiers and sunshine. (3)

The leitmotifs that swirl through the pages of the novel are of a profound love for the family and for their land and rage at their displacement by the Jews. This rage is tempered with glimpses of empathy for the suffering of the Jews. Towards the close of the novel Abulhawa observes that the inescapable truth is that the Palestinians paid the price for the Jewish Holocaust (273).

Yehya 'thought the sincere offering of peace with the Jews would ensure the continuity of their lives' on the land (26). But the village of Ein Hod is laid in ruin and the Jews, according to Yehya, harvest the gold and valuables of the Palestinian families (31). The family can only reminisce about their previous lives from the hills of Jenin that overlook Ein Hod. In 1953, when Yehya realises that 'his miserable tent in Jenin had turned into clay, when he knew that the olives, grapes and figs were ready for harvest and rotting on the land' (43), he returns to Ein Hod undetected and devastated he says: 'Those people don't know a damn thing about olives. They're lily-skinned foreigners with no attachment to the land. If they had a sense of the land then the land would compel in them a love for the olives' (46). Yehya makes one

Book reviews: *Mornings in Jenin* by Susan Abulhawa. Loula S. Rodopoulos.
Transnational Literature Vol. 2 no. 2, May 2010.
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

more journey to Ein Hod before he dies holding three olives in his hand and carrying some figs in his pockets.

Yehya has two sons, Hasan and Darweesh. During the harvest Hasan tells Yehya that he will travel to Jerusalem to market their produce. Yehya cautions him, suggesting that he go to a closer town, 'you never know what son-of-a-dog Zionist is hiding in the bushes or what British bastard is going to stop you' (7). Yehya, though, knows that Hasan plans to catch up with his childhood Jewish friend Ari, the son of a German professor who fled Nazism and settled in a home rented from a prominent Palestinian (8). Notwithstanding the growing divide between Arab and Jew their friendship 'had been consolidated in the innocence of their twelve years, the poetic solitude of books, and their disinterest in politics' (9). Yehya forbids Hasan to attend studies with Ari in Jerusalem as books would 'do nothing but come between you and the land' (10). Ari's mother taught Hasan privately and the friendship between the men endured as did Hasan's love of learning that he imparts to his daughter Amal.

Hasan tells Amal that knowledge and academic achievement cannot be appropriated, unlike the land (60). Thoughts of her father's loving arms and the scent of honey apple tobacco from his olive wood pipe are constant reminders of his love. In 1973, Amal goes to America on a scholarship to study: 'The American scholarship was a gift I had no right to refuse. It sat mercifully in the path of my father's greatest longings for his children' (159). In America she lived in the present, as Amy, keeping the past hidden away but not without a feeling of shame that she had betrayed her family by leaving (174).

Amal has two older brothers, Yousef and Ismael. In infancy, Ismael is accidentally scarred on his face by Yousef (22). During the events in 1948, when Jewish soldiers evicted the villagers of Ein Hod from their homes, Ismael is snatched from his mother's arms and disappears. The reader is immediately taken into the life of Moshe, a Jewish soldier who desires Jolanta, his barren wife, to be happy, for 'She wanted to escape the memories of sweaty German men polluting her body, memories of depravity and memories of hunger' (36). Moshe and Jolanta name Ismael, David.

Ismael's disappearance; the anguish and deepening despair of Dalia, Amal's mother. in losing her infant son; the guilt and fear felt by Moshe who walked every day to silence his demons (99); Jolanta's fears that it would become known that she was raising a Palestinian child as a Jew, haunt the novel: 'How he had come to be her son remained unsaid, a harmless butterfly in a field of love' (95).

As hostilities continue, the brothers unknowingly meet at a border crossing, where David attacks Yousef. David's eventual reconciliation with Amal, a sister he'd never known, after Yousef's death, highlights the wretchedness of families torn apart by war in the name of ethnicity and religion.

Notwithstanding her glimpses into the Israeli imperative to establish a homeland, Abulhawa spares no empathy with the carnage and family dispossession wrought on the Palestinians. She depicts a nun who tells the Israeli soldiers to shoot her accusing them of being 'no different from Nazis who stood in my way when I cared for Jews in the Second World War' (73).

As a young girl Amal, not knowing about Ismael's disappearance, feels estranged from her mother who becomes increasingly withdrawn and apparently unloving, having suffered several miscarriages before Amal's birth in 1955 and losing Hasan. Their emotional distance is depicted through her mother's words that 'Whatever you feel keep it inside' (56). Amal describes her mother as smelling of

fermented misery (86). Amal also experiences estrangement from her daughter Sara, born after the death of her husband, Majid, during the invasion of Lebanon by the Israelis in 1982. 'This fragile infant had forced upon me the will to live, and I resented her for that, for all I really wanted then was to die' (229).

Amal learns that Yousef has joined the PLO and it is only after thirteen years of separation that in 1981 they meet again in Lebanon where, 'Safe in his embrace, I remained there as long as I could, trying to siphon the lost years from his massive chest, which felt so much like our father's. For a moment, my brother's arms dulled the aloneness of my life' (189).

David contacts Amal and gradually they develop a warm and familial understanding as to how history has shaped their lives. Amal travels back to Jenin with David and her daughter. The flashbacks and narratives of the various characters with whom Amal renews her acquaintance in Jenin are somewhat tedious, having already been beautifully portrayed throughout the novel. In Jenin she finally reveals to Sara the tragic loss of Majid and Yousef who, after the slaughter of his wife and children, carries out his own act of retribution: 'They killed my sweet brother in absentia when they murdered Fatima. And his heart now beat with the force of his rage' (227).

In Jenin, the confrontation, depicted in the prelude of the novel, is tragically resolved.

The historian and storyteller Haj Sahen, who frequently appears in the story, says: 'I've seen it all. All the wars' (78). Amal observes that 'in our camp, his story was everyone's story, a single tale of dispossession, of being stripped to the bones of one's humanity, of being dumped like rubbish into refugee camps unfit for rats' (77-8).

Those of us fortunate not to have seen it all, will find the humane polemic presented by Abulhawa both challenging and touching. In addition to a glossary, a comprehensive reference and discussion guide is provided at the end of the book to encourage us to engage in the polemic.

Loula S. Rodopoulos