

Identity and Resistance: A Study of Diasporic Perspectives in the Works of Sahar Khalifeh

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Abstract

This paper examines resistance in exile through the lens of diasporic consciousness in the works of Palestinian novelist Sahar Khalifeh. Drawing upon feminist and postcolonial frameworks, it explores how Khalifeh's novels portray the struggles of Palestinians living under occupation and in diaspora, highlighting the complexities of identity, belonging, and cultural survival. Her narratives, particularly *Wild Thorns* (1976) and *The Inheritance* (2005), illustrate how Palestinians experience exile not only as physical displacement but also as an internal fragmentation of the self, marked by alienation and hybridity. Khalifeh's female characters are shown to face dual oppressions of colonialism and patriarchy, yet they also embody resilience and agency through cultural, linguistic, and everyday forms of resistance. By situating Khalifeh's writing within wider postcolonial discourse, this study argues that her work itself constitutes a form of cultural resistance that preserves memory and resists erasure. The analysis contributes to ongoing debates in diaspora and feminist postcolonial studies by identifying the intersections of gender, identity, and exile in Palestinian literature.

Keywords: Exile, Resistance, Diaspora, Palestinian literature, Sahar Khalifeh, Feminist criticism, Postcolonialism.

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INTRODUCTION

Sahar Khalifeh is one of the most prominent voices in Palestinian literature, known for her unflinching depictions of life under occupation and exile. Her fiction engages deeply with the political and personal struggles of Palestinians, particularly women, who navigate the compounded challenges of dispossession, displacement, and patriarchy. Novels such as *Wild Thorns* (1976), *The Inheritance* (2005), and *The End of Spring* (2008) dramatize the fractured identities of Palestinians caught between homeland and diaspora. They foreground the question of how identity and resistance are shaped in the face of colonial domination and cultural erasure.

Khalifeh's narratives are inseparable from the historical realities of Palestinian exile. Since the *Nakba* of 1948, exile has become a defining experience for millions of Palestinians, representing "the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home" (Said, 2000, p. 180). Khalifeh captures this existential rupture, illustrating how characters returning from exile often find themselves alienated even in their homeland. As Alfaqih and AlJahdali (2024) argue in their reading of *The*

Inheritance, Khalifeh presents "homecoming itself as another form of exile," suggesting that displacement continues even within the supposed refuge of return (p. 61).

At the same time, Khalifeh complicates traditional narratives of Palestinian resistance. While earlier literature often emphasized armed struggle as the primary mode of defiance, her works present resistance as multifaceted: cultural preservation, language, education, and women's agency all emerge as vital tools of survival and contestation (Rashid et al., 2024). By foregrounding women's experiences, Khalifeh expands the discourse of postcolonial resistance, demonstrating how female characters are doubly marginalized yet central to the endurance of Palestinian identity (Elnamoury, 2016).

This paper explores resistance in exile through the concept of diasporic consciousness in Khalifeh's works. It argues that her novels illuminate the fractured, hybrid identities of Palestinians and depict resistance as a spectrum extending beyond militancy to include cultural and gendered forms of survival. By integrating feminist and postcolonial approaches, this study aims to

demonstrate how Khalifeh's fiction serves as both a representation of the Palestinian struggle and a literary act of resistance in its own right.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Palestinian literature often explores exile, displacement, and identity. Khalifeh's novels show how Palestinians struggle between homeland and diaspora. Said (2000) calls this "*the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place*" (p. 180). In *The Inheritance*, Zayna/Zaynab says, "*I was caught between two languages and two cultures... later left without any culture and lived in a vacuum*" (Khalifeh, 2005), showing how exile affects both body and mind. Her characters' identities are shaped by occupation, displacement, and nationalism, and are fluid, contested, and fragmented.

Khalifeh highlights women's struggles under both occupation and patriarchy, what Elnamoury (2016) calls "*double subjugation*." Female characters face social restrictions while also dealing with exile and loss. Khalifeh's feminist lens emphasizes women's agency and shows that resistance includes challenging patriarchy as well as colonial domination (Alhatemi, 2025).

Resistance in Khalifeh's work is not only armed struggle. In *Wild Thorns*, Usama fights openly, while Adil survives quietly by working in Israel (Alhatemi, 2025). Both approaches reflect different forms of resistance. Everyday acts, such as preserving Palestinian place names like Nablus, show cultural and linguistic significance. Resistance in her novels thus ranges from physical struggle to cultural preservation.

Research Gap

While scholarship on Khalifeh has examined exile, identity, and postcolonial themes, few studies combine feminist, diaspora, and resistance perspectives. Elnamoury (2016) highlights women's roles in exile, but this is rarely linked to diasporic consciousness or cultural resistance. Similarly, Khalifeh's unique focus on women's voices and homecoming as exile remains underexplored. This paper addresses these gaps by integrating feminist, postcolonial, and diaspora frameworks to understand Khalifeh's unique literary contribution to Palestinian resistance literature. It also examines how the interrelated themes of diasporic consciousness, identity, and memory are woven through her narratives.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses qualitative textual analysis of Sahar Khalifeh's *Wild Thorns* (1976), *The Inheritance* (2005), and *The End of Spring* (2008). Through close reading and thematic analysis, it examines motifs of exile, resistance, patriarchy, and diasporic identity. The study integrates postcolonial theory (hybridity,

alienation), feminist theory (women's dual oppression), and diaspora theory (rupture of belonging) to analyze how Khalifeh's characters navigate displacement and cultural survival. Intersectionality is applied to explore the interplay of gender, class, and national identity, revealing the multilayered forms of resistance in her works.

Analysis

Khalifeh's fiction highlights resistance as a multifaceted practice, not limited to armed confrontation. In *Wild Thorns*, Usama's commitment to militancy is expressed in violent imagery: "*I was a single shot in a fusillade, a guided missile*" (Rashid & et.al, 2024, p. 8). His radical vision is contrasted with Adil's insistence on economic survival, who maintains that "*feeding my children is also resistance*" (Alhatemi, 2025, p. 10). These conflicting views reveal how Palestinians themselves debate what counts as legitimate resistance, suggesting that endurance and survival are as politically significant as armed defiance.

Moreover, cultural and everyday practices emerge as powerful tools of resistance. Usama resists linguistic erasure by rejecting the Hebrew place names imposed by occupation, insisting instead on using "*Nablus*" and other Arabic names (Rashid et al., 2024, p. 6). As Khoury (2024) argues, "*The act of writing and publishing a novel depicting the Israeli occupation is an act which refuses to allow for the erasure of the Palestinian narrative*" (p. 57). Khalifeh's very act of storytelling is framed as resistance, preserving the memory of a silenced people.

In *The Inheritance*, Zayna/Zaynab voices her crisis of belonging: "*I was caught between two languages and two cultures... later left without any culture and lived in a vacuum*" (Alfaqi & AlJahdali, 2024, p. 62). This "vacuum" illustrates exile as an internal void, where hybrid identities often feel incomplete rather than enriched. Alfaqi and AlJahdali (2024) explain that Khalifeh portrays "*homecoming itself as another form of exile*" (p. 61), since return does not heal fragmentation but often intensifies it.

This aligns with Said's (2000) description of exile as "*the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place*" (p. 180). Characters who attempt to reconnect with their homeland often experience alienation, underscoring the impossibility of fully reconciling past and present. As Alhatemi (2025) notes, Khalifeh dramatizes "*the contradictions of exile between tradition and modernity, between homeland and diaspora that unsettle identity but also fuel resilience*" (p. 12).

Khalifeh's female characters are marked by what Elnamoury (2016) terms "*double subjugation; first as women in patriarchal societies and second as politically colonized women*" (p. 2). In *The Inheritance*,

this tension is evident in the social restrictions placed upon Zayna, whose personal desires are constantly judged against notions of honor. As Elnamoury (2016) further argues, *“The experience of Palestinian women under the Israeli occupation and the unfair social rules makes their identity quest harder”* (p. 4).

Khalifeh, however, portrays women not merely as victims but as agents of resistance. Daghamin (2025) highlights how *The End of Spring* depicts women’s resilience in balancing roles as caregivers and activists, stressing that *“Palestinian women resist ecological destruction, occupation, and patriarchal confinement simultaneously”* (p. 15). By foregrounding these voices, Khalifeh critiques nationalist discourses that privilege male heroism while overlooking the equally crucial forms of female resistance.

Khoury (2024) observes that *“Language is a main tool in the novel, functioning as both resistance and oppression”* (p. 69). Hebrew represents the colonizer’s attempt to overwrite Palestinian presence, while Arabic preserves collective memory. In this sense, Khalifeh dramatizes Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s (1986) notion of language as central to decolonization. As Rashid et al. (2024) explain, even *“a refusal to speak the occupier’s language or to adopt their place names becomes a subtle but powerful act of defiance”* (p. 7).

Through such strategies, Khalifeh illustrates how even the smallest acts of insisting on Palestinian names, teaching Arabic to children, or writing novels function as cultural resistance.

Khalifeh’s works emphasize that Palestinian resistance is not uniform. In *Wild Thorns*, the rift between Usama’s militancy and Adil’s pragmatism symbolizes deeper class and generational divides. Rashid et al. (2024) point out that *“Khalifeh complicates the nationalist narrative by portraying not only resistance to occupation but also resistance within Palestinian society”* (p. 9).

By presenting resistance as contested, Khalifeh avoids romanticized depictions of unity. Instead, she portrays a reality where disagreement, compromise, and contradiction coexist, reminding readers that resistance is itself a site of struggle.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of Khalifeh’s novels reveals that Palestinian resistance must be understood as a complex, multilayered phenomenon. A key contribution of her work is the expansion of resistance beyond militancy. As Khoury (2024) states, *“The act of narrating Palestinian experiences in itself becomes a refusal of erasure”* (p. 57). This framing highlights how literature functions as a cultural weapon, preserving memory and shaping identity in exile.

Equally significant is Khalifeh’s feminist intervention. By exposing the “double subjugation” of women under colonial and patriarchal systems, her novels broaden postcolonial studies to account for intersectionality. Daghamin (2025) emphasizes that Khalifeh’s female characters embody *“a resistance that is ecological, national, and feminist all at once”* (p. 15). This insistence on women’s agency enriches the discourse of Palestinian resistance, urging scholars to move beyond male-centered narratives.

Furthermore, Khalifeh’s focus on diasporic consciousness challenges simplistic notions of exile. Alfaqih argues that for Khalifeh’s characters, *“homecoming itself is another form of exile”* (p. 61), underscoring the ongoing alienation Palestinians face even in return. This insight complicates Said’s (2000) conception of exile as rupture, suggesting that exile can persist as an internal condition that reshapes belonging.

Finally, Khalifeh destabilizes the idea of a unified Palestinian resistance by portraying internal divisions. As Rashid et al. (2024) note, her work *“disrupts monolithic nationalist discourse, offering instead a multiplicity of voices that debate and contest the meaning of resistance”* (p. 9). In doing so, Khalifeh affirms that resistance itself is fragmented, evolving, and deeply human.

Taken together, these insights position Khalifeh’s literature not only as representation but as resistance. Her novels preserve Palestinian voices against erasure, confront both external and internal oppressions, and challenge readers to see resistance as a spectrum that encompasses armed struggle, cultural survival, and gendered defiance.

CONCLUSION

Sahar Khalifeh’s literary works offer one of the most compelling examinations of Palestinian resistance, exile, and diasporic consciousness. Her novels demonstrate that resistance is never singular but always multifaceted, ranging from militancy to survival strategies embedded in daily life. As Rashid, Abed, and Aljasim (2024) emphasize, Khalifeh *“disrupts monolithic nationalist discourse, offering instead a multiplicity of voices that debate and contest the meaning of resistance”* (p. 9). By presenting this plurality, her fiction resists simplistic portrayals of Palestinian struggle and instead reflects the complexities of lived experience under occupation and in exile.

Khalifeh’s work also highlights the fractured nature of diasporic identity. In *The Inheritance*, Zayna/Zaynab confesses, *“I was caught between two languages and two cultures... later left without any culture and lived in a vacuum”* (Khalifeh, 2005). This captures the paradox of exile, where displacement produces hybridity but also alienation. As Alfaqih and AlJahdali (2024) argue, *“homecoming itself is another*

form of exile" (p. 61), suggesting that exile persists as an internal condition, even within the homeland.

Khalifeh's feminist intervention is Equally significant, she portrays women as doubly oppressed, "first as women in patriarchal societies and second as politically colonized women" (Elnamoury, 2016, p. 2), yet also as active agents of resistance. Daghamin (2025) demonstrates that her female characters embody "a resistance that is ecological, national, and feminist all at once" (p. 15). By foregrounding these struggles, Khalifeh expands postcolonial discourse to include intersectionality, ensuring that gender is recognized as integral to the politics of resistance.

Khalifeh positions literature itself as a form of resistance. As Khoury (2024) notes, "*The act of writing and publishing a novel depicting the Israeli occupation is an act which refuses to allow for the erasure of the Palestinian narrative*" (p. 57). Through storytelling, Khalifeh preserves memory, asserts identity, and contests hegemonic erasure. Her fiction becomes a cultural archive, ensuring that Palestinian voices endure across generations and geographies.

Taken together, Khalifeh's works enrich our understanding of resistance as a spectrum that encompasses armed, cultural, linguistic, feminist, and everyday forms. They also challenge the notion of exile as temporary or resolvable, revealing instead its enduring psychological and cultural impact. Future research might expand on Khalifeh's feminist interventions by comparing her portrayal of gendered resistance with that of other diasporic writers, or by analyzing the role of Palestinian literature in digital and transnational contexts.

Khalifeh's literature reminds us that resistance is not only about confrontation with the occupier but also about survival, memory, and the reclamation of dignity. In this way, her novels stand as acts of cultural defiance, ensuring that the Palestinian story continues to be told. They also make sure that the Palestinian story is shared over and over again to people of all ages and from all over the world.

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