

The Confiscated Dreams: Occupation and the City in Khalifeh's Writings

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Abstract

Sahar Khalifeh, a Palestinian academician and novelist, explores in her narratives, among other things, the impact of occupation on the day-to-day life of Palestinians in their cities and villages. In her 1980 *Sunflower*, Khalifeh vividly portrays the city of Nablus from the perspectives of several male and female characters who view the city and themselves under occupation from the perspectives of class, gender, ethnicity and situatedness. Cut off from the outside by military occupation, cordoned by hostile settlements, and impaired sexually and emotionally, the city and its inhabitants in Khalifeh's narrative suffer from excessive atrophy. As a result of its devastating effect on the growth of the city, Khalifeh perceives in occupation vicious machinery that consumes up the land and the people creating a wasteland, a system of physical debris and human dereliction. Urban entropy is at work in Nablus where chaos threatens order and urban forms of death intrude upon the social in the form of sexual impotence, and upon the commercial and economic processes in the form of obfuscation, confiscation and destruction of the city's resources and green belts.

Introduction

Sahar Khalifeh, a Palestinian academician and novelist, explores in her narratives, among other things, the impact of occupation on the day-to-day life of Palestinians in their cities and villages. In her 1980 *Sunflower*, Khalifeh vividly portrays the city of Nablus from the perspectives of several male and female characters among them Adel, Rafeef, Sa'diye, and

Khadra. Each of these characters belongs to a social class and each sees the city under occupation from his/her situatedness.

In *The Sunflower*, the city features very prominently in the discourses of the narrative. Nablus, occupied in June 1967 is innocent of any form of progress under occupation. The occupation machinery demonizes the city and its population. In a paragraph reminiscent of Eliot's "Waste Land", Khalifeh poetically depicts the wasteland of occupation and its impact on the city: "June¹ brought us Bulldozers with infernal jaws, swallowing the land and the rock and the trees and the people" (20).² Ironically, under occupation technology and its manifestations, when available, are used to demonize the populace and oppress the city. As a result we observe Rafeef's adamant refusal to stop at the red traffic lights as a symbolic rejection of both technology and the imposed order.

Occasionally and sweepingly the narrative reveals glimpses of nostalgia to moments that date to a preoccupation period of the history of the city. Such Nostalgic moments in Khalifeh's narrative confirm Baudrillard's contention in *Simulacra and Simulation* that "nostalgia assumes its full meaning when the real is no longer what it was" (6). As the city is defiled now by occupation the characters begin to harbor negative sentiments about it and about its dwellers. As a result, the relationship between the city and its inhabitants has metamorphosed into hatred, disgust and a weird form of love informed by situatedness, gender and disposition. Sa'diye, for instance, desires to desert the city. She labors day and night, and puts her reputation and honor at stake to buy a piece of land on the hills overlooking Nablus. She wants to be outside Nablus, above Nablus, yet not that away from it. Eventually her attempts to leave the city are thwarted by occupation. The paper will examine the impact of occupation on the growth and dimensionality of the city of Nablus and its populace and will delve into the dialectic relationship between occupiers and occupied and its effect on the city.

The Maimed King

Jessie Weston maintains, “the woes of the land are directly dependent on the sickness, or maiming, of the king”(62). In the legendary narratives of the romances, to which Weston refers, the king is sexually impaired and this renders his realm waste. In Khalifeh’s *Sunflower* the situation of the city is almost similar to that of the city of the maimed king, except that in Nablus everybody is almost sexually impaired. Nablus is inhabited by people whose, in Sharpe’s words, “sexual dysfunction, social alienation, and spiritual despondency” unite to prevent them from true interaction (102). Khalifeh, intuitively, judges that the liveliness and dynamism of the city is gauged first in terms of its sexual health, a significant point that escaped the attention of Khalifeh’s scholars.³ In the *Sunflower*, bachelors, homosexuals, widows, pimps, whores and spinsters populate Nablus. Khalifeh attributes this social imbalance largely to occupation as it alienates love and upsets the conventional order of life in the city. This weird social phenomenon manifests itself in almost all the major characters of the narrative. Adel, a confirmed bachelor “desires to love Rafeef, lie with her on the grass, fall madly in love with her,” but he resists his love for her as he keeps reiterating, “the reality is a crisis”(18). Khalifeh describes Adel’s reality in terms of occupation and the heavy weight of tradition that commandeers spontaneous love. Adel bemoans that “the year of occupation is equivalent to hundred years”(18). When Rafeef tries to persuade him to love, he retorts with a somber resignation that he “cannot love anymore because his heart aged under occupation and defeat” (18). Apart from his left wing idealism and his occasional pragmatic thinking that rarely advance anything in his circle under occupation, Adel’s undeclared approach to women is Baudrillardian in spirit: “You have a libido, and you must expend it” Baudrillard advocates in *Seduction* (38). In the present condition of the city, Adel prefers to keep his relations with the other sex casual and volatile. His attitude to sexuality does not go well with Rafeef who refuses to surrender her body to Adel without a solemn promise of marriage. When, in a party, she sees Adel dancing with a beautiful young woman, she painfully decides to stifle to death her love for him. As she does so, she attributes Adel’s reluctance to fall in love with her to his gender, class and ethnicity rather than to the present crisis as he constantly claims. Khalifeh

tells us that deep in Rafeef's mind she becomes convinced that Adel, like all Arab men, is "still sick, he is split and schizophrenic. He desires one thing and does something else. He is strongly attached to the past while dreaming of the future. He is a victim, exactly like the woman. However, his sickness is more dangerous because he is the stronger and the dictator. This is the reality" (19). Thus, Rafeef decides not to be the "victim of a victim" in spite of her awareness that loneliness and spinsterhood will be her long life companions as a sad and bitter alternative.

The other characters that populate the narrative are also sexually impaired by the occupation of the city. Sa'diye, the most colorful character in the narrative, is a frustrated, young and beautiful widow. Her husband died in defense of the city against occupation, and left her with a cluster of kids that suck the sap of her body the way occupation sucks the life force of the city. Sa'diye is very conscious that her youth and sexual life have died with the death of her husband. As a result she refuses to reciprocate with Shehdeh, who desires to marry her. Ironically enough, in comparison to the good and brave husband she has lost, Shehdeh is a pimp and insincere creature, the thought of whom makes her puke. The only thing that entertains Sa'diye and helps her maintain her sanity in her utter frustration is her dream of leaving the city to reside on the hills overlooking it.

Not only Sa'diye, but also Nowar and Khadra are sexually impaired figures: Nowar, Adel's sister, is a young girl who has lost Salih, her beloved fiancée, to the jails of the occupation. Salih is unlikely to exit out of jail during Nowar's prime years of youth, if at all. Khadra, a destitute turned into a marginal prostitute after she and her family are evicted twice from their homes by occupation. She sees the city, as cruel and oppressive. The final episode in which the women in the public bath savagely attack her confirms her conviction of the demonizing effect of occupation on the psychology of the city dwellers, as well as on the city resources.

Men other than Adel are sexually impaired, too. In a revealing conversation with Basil, the newly released prisoner, Abu Ma'roof, the café's owner, hints that the city is an abode for

homosexuality and pederasty. He tells Basil through a frenzied wave of cough, sneeze and loud spit symbolic of the ailing condition of the city and its populace:

Under the stairs, where I built for you a respectable loo, countless things happened and countless people hid: from 1936⁴ rebels during the British Mandate, to Communists and Ba'thists⁵ during Jordan's rule, to the boys of demonstrations⁶ those days. Countless things happened and countless events took place under the stairs. Sometimes you see people busy with politics, and other times you catch them busy doing each other. One day, Haj Akho E'ini⁷ came out from under the stairs dragging behind him a wretched, lame boy. Abu Sabber yelled after him: 'even the lame! Haj Akho E'ini! Haj Akho E'ini winked with his crossed eye and said: 'so what? Am I taking him to the race?' (50)

Such episodes in Khalifeh's narrative mean to evoke a sense of urban hell by showing how occupation and oppression change the norms and formulas of healthy social existence. The immigration, the incarceration and the demise of young men under occupation pave the way for the emergence of spinsters, widows, prostitutes and bereaved and confused mothers. The narrative is replete with stories of immigration of young men to study and work beyond the borders of the occupied West Bank who rarely come back such as Hamadeh and Sabber; with stories of death of young men resisting occupation like Zuhdi; and with stories of imprisonment of young men like Basil and Salih who spend their lives in the jails of the occupiers. Such depletion of the city resources takes place while women are left at home in great numbers. This male exhaustion and sexual dysfunctionality in a closed society upsets the sex's balance and paves the way for what Richard Lehan terms as "urban entropy" where people themselves become waste in the city (123).

Entropy in Action

Cut off from the outside by military occupation, cordoned by hostile settlements, and impaired sexually and emotionally, the city and its inhabitants suffer from excessive atrophy. Richard Lehan's theory of urban entropy applies well to Khalifeh's city. Lehan, taking his cue from thermodynamics, contends that "the amount of energy in the universe is fixed, and energy can never be increased or diminished, only transformed. As a result every time energy is transformed from one state to another, there is a loss in the amount of energy available to perform future work. Entropy is that loss of energy in a closed system"(123). The city in Lehan's view is a closed system, where "nothing provides it energy outside itself" (123) What is left in the modern city is reiterated by Jermeiy Rifkin who argues that with the great energy flow, energy "ends up in one form or another as waste" (129)

As a result of its devastating effect on the growth of the city, Khalifeh perceives in occupation vicious machinery that consumes up the land and the people creating a wasteland, a system of physical debris and human dereliction. Urban entropy is at work in Nablus where chaos threatens order, and urban forms of death intrude upon the social in the form of sexual impotence, and upon the commercial and economic processes in the form of obfuscation, confiscation and destruction of the city's resources and green belts.

In Khalifeh's city, economic and commercial dysfunctionality parallels that of the impaired sexuality in bringing the demise of the city. Not only the Karmi's family in particular, but Nablus as a whole have suffered a systematic massive economic impoverishment over the past decades. The militarisation of the city through the constant presence of the occupation forces and their conspicuous military apparatuses in it, the shadow of the armed resistance in the refugee camps and the ghettos of the city, and the daily curfews have severely damaged the city's economy.

In Nablus, the people either seek employment beyond the borders, leaving whatever institutions at home to rust and whither away, or depend on irregular external aid and donations from some neighboring countries, which again leave negative impact on the local

institutions as it discourages them from depending on themselves in meeting their own needs. The failure and near collapse of the newspaper and the marginalization of the municipalities' police force, and the collapse of local farming and trade are examples on what befell the city.

Trade and productive activity, requiring a minimum of legitimate and institutionally predictable legal frameworks to ensure their reproductive life, are not only compromised in such circumstances, but are turned into waste. Khalifeh's reference to the "Bank, closed since the wind of occupation blew over the city, with spiders nesting their webs on its door and windows and the moss becoming dark on its stairs" (20) is a cogent comment on the economic decline and the holocaust of the city's resources.

Waste is everywhere in Nablus: economy is in shambles; urban structures are under constant threat of demolishing in retaliation for resistance; people are shut off from other places by means of fences, walls, barricades and curfews; arable land is confiscated; water resources are taken and the city water sources are mediated; the young men are either in jail, in the grave or in exile; women are widows, spinsters, and lost. In Adel's view, not only the city, but also the whole region is a big prison. His pessimistic reflection on the condition of the city and the region shows the anguish of a person caught up in the web of waste:

The prison. ... It is always the prison. If you go out to the street, the prison is waiting for you. And if you stayed at home, the prison is waiting for you. And there beyond the bridge there is an enormous prison, a vast prison, there are martial laws and deified rulers who once were from you and turned against you. And woes betide you as a subject, and woes betide you as a nation. It is by their commands that people live and die (Khalifeh, 38).

Lewis Mumford optimistically declares that the "chief function of the city is to convert power into form, energy into culture, dead matter into the living symbols of art, biological reproduction into social creativity" (87). Nablus, under occupation is incapable of producing

any of these functions. The city's remaining power lies in the hands and slingshots of underfed and frustrated teens that turn whatever energy they have into chaos and disorder during their endless demonstrations against occupation. The city's energy is turning into a culture of chaotic resistance and violence that is totally different from the culture that Oswald Spengler perceives as leading to "civilization" (36). Sa'diye, the widow, the mother, the bee-like laborer, the symbol of the city before and after occupation is intuitively aware of the urban entropy that enfolds the city. Her desire to get out of the city reflects the true mother's instinct of combating waste and protecting her children. The hills beyond the city, in Sa'diye's words, are "safer, natural and abounding with clean air and sun with no menace of the occupation apparatuses" to herself and to her sons (228). Sa'diye eventually buys a piece of land on the hills overlooking the city.

In her attempt to justify buying the piece of land away from the center of the city to her youngest son who abhors the idea of leaving his stone-throwing pals downtown, she draws a dreary picture of the city for him. "Nablus", she says, "is a source of darkness, dampness and gossip and horrendous eyes surveying every dweller in it. There on the hills" she tells her son appealingly, "you can shoot at birds with your slingshot, instead of shooting at soldiers" (227) The boy, refusing to understand his mother's position, starts crying as he sees in their pending movement a detachment from the center where his father died resisting occupation.

However, Sa'diye's momentary happiness at buying the land is marred by her phobia of occupation forces commandeering the land and or demolishing the small house of her dreams. Such is the power of occupation in Khalifeh's novel that it holds great sway on the dreams of the most peaceful characters in the city. At the end of the narrative, Sa'diye's phobia turns into nightmarish reality when the occupation forces confiscate her land for no reason what so ever and condemn her to go back to the system of waste she labored hard to exit.

Conclusion

In Lehan's words, "as the city becomes more chaotic, less friendly and more hostile, the inhabitants become more alienated, more lonely and isolated, and the urban process itself more absurd" (153). Lehan apparently refers to the inhabitants' entrapment in industrial and post industrial cities where the ultimate state of chaos, hostility and disorder emanates from economic, social and cultural systems of the already isolated and alienated inhabitants' own production which at some point in the history of the city were productive and beneficial to the city dwellers. When the city's chaotic condition, however, comes from an alien power from without, the alienation and the isolation of the inhabitants become suicidal and destructive, as there are no advantages whatsoever available to the inhabitants. In Nablus, even water, an essential substance of existence, is hardly available, and when scantily available, it is excessively polluted.

All the social structures and physical spaces in the occupied city are in ruins. And likewise the relationship among the inhabitants of the city is fraught with strife, discord and disharmony. Mona Fayad surprisingly asserts that the novel is "preoccupied with physical spaces as a way of organizing community. Whether it is the prison, the board-room of the newspaper, or the steam baths." "It is there " she adds "that communality is established and the testing of individual freedom takes place" (153). Fayad's contention is unrealistic and does not reflect the waste of the city under occupation as she opts not to see and hear the acrimonious conflict among the inhabitants of these so-called 'physical spaces'. Fayad's term "the individual freedom" becomes an oxymoron in conjunction with occupation that confiscates and cancels everything, including dreams.

The prison, firstly, is not a legitimate city physical space. Like cancer, it is unnatural growth in the body of the city and a major cause of the decline of its energy. Secondly, the communality established there is one of discord and conflict as Khalifeh reflects it colorfully in the conflict between Islamists, Marxists, and non-aligned prisoners. Similar discord and disunity pollute the congregation of the editors' board of the Newspaper, and the women's gathering in the city's dirty and crumbling public bath. The Newspaper's board, with its

tragicomic polemic over the most trivial matters, epitomizes entropy in action as the board members always end up their meetings in total disagreement on whatever issue at hand. This situation does not only reflect the decaying condition of the city under occupation, but also becomes a blatant metaphor for the on going disunity among the Arab states at large. Finally, the chaos spawned in the public bath episode reflects the death of the rational and the collapse of dialogue and is matched with the last scene in the novel when the occupation forces and the city inhabitants confront each other, after the confiscation of Sa'diye's land along with all the hilly area around the city, as a cycle of violence is let loose with more waste and further loss to come.

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NOTES

¹ June 1967 is the month in which Israel fought the 6-day war against its bordering Arab neighbors and occupied the West bank of the Jordan along with the Golan Heights and the Sinai.

² The translation of this and all subsequent quotes from the Arabic text of Sahar Khalifeh's *Ubbad ash-Shams [The Sunflower]* is entirely mine.

³ Hassan Jarah (7-22), Samia Odeh (41-53), Zekrayat Amra (91-110) among others dwell in their writings on Khalifeh's depiction of the various slices of the Palestinians under occupation without paying critical attention to Khalifeh's in depth analysis of the impact of occupation on the psychology of the characters. These critics focus mainly on the relationship between politics and the day-to-day existence of Palestinians under occupation. Elizabeth Asfour (6-33) and Salma Mahfooz (21-53) write about Khalifeh's denigration of patriarchy in a dominantly conventional and Muslim society. However, in their writings they do not touch

on tricky issues such as sexuality and its manifestation in and impact on Khalifeh's characters. Rita Sakran (1-45), Rana Mussas (17-39), and Suliman Khashram (12-33) write insightfully about Khalifeh's manipulation of language and her excellent skill of presenting characters through discourse and insightfully establish various links between her narrativity and that of many postmodern American and European writers.

⁴ 1936 refers to an early Palestinian uprising against a decree by the British Mandate to partition Palestine into Arab and Jewish states. Nationalists who opposed the decree became targets for the mandate authorities.

⁵ In the 50s and 60s left wing activists were not allowed public venue under the Jordanian regime. Activists had to go underground to avoid arrest and persecution.

⁶ After the 1967 Israeli occupation of the West Bank, the initial resistance movement in the city started in the form of demonstrations fueled mainly by boys in their early and late teens. The occupation forces dealt ruthlessly with these boys.

⁷ In Odeh's view (49), the name is a pun on a major pre 1948 Palestinian resistance leader called Haj Amin el-Husseini. The word 'Haj' means pilgrim (a person who goes to Mecca to perform the Islamic Haj rites) In the colloquial of the region the adjective 'Haj' precedes a person's name to indicate advanced age and to venerate the person addressed. Sakran (17) contends that the usage of the adjective 'Haj' in this quotation produces a comic effect by emptying the idiom of its sacrosanct meaning through attaching it to a sodomite. Mussas (24) reads in "Akho Eini" which translates as the 'Brother of my Eye' a euphemism for the male sexual organ.

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