

From Incarceration in the Cube to Self-Reclamation: A Feminist Reading of Abulhawa's *Against the Loveless World*

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Abstract: Feminism in Palestinian literature focuses on the struggle of Palestinian women against patriarchal oppression and colonial occupation, emphasizing resistance, identity preservation, and the reclamation of voice, land, and agency. The paper presents a feminist reading of Susan Abulhawa's *Against the Loveless World* and examines Nahr's act of transforming herself from incarceration in The Cube that was an isolated and surveilled space, into a site of agency, resistance, and self-reclamation. Theoretically, the study is grounded in Feminism and draws on the lens of Lila Abu-Lughod's *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*. The study is qualitative in nature and relies on the technique of textual analysis. It foregrounds the gendered nature of violence and surveillance that shapes Nahr's experiences as a Palestinian woman negotiating trauma, exile, and political repression. The study contends that Abulhawa subverts conventional representation of female victimization by depicting Nahr's journey from incarceration to psychological and political empowerment. Nahr challenges the patriarchal and carceral structures and traces her subjectivity. The study also sheds light on Abulhawa's contribution to feminist prison literature and Palestinian resistance narratives. Consequently, this research reveals that *Against the Loveless World* reconceptualizes imprisonment not merely as a site of oppression, but as a transformative space where feminist consciousness, memory, and selfhood are reimagined and reconstructed.

Keywords: Incarceration, Cube, Resistance, Self-Reclamation, Surveillance

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1. Introduction

The present study examines Abulhawa's *Against the Loveless World* (2019) [1] and tells the compelling story of Nahr, the protagonist, a Palestinian woman whose life is marked by many factors, i.e displacement, suppression, conflict, and gendered violence. But the major part of her transition occurs inside The Cube, Palestinian imprisonment, a solitary confinement cell meant to suppress her identity and silence her resistance. This paper investigates how the writer Nahr's journey from physical and psychological incarceration to a state of self-awareness, empowerment, and reclamation of agency. By focusing on the factors that shape Nahr's journey and her experiences, such as the gendered nature of surveillance, trauma, and social ostracization, the study incorporates how the novel subverts traditional narratives of female victimhood. Instead, Nahr becomes a self-defining and strong subject that creates a prison space as a place of self-examination, opposition, and self-reconstruction, thus reconstructing imprisonment as a multi-dimensional and possibly transformative space in the context of the lives of Palestinian women. The memories of Nahr's childhood, family, and

traditions highlight the power of memory to keep alive hope as despair will be sustained. Seeking to reclaim one's sense of belonging in a world marred by turmoil and uncertainty, she looks for places and connections that speak to her identity and background-from refugee camps to foreign lands.

1.1 Research Objectives

- 1) To analyze Nahr's journey from confinement to self-reclamation and empowerment in Abulhawa's *Against the Loveless World*.
- 2) To examine the Cube as a gendered and political space of incarceration, surveillance, and control in Abulhawa's *Against the Loveless World*.
- 3) To identify the roles of trauma, exile, and social ostracization in shaping Nahr's identity and self-recovery in Abulhawa's *Against the Loveless World*.

1.2 Research Questions

- 1) How does Nahr transform herself from confinement to self-reclamation and empowerment in Abulhawa's *Against the Loveless World*?
- 2) In what ways does the Cube serve as a gendered and political space of incarceration, surveillance, and control in Abulhawa's *Against the Loveless World*?
- 3) How does the novel portray the roles of trauma, exile and resistance in shaping Nahr's identity and self-recovery in Abulhawa's *Against the Loveless World*?

2. Literature Review

Recent scholarship on Abulhawa's *Against the Loveless World* has increasingly focused on feminist readings that explore themes of trauma, oppression, identity, and self-reclamation. Rameen and Bashir (2025) [2] examine the novel through the lens of feminine trauma and political awakening, arguing that the protagonist, Nahr, transforms experiences of love, loss, and systemic oppression into personal and political agency. They use Freud's *Nachtraglichkeit*, Lacan's symbolic disruption, and Cathy Caruth's trauma to accentuate how Nahr's trauma, even though non-linear and painful, is being used as a catalyst not only for feminist consciousness but also for socio-political resistance. According to the authors, the novel challenges patriarchal and wartime systems of violence and the image of Nahr as the victim of oppression becoming the activist of self-recovery and activism.

The experiences of Nahr are placed in the context of a postcolonial feminist approach by Zayed (2025) [3], who asserts that Palestinian women in the novel are subject to dual victimization, which is oppression by patriarchal norms and colonialism. Incarceration, exile, and dispossession in the story are not only personal challenges, as shown by Zayed, but also symbolic of the systemic power in which women have to live among the intersecting layers of

social, political, and cultural oppression. In the same vein, Humayun and Akhtar (2024) [4] apply the intersectionality theory developed by Crenshaw to the text and indicate how Nahr forms her identity at the crossroads of gender, ethnicity, displacement, and patriarchy. Their research indicates that Nahr and her experience of arranged marriage, life as a refugee, and her imprisonment are an illustration of multi-layered oppression that Palestinian women face and the process of negotiations that they must undertake to reclaim themselves.

Bibi et al. (2022) [5] extend these perspectives by exploring Nahr's trajectory from implicit being to explicit becoming, emphasizing how survival, resilience, and political consciousness intersect to construct a feminist subject in exile. Similarly, Naz, Khan, and Bashir (2025) [6] investigate the notion of double colonization, showing how both patriarchal society and colonial occupation shape Nahr's search for home and identity. Their analysis underscores that self-reclamation in the novel is a complex struggle against erasure, marginalization, and structural domination.

Feminist readings of the text are also supported by ecofeminist interpretations of the text. Muzaffar (2025) [7] finds comparisons between the land exploitation of Palestinians and the commodification of a woman's body, as she believes that Nahr's resistance to the exploitation of her body and her body was a reflection of communal fighting against the exploitation of the body and the world. Applying the psychoanalytic feminist theory, Khader (2023) [8] interprets that Nahr broke the gender roles as an element of her trauma and alienation healing process and refers to the novel as a way of challenging and revisiting gender norms as the healing practice of self-reclamation.

The Reclaimed Woman by Brogan (2016) [9] focuses on the self-healing of women, on the basis of emotional depth, intuition, and inner strength, self-reclamation outside of the bounds of patriarchy and biomedicine. The book is also involved in the feminist discourse because it views empowerment as an internal process of regaining identity, agency, and feminine autonomy.

Addison (2007) [10] *Reclamation Voices* also looks at the role of silence and voice in the stories by and about black women and how self-reclamation is a form of resistance to racial and gendered marginalization. The research highlights storytelling as a vital territorial place of reclaiming identity, agency, and subjugated subjectivities.

These studies show trauma as a personal and political trigger, intersectionality as the manifestation of intersecting systems of oppression according to which Nahr experiences her life, and self-reclamation as resistance against the patriarchal and colonialist forces. Nevertheless, some holes are still there, such as insufficient investigation of the metaphor of

the Cube as a Foucauldian disciplinary space and comparison with other stories about women in the Middle East. Regardless of these gaps, the modern studies have continually emphasized the delicate portrayal of female agency, re-established their identities, and standing up to systemic oppression by Abulhawa.

The necropolitical and temporally repressed space of imprisonment in the form of the metaphorical incarceration of the Cube has been discussed as well to immobilize and objectify Nahr through disciplinary power. Locating the Cube within the context of necropolitics developed by Achille Mbembe [11], Salami (2024) [12] posits that the necropolitical subjectivity of spaces in which colonial forces attempt to seize control stirs the subjectivity of Nahr as well as the creation of alternative temporalities of resistance that colonial forces cannot erase. As it will be analyzed, the non-linear narrative composition and strategic temporal disjunction in Abulhawa enable Nahr and, by extension, Palestinian women to rebel against oppressive temporalities that colonial power imposes and reclaim their identities and past.

3. Theoretical Framework

Susan Abulhawa's *Against the Loveless World* can be examined through a **feminist postcolonial lens**, with Lila Abu-Lughod's insights in *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East* (2002) [13] providing a foundational framework for understanding the tensions between gender, culture, and politics in the novel. Abu-Lughod challenges the universalizing forms of feminism applying Western paradigms of liberation, insisting on the contextual sensitivity that considers both the historical background of a place and its cultural peculiarities and structural constraints that define the lives of women in the Middle East. She stresses that female oppression cannot be explained only as the consequence of the patriarchal order; rather, it is connected with the colonial past, modern state policies, and international politics.

Using the framework of Abu-Lughod in the book *Against the Loveless World*, when Nahr is experiencing displacement, confinement, and even the domination of men through the means of the so-called Cube, one can consider that Nahr is not only suffering personally but also as a result of the interlocking systems of domination. Her path of self-reclaiming is the process of negotiation between agency and structural limitation, showing that the strategies of survival and resistance of women are deeply rooted in their social, cultural, and political situations, as argued by Abu-Lughod. To take just a single instance, the way Nahr maneuvers her way through exile, forced marriage, and social expectations aligns with the idea of local forms of

agency introduced by Abu-Lughod and obstructs the idea of women as tactical to oppression instead of being a universalized notion of emancipation.

Moreover, the fact that Abu-Lughod criticizes Western-centered accounts of liberation shows the risks of explaining the experiences of Palestinian women through the prism of radical and liberal feminism. In Abu-Lughod's novel, self-reclamation is not just a personal or psychological process but a collective and political endeavor, tied to the struggle against occupation, displacement, and cultural erasure. Such a point of view makes it possible to analyze the feminist consciousness and the postcolonial critique and place Nahr and her resistance in the framework of the wider socio-political and historical context instead of evaluating it as an empowerment narrative of an individual.

Overall, the work of Abu-Lughod offers a theoretical background to contextualize the experience of Nahr in the context of Middle Eastern feminism, focusing on culturally rooted forms of agency, the conflict between personal and political struggles, and the relationship between gender, politics, and colonialism. This framework supports a feminist reading of Abulhawa's novel that foregrounds the protagonist's self-reclamation as both a personal and socio-political act.

4. Discussion and Analysis

Against the Loveless World introduces Nahr, a resilient and exhausted woman trying to survive her life in parts of Kuwait, Iraq, Jordan, and Palestine. The novel is Abulhawa's magnum opus. Though all three novels by this author share some characteristics, this one is somewhat different because of its unique narration style. Nahr, whose story begins with gray hair, launches her life narrative by saying, "*I live in the Cube.*" And further she says *I live in the Cube. I write on its glossy gray cinder-block walls however I can—with my nails before, with pencils now that the guards bring me some supplies.* (Abulhawa, 2019, p.01) Because the Cube is the name for an Israeli prison cell where she has spent years incarcerated, the task of narrating her life is further complicated. She does talk to the walls until a sympathetic guard gives her two pencils and a notebook. This urge to document her experiences, chronic in nature, sends her filling up three thousand pages. Born in Kuwait, which she referred to as "a country that abandoned us," Nahr narrates an upbringing in a patriarchal society, an arranged marriage, and subsequent desertion. The necessity of a lucrative life of escort work led her and her family to flee to Jordan after the US invaded Iraq, again finding themselves to be refugees. A divorce in pursuit, Nahr makes a treacherous journey into Palestine, where her true love is to be found in her homeland. Bit by bit, Abulhawa reveals the suppressed truths as she constructs her narrative around the six-sided shape that depicts both the Black Cube—the

name for an Israeli private intelligence agency-and the mind game made famous in Annie Gottlieb's 1995 novel, *The Cube*, which borrowed its title from the Japanese word *kokoro*, meaning mind or spirit. *The Cube is smaller than a grave and just as quiet. I write on its glossy gray cinder-block walls however I can.* (Abulhawa, 2019, p. 3)

Weaving together Nahr's historic story with modern sections centered on the Cube, Abulhawa imbues her work with geometry and architecture. Each face of the cube is titled: East, West, and North, South, Up, and Down, including The Space Between. *In the Cube, I contemplate every decision I made, every turn that brought me here.* (Abulhawa, 2019, p. 7)

Abulhawa expounds on the ancient meaning ascribed to the cube to frame her storytelling. All sides of the cube are parallel, equal in measure, and evoke an impression of three-dimensional stability. One of five Platonic solids to represent the element earth, the cube is also the metaphorical prison cell, separating public and private worlds, and one that virtually eliminates Nahr's concept of privacy. In terms of architectural design, there is the path of the sun to consider. Abulhawa places the Cube window quite high so that Nahr becomes disoriented regarding time and can't measure it in this area. *That's how I got the name Nahr. Not the one my mother gave me, but the one I chose to survive.* (Abulhawa, 2019, p. 29)

Abulhawa metaphorically breaks the cube, so that what it represents seeps into the fictional realm, much like Yannick Martin's architectural concept of burning-off repression. She speaks about chaos theory with élan: *"Our dance is about chaos and anarchy, the antithesis of control"*. Nahr calls her shower "Attar", after a Persian poet, but to the mind heaves the Rosewater of the film on an Iranian prison by Jon Stewart. Nahr feels like a real person, with all her faults. Her life is shaped by things she can't control, starting with being born into a family of Palestinian refugees. Growing up with constant uncertainty messes with her sense of safety and belonging. These early experiences push her to make tough choices later, like getting into sex work to support herself and her family. The book itself doesn't marginalize Nahr for her preference, but instead it shows a way to deal with them. Abulhawa provokes simple ideas about Palestinian women and gives Nahr a powerful, complex, and soulful character through her honest voice.

In Nahr's second marriage, to Mhammad's brother Bilal, a conscientious resistance member, eventually calls for a thobe, Mama describes the handicraft as an act of resistance: *"I thought a lot about this and decided to use the basic patterns of a Jerusalem thobe, because we're being erased from her story and her stone"* (Abulhawa, 2019, p.125).

To move on and try to figure out who you are is the big and main idea in the book. Nahr's life involves constant movement across borders, and each move makes her sense of belonging

weaker. Palestine is always in her mind because it's where she came from and it's what makes her life meaningful, but she knows that going back there will not bring her the comfort she has hoped for. Instead, she finds a land controlled by others, full of fighting. The home she had imagined was totally different from reality. She eventually suffered a lot, which shows the misery in her life. Nahr is always dealing with uncertainty and failings, which makes her feel like she doesn't belong in this cruel world. She believes that nobody truly understands her in any deeper way. She is having a hard time finding someone who understands her feelings. The book makes it clear that displacement is not only going to uproot you but also the way you perceive yourself and your place in the world.

Love plays a crucial role in the life of Nahr, yet it is never simple and comfortable. Her relationships are good and usually agonizing, which manifests how difficult it is to live in a state of constant doubt. The novel brings out her peculiar relationship with Bilal, where love and political participation are combined. That friendship leads her into an even greater Palestinian struggle, a true love with sacrifices and defiance. Meanwhile, the book does not have this connection sounding flawless. Suffering and loss are here to stay, and it is love that makes things run, including actions, feelings, and pain. Abulhawa employs these relationships to demonstrate how relating to other people may provide a sense of life despite the pain. The reason for Nahr's imprisonment is labeled as terrorism, a term often used to justify the actions of the Israeli government. As we delve into Nahr's life, we witness the impact of her incarceration. In 1967, her mother, who was originally a refugee from Haifa in 1948, finds herself pregnant as Israel forces her to become a refugee once again. She flees with her spouse across the Jordan, seeking refuge at Allenby Bridge, only to face further hardships.

I just prayed to God as your father, and I crossed, and I made a deal with the river, she told me. If it didn't eat any of us, I said I would name you after it. But that would have been too weird to name me Jordan. So I got my name, Nahr, River, this way.

(Abulhawa, 2019, p.19)

The whole novel explains how painful her life is by telling about the abandonment, violence, and how it is being locked up. But even with all this, Nahr is never shown as weak or helpless. Her strength comes from being able to keep going, think things through, and hold onto who she is. Even alone in prison, she refuses to let her mind break. The Cube becomes a place where memories and thoughts help her survive, although it is supposed to isolate

and break her. Nahr fights back and takes control of her identity again by remembering and telling her story. She says her writing is a resilience.

I don't know what compelled me to write it all. To set the record straight? To lay bare with love what others find offensive? To pass the time? To mark my place in the world? To inject life into this lifeless box? To declare simply that I survived? (Abulhawa, 2019, p. 343)

The "lifeless box" portrays oppression, silence, and dehumanization. In doubting the question of why she writes, the reasons she uses to justify her writing, she aims to clear up the record, create a mark, assert her presence, and by stating that she survived, Nahr literally turns uncertainty into purpose. The boundaries between the reason Nahr chooses to narrate her story and that of Abulhawa fade into the background since she also was sent out of Palestine by the Israeli state when she was a teenager. By telling their stories, both reclaim their identity, their home, and their humanity, despite Israel trying to deny them the same. From the feminist critiques, writing becomes an act of resistance and agency. Through writing and narration, women regain their voice, identity, and dignity. Thus, the prison that confines her physically becomes the space where she asserts her subjectivity and survival. Throughout these encounters, Nahr must endure discomfort and delay her bodily functions, as she is under the control of the paying client.

Something sharp, maybe a rock or a shell, dug into my back under the blanket with the very thrust he made. I had to pee again. The stars were watching me, daring me to move. But I didn't. I endured and waited, because that's what girls do. (Abulhawa, 2019, p.52)

During that period of prostitution, she encounters Abu Moathe, a man known for his violent approach. He inflicts bruises on her body during sexual encounters, pushing her to the brink of discomfort. Nahr becomes a part of Um Baraq's group, where she engages in activities that provide financial support to her family, albeit straying from their traditional values. She sacrifices her well-being as a sex worker, enduring the brutality of men at a high personal cost. Even after being gang-raped on the eve of Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, she persists in her profession until a pivotal moment. As expressed in the book, *"I wasn't yet ready to give up on men," she contemplates. "Part of me wanted to know if men could be good"* (Abulhawa, 2019, p. 85).

5. Findings and Conclusion

To sum up the whole discussion, the study finds that *Against the Loveless World* presents the “Cube” as both a literal prison cell and a metaphor for patriarchal and colonial control. The space is used as a symbolic representation of surveillance, silence, and control of systems on the bodies and identities of Palestinian women. Nevertheless, instead of portraying Nahr as a passive victim, the novel represents trauma as something that leads to feminist consciousness and political awareness. The experiences of exile, being forcibly married, being sexually exploited, and imprisoned demonstrate that Nahr is facing layers of oppression, but by writing, she turns the prison into the location of resistance. The memory and narration turn into the instruments of survival with the help of which she regains her voice, identity, and dignity. It is also analyzed in the study that Abulhawa can subvert the stereotypical depiction of Palestinian women by making Nahr a multi-dimensional, diminished, and self-defining person. The study concludes that the incarceration to self-reclamation is the movement which is explicit to the feminist vision of the novel. The Cube that is supposed to hush up and obliterate turns out to be a place of self-reflection and empowerment. By narrating, Nahr opposes patriarchal as well as colonial discourses that attempt to construct her. Finally, Abulhawa redefines imprisonment as a world of transformation where memory, voice, and resistance help to reinvent the self. The concept of self-reclamation in the novel is not brought up as an innocent liberation, but rather as a continual, politically based fight over identity and agency.

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