**Sahar Khalifa (1941-)**

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Novelist, writer, feminist, and political activist Sahar Khalifa was born to a Palestinian Family in Nablus in 1941. On the day of her birth, she became the fifth daughter, much to the disappointment of her parents who were hoping for a baby boy. Growing up in a family that valued men more than it did women, Khalifa experienced firsthand the second-class status to which patriarchy relegated her gender. But patriarchy was not the only oppressor: Israeli settler colonialism was, and still is, the major threat to the wellbeing of Palestinian women. In her writing, Khalifa constantly subjects both oppressive forces to harsh criticism. Defiant of the limiting, and limited, identities patriarchy and Israeli settler colonialism force upon her fellow countrywomen, Khalifa depicts Palestinian women as intellectuals, feminists, freedom fighters, social activists, breadwinners, mothers, sisters, and lovers. According to Salma Khadra Jayyusi, Khalifa believes “that feminist consciousness is an integral part of political consciousness” and in her novels, “the struggle and tribulations of Palestinian women are shown, in an artistic and convincing manner, to be part of the general political struggle for liberation” (589). Indeed, in the novel *Sunflower* (1980) for example, Khalifa emphasizes the inseparable relation between women’s struggles for national liberation and gender equality. She draws attention to Palestinian women’s struggle against patriarchy in *Memoirs of an Unrealistic Woman* (1986) and their fight against Israeli settler colonialism in *Wild Thorns* (1976). Both struggles, however, are often simultaneously present in her works which seek to uncover why the Palestinians continue to suffer and how they can end their suffering.

At a very young age, Khalifa married traditionally and gave birth to two daughters, but after thirteen years of arranged matrimony, she decided to divorce, rebuild her life, and start afresh. The divorce was a turning point in Khalifa’s intellectual and political life. Yet, it was triggered, as Khalifa herself admits, by the tragic event of the 1967 Israeli occupation of the rest of historic Palestine, causing Khalifa to reshape her life, participate in the national struggle, follow in the footsteps of other Palestinian women intellectuals, and write against patriarchy and Israeli colonialism. Therefore, Aida A. Bamia is correct to point out that the “history of the Palestinian liberation movements, spanning from the pre-1948 debacle to the Intifada years, reveals the progressive involvement of women in the heart of the political action” (173). To some extent, Khalifa follows in the footsteps of Mary Shehadeh and Fadwa Tuqan.

At age thirty two, Khalifa pursued a BA in English at Bir Zeit University. Upon graduation, she worked at the same university before she won a Fulbright Fellowship. She finished an MA in English from the University of North Carolina and completed a Doctorate in Women’s Studies and American Literature from the University of Iowa. After returning to Palestine in 1987, Khalifa founded the Women’s Affairs Centre in Nablus. She opened new branches in the Gaza Strip in 1991 and Jordan in 1994. The Centre researches issues pertaining to the status and struggles of Palestinian women, offers training opportunities, and promotes Palestinian women’s rights and full equality with men.

Khalifa started writing while married. She published several novels including *We Are Not Your Slaves Anymore* (1974), *Wild Thorns* (1975), *The Sunflower* (1980), *Memoirs of an Unrealistic Woman* (1986), *The Inheritance* (1988),and *The Door of the Courtyard* (1990). Her novels were translated into more than fifteen languages including English, Hebrew, German, French, Dutch, Sweden, Spanish, and Italian. According to Jayyusi, *We Are Not Your Slaves Anymore* “made quite an impact because of its advocacy for feminist freedom, but it was with the appearance of her third novel *Wild Thorns*, in 1976, that Khalifa received literary recognition and acclaim” (589). In addition to her criticism of patriarchy and Israeli settler colonialism, Khalifa revises the Palestinian history of struggle and rewrites the political activism of revolutionary Palestinian figures. Indeed, in *The Inheritance*, Khalifa criticizes the Oslo Accords, while in *My First Love*, she concentrates on the revolutionary leader Abdul Qadir al-Husseini. In *The Door of the Courtyard*, Khalifa concentrates on the First Intifada and treats the Second Intifada in *Hot Spring*. Her feminist views, unconventional treatment of male characters, and rendering of Palestinian history drew harsh criticism from male critics. Khalifa was acquainted with the novelist Emile Habibi and historian and intellectual Hisham Sharabi. Thematically, by concentrating on Palestinian displacement, struggle against settler colonialism, Palestinian inalienable right to return, forms of Palestinian disempowerment and attempts to re-empower the individual and community, Khalifa follows in the footsteps of generations of Palestinian writers. Her writing style is unique: “sensitive, economical, and lucid; although she writes in modern Arabic, her language is deeply rooted in Palestinian vocabulary and general idiom” (Jayyusi 589). Khalifa won several literary prizes including the 2006 Najib Mahfouz Medal for Literature for her novel *Image, Icon, and Covenant*.

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