



Sahar Khalifeh

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My language was lost before I was lost and so was my identity. My name and address followed suit. My original name was Zayneb Hamden, and with time it became Zayna.

— The Inheritance

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Quick Facts

- * Born in 1941
- * Palestinian novelist, writer, and activist
- * First novel published in English was *Wild Thorns* (1975)

Biography

Sahar Khalifeh, born the fifth girl to a Palestinian family in Nablus, West Bank, was seen as a disappointment to her parents from the start. In order to preserve the Palestinian bloodline, name, and inheritance, a son was necessary.

Growing up with such discontent, Khalifeh learned that the existence of females was seen solely for “miserable, useless, worthless sex,” as Khalifeh writes. Growing up female meant that there would be many rules surrounding her life. As an escape, she resorted to reading, writing, and painting.

At age eighteen, Khalifeh entered a traditional arranged marriage. Her marriage lasted thirteen years and was ultimately a disappointment for her. Although she and her husband had two daughters, Khalifeh could not help but feel frustrated and unhappy in her marriage. She found herself silenced as an Arab woman and began to find her voice in writing.

This page was researched and submitted by Cindy Koy, Greg Gustafson and Denise Obitz-Cooney on 12/18/06.



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Biography continued

An Arab publishing house discovered Khalifeh and saw potential in this would-be novelist. They weren't wrong. Through her writings, she saw an escape from her life and could live vicariously through her characters. Once determined and confident in her writing ability, Khalifeh was able to leave her husband.

Through a series of events in her life, Khalifeh became a feminist. She experienced a sense of despair for herself and other Palestinian women based on their tradition, laws, and culture. At age thirty-two Khalifeh began a new chapter in her life. She enrolled in the Department of English at Bir Zeit University where she obtained her Bachelor of Arts degree in English.

While taking two years off from school, Khalifeh wrote *Wild Thorns* (1975). This book portrays Palestinian society under occupation. Through heroic tales and stories, Khalifeh earned success as an Arab woman writer, although her first book was confiscated by Israeli authorities. After interviewing intellectuals, revolutionaries, and ideologues, she had an idea to interview their wives, girlfriends, and the women in their communities. Here she found what she already knew, that women were exploited and inferior just like the women in her life.

As she discovered, despite their education or other sacrifices they made, women were still inferior to men regardless of their politics, profession, or academic achievements. It was here that her realization of the widespread gender inequities became concrete with not only her own personal experiences, but from listening to other women as well. Thus began her next writing, *The Sunflower* (1980). Here she wrote about the reality of the revolution and the peoples disenchantment with the revolution.

Two years later came *The Memoirs of an Unrealistic Woman* (1986) which depicts a woman's emotional and conceptual growth from childhood to adulthood. The story covers the turmoil of the female character overcome by fear, frustration, and helplessness.

While Khalifeh worked at Bir Zeit University, life began to change. Political factions moved in on campus and Khalifeh found herself wanting to fight. She helped found the Union of Palestinian Writers. Receiving criticism from her Muslim brothers and leftist writers, Khalifeh left the University.



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She received a Fulbright scholarship to study in America. Here she continued her education and received an MA in English from the University in North Carolina Chapel Hill. She then completed a PhD in women's studies and American literature from the University of Iowa.

Following the Intifada in 1987, Khalifeh returned to Palestine in 1988. The liberation of Palestine had been a dream of the people of Palestine. However, their reality has been to endure more suffering while under Israeli occupation with checkpoints, curfews, and oppression. It is this realization which Khalifeh writes about in her later works. *The Inheritance* (1997) is a story of Palestinian women who sacrifice much for the men in their lives and their country, while their own lives are lost and forgotten.

In 1988, Khalifeh became the founder of the Women's Affairs Center in Nablus, West Bank. She has since opened additional branches in Gaza City, West Bank in 1991, and Amman, Jordan in 1994.

According to Lisa Kaaki, a writer for the *Arab News*, Khalifeh's female characters in *The Inheritance* shine above their male counterparts. Khalifeh looks at the lives of the Palestinian women from the time of the Al-Nakba catastrophe (the loss of their homeland) and the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. It was at that time that the Palestinian's were transformed into refugees. Since that time, the women of Palestine had to work to provide for their families. Some even left their country in hopes to find employment elsewhere.

Dr. Bouthaina Shaaban, a professor of literature at Damascus University in Syria writes that Palestinian novelist Sahar Khalifeh is the woman novelist of the twentieth century. She has written novel after novel depicting the life of Palestinian women both socially and politically. Her stories follow women's roles in the Palestinian struggles over the past three decades. *The Inheritance* addresses the lives and conditions of the Palestinian people post Oslo era while under Palestinian authority. Khalifeh depicts the women of Palestine as fighters, mothers, sisters, breadwinners, and political strategists.



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The post Oslo era, according to Wikipedia, can be defined as a time following the official signing of the Oslo Accords by Yassir Arafat and Shimon Peres in 1993. The Oslo Accords was an agreement between Israel and Palestine for a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, the post Oslo era defines a time of unrest, conflict, and resistance.

In a separate article, "Between Complicity and Subversion: Body Politics in Palestine National Narrative by Amal Amireh," she examines a more detailed explanation of the interconnection between gender and nationalism in the Palestinian context. She states that Khalifeh's men in *The Inheritance* are either sexually impotent, physically repulsive, or like Mazen, symbolically castrated. Khalifeh's female characters such as Fitna, was not only sexually frustrated and exploited, she was also penetrated (artificially inseminated by an Israeli doctor) by the enemy. According to Amireh, Palestinian feminists need a new theoretical discourse.

In *The Inheritance*, fiction follows fact and fact follows fiction. The actual events which occurred during Khalifeh's life in Palestine and in the time frame of *The Inheritance* are intermingled with one another. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has not been a simplistic two-state solution. There are many complicated facets which make up the prolonged violent conflict between the two sides. There is a long history between Israel and Palestine which is the backdrop for Khalifeh's book. This turmoil still exists today.

Currently, Khalifeh is considered one the most distinguished Palestinian novelists as well as one of the first female writers to come out of Palestine. As recent as April 2, 2006, she was honored by the AUC Press in Amman, Jordan for the translation of her latest novel, *The Inheritance*.



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Wild Thorns, is a complex blend of opposing motivations that delves into a story about honor, sacrifice, and revolution, asking what it means to be a man in a society that demands strength. Khalifeh writes about a Palestinian man's struggle to preserve his native land from the years of occupation it has endured by Israel.

A reviewer at www.myownlittleworld.com believes that in *Wild Thorns* Khalifeh is showing the absurdity and wrongness of her main character Usama and his violent actions against the Israeli occupation of Palestine: "What Usama lacks is a real connection to the 'people' of Palestine.... Usama convinces himself that he has no stake in the humdrum day-to-day lives of Palestinians. The 'revolution' is everything to him, to the point that if his cousin, Adil, is in the bus that Usama blows up, Usama thinks he can accept the loss." The reviewer goes on to praise Usama's cousin Adil who works for Israel to keep his family alive: "Even passive Adil was fighting, for by keeping his family alive, and in Palestine, he was opposing Israeli policy." This reviewer and other's believe Khalifeh favors one character or the other, but this is probably not the case. Khalifeh's brilliance shines through with the juxtaposition of Usama and Adil. They both show the extremes which the Israeli occupation produces in these Palestinian men. Usama is violent, and Adil passive. There is no in-between. Each character has strengths and weaknesses the other does not. The ideal character would be a combination of the two, but Khalifeh shows how that is impossible. The occupation produces only extremes in people. Instead of favoring one side or the other, Khalifeh documents the Palestinians' reactions to the occupation. Though the characters are fictional, by doing this she humanizes the situation and the people involved.

Web writer Orrin at brothersjudd.com (a website that focuses on political events, literature, and media) regards *Wild Thorns* as an important contribution to the publisher Interlink Books' Emerging Voices Series of international books that have not been previously translated into English. The reviewer addresses the problematic but understandable plight of individual Palestinians who are deeply moral who choose the path of violence because of the "evil logic of terror" which forces everyone to take sides. Orrin stresses the point that the novel is "non-polemical," that is, not controversial or an aggressive attack, even while exploring controversial topics. The argument Orrin makes is that Adil offers a "constructive alternative to terror and violence" but in the end, shares in Usama's fate, taking up weapons to fight with his people. This tragic ending emphasizes that those who are viewed as dangerous zealots might begin as "decent and reluctant men."



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Orrin continues to provide a commentary on the Israeli state, pointing out that it is “first and foremost a democracy,” and gives a brief political history of the conflicts in the West Bank. He predicts that if Palestine soon becomes a state, “lethal action” may be taken against “the enemy” by Israel. These killings would be viewed as more acceptable because the Palestinians represent an “internal ‘minority.’” Orrin’s final claim is that the Usamas and Adils continue to die while an unaffected Israel thrives.

Of further interest in the novel, is the humanization of those whom westerners would deem “terrorists.” Usama claims that he is a man “unromantic in thought and deed” but his sensitive descriptions of the land that he loves and the repeated scenes of him weeping prove that he is in truth a gentle and caring soul who has chosen the path of violence in order to protect that which he loves from occupation and destruction. This also calls into question ideas of masculinity, and what it means to be a protector, a man, a warrior, and a son. Usama is all of these things, but at the same time, challenges the ideas of them. He is depicted as being driven by love and devotion to not only his family, but Palestine, the land of his youth. Forced to choose between his love for his country and his ties to family, Usama must reconcile the ugliness of war with his own personal sensitivities.

The “freedom fighters” or “terrorists” (whatever label persists), talk to each other and form bonds in jail. One inmate remarks on Victor Hugo’s *Les Miserables*, calling it the “finest book ever written.” Khalifeh deliberately uses this classic story of tragic heroism and the fight for freedom from an oppressive government to offset it with the West Bank’s situation. In both novels, the idealist youth set out with guns to create a revolution, hoping for change, and end up barely registered by those who they wanted to acknowledge them. Their deaths are seemingly meaningless in the endless line of deaths past and to come. Khalifeh wants to humanize fighters like Adil and Usama and remind us that *Les Miserables*, with its French characters, follows a similar plot; however, not once are the revolutionaries in Hugo’s novel referred to as “terrorists.”

Khalifeh’s novels have been translated into many European languages ranging from French to Dutch to Hebrew. She is still writing today and is awaiting publication of a book called *Sayf Maksour, or A Shattered Summer*. Even if Palestine is able to find peace, Sahar Khalifeh and her works will continue to retain the weave of history and memory of the West Bank.



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