

Fractured Identities: Sexual Violence and The Struggle for Dignity in Women War Literature

Ms. Richa Chand

Assistant Professor, Department of English

NSN PG College

Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India

prc.jpub@gmail.com

Abstract

In war-torn societies, the collapse of legal and moral structures often gives rise to extreme violations of human dignity, with women frequently targeted through gender-based violence. This paper examines how literature set in conflict zones portrays the specific vulnerabilities of women and their resistance to dehumanization. Through a close reading of Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*, Bushra Al-Maqtari's *What Have You Left Behind?*, and Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin*, this paper explores the intersections of gender based violence, cultural disintegration, and human dignity. These narratives underscore the power of storytelling as a means of reclaiming voice, identity, and dignity in the face of systemic violence.

Keywords: Women, Gender Based Violence, Identity, Human Dignity, Pride, Feminism

The horrors of war do not end at the battlefield. For women, the consequences of conflict often extend into their homes, communities, and bodies. While early representations of gender-based violence in war often emerged from male-authored narratives or from a western gaze, twenty-first century women writers have reclaimed the literary space to centre women's voices, bodies, and inner lives amid conflict. These authors do not merely narrate suffering but rather redefine dignity as resistance, memory, and survival. In literary narratives set in war-torn regions, women's experiences frequently centre on sexual violence, forced

marriage, and the stripping away of personal agency, which are essentially forms of gender based violence that serve as both weapons and consequences of war. Yet amid these depictions of suffering, literature also becomes a space of testimony, resistance, and healing. This paper examines how novels grounded in the realities of war represent gender based violence not only as an assault on the body but as a profound violation of human dignity through the works of Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*, Bushra Al-Maqtari's *What Have You Left Behind?*, and Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin*.

As per Martha Nussbaum, “women in much of the world lack support for fundamental functions of a human life. They are less well-nourished than men, less healthy, more vulnerable to physical violence and sexual abuse”(Women). Human dignity necessarily implies the inherent worth of each individual, regardless of gender, social or political context. However, war creates conditions where this worth is often ignored or actively destroyed. In literature, this erosion is dramatized through women’s subjugation, both as victims of violence and as survivors within patriarchal and militarized cultures. Importantly, many war narratives also highlight the resilience and humanity that persists despite violence, suggesting that dignity can be wounded but not entirely erased.

Nadia Hashimi’s novel *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* is set in both contemporary and nineteenth century Afghanistan, draws parallels between generations of women resisting oppression. The narrative follows Rahima, a girl who lives as a *bacha posh*, a common Afghani practice of disguising a girl as a boy, and her great-great-grandmother Shekiba, who was disfigured by fire and later forced to serve as a harem guard. War functions as both background and catalyst in Rahima’s life. Her father, an opium addict and former mujahideen fighter, sells her into marriage at the age of thirteen. While her new husband, a powerful warlord, rapes and imprisons her owing to which Rahima feels objectified, as if she had become something less than a person. Devaluing of women is common worldwide, however, it is more acutely felt in

misogynistic cultures like that in Afghanistan. The reduction of Rahima to a mere object reflects the core function of gender based violence in war which is to strip away identity and control. However, as with *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Hashimi emphasizes the importance of ancestral memory and narrative continuity, she asserts how, “Decades of war and fundamentalist regimes left Afghan women battered and scarred, their rights buried under piles of rubble.” It is through the experiences of women like Rahima and Shekiba that Hashimi relays the truth about being a woman in a culture that values boys over girls. She nonetheless also posits hope in these women’s sheer grit that, “this tenacity is what I see changing the face of Afghanistan today and giving hope for tomorrow”(451). By learning Shekiba’s story, Rahima gains strength to resist and ultimately escape and as such it can also be said that the novel insists that storytelling is itself an act of reclaiming dignity.

Set during and after the Biafran Civil War in Nigeria, Chinelo Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Trees* explores how war intensifies not only physical violence but also societal policing of gender and sexuality. The protagonist, Ijeoma, comes of age during the war and discovers her sexual identity in a society that punishes same-sex love, especially amongst women. Though less overtly about physical wartime gender based violence, the novel powerfully portrays emotional and psychological violence against women who defy heteronormative roles. Ijeoma is forced into a heterosexual marriage to ‘cure’ her, and her husband’s emotional abuse reflects the violence of a society that denies her the right to exist as she is. Ijeoma’s inner monologue captures the conflict between self-erasure and self-acceptance which ultimately culminates in her conservative mother accepting her sexual preferences as she decides, “God, who created you, must have known what He did. Enough is enough”(322). This quiet closure affirms Ijeoma’s dignity in a world that continuously sought to deny it. In a war-torn, postcolonial setting, Ijeoma’s story becomes one of resistance against ideological violence. While gender based violence often involves physical coercion, Okparanta shows how cultural

and religious systems can inflict equally devastating wounds, ones that literature can expose and challenge.

In *What Have You Left Behind*, Bushra Al-Maqtari offers a haunting collection of testimonies from civilians caught in the horrors of the Yemeni war, many of whom are women whose suffering often goes unseen. While the book does not focus solely on gender-based violence, it becomes impossible to ignore how war magnifies the vulnerabilities of women as their bodies and lives become collateral in a conflict they did not choose. Stories of widowed mothers, girls forced to grow up too fast, and women who bury their children with their own hands unfold without embellishment. Women describe the moment their homes are reduced to rubble, killing their husbands, sons and daughters. In Sabah's words, "I didn't cry. I just stared at the hole that swallowed up my family...the home my husband had toiled years to build...the home that was no longer, the home that was replaced by a pit." While others like Munira recall her, "two daughters spread out on the floor; a pool of blood and silence," Sumaiyya reminds us of the tough calls women make in forsaking grief to protect their dependents from falling apart despite the painful memories (34-45).

In these raw expressions lies the unspeakable grief and violence that women in war endure, which is not just physical destruction, but the erasure of their roles as caregivers, protectors, and human beings. Al-Maqtari never strips her subjects of dignity, instead by giving them space to speak, she returns to them the very thing that the war tried to steal, their voice. These stories do not ask for pity, but they demand recognition. They show how even in the face of unimaginable loss, women carry memory, hold families together, and bear witness. Al-Maqtari states, "The scars of war don't go away. They stay in our souls, and in our memory. They remain alive in the minds of all those...who have lost their loved ones. The horrors of this war and our tragedy cannot be forgotten, simply because the world wants to pull the curtain down over it" (21). In this act of remembrance, *What Have You Left Behind* becomes more

than just a book about war, it becomes a testament to endurance, and to the quiet, persistent dignity that refuses to be erased.

Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin* chronicles four generations of a Palestinian family displaced by the creation of the state of Israel. Although not focused solely on gender-based violence, the novel poignantly illustrates how war and displacement uniquely impact women, particularly through state-sanctioned and personal violence. Amina, Amal's mother, becomes a symbol of stoic endurance in the face of exile and personal loss. Amal herself, the protagonist, is haunted by childhood trauma, including the death of her father and the disappearance of her brother. Later, as a refugee, she witnesses and survives sexual violence, an experience that Abulhawa describes with restraint yet emotional clarity. The war violates bodies, tears families apart, and displaces identity, but it is the persistence of narrative memory that restores dignity as Abulhawa says, "I learned the power of art and the importance of narrative in creating a safe and emotional landscape where people can meet and explore our shared humanity. I learned that novels can be emancipatory"(16). Amal's final decision to return to Palestine, not in triumph but in reclamation, signifies a profound act of dignity. The novel demonstrates that to remember and to name injustice is a resistance to dehumanization, a feminist reclamation of both land and self.

These novels do more than set their stories against the backdrop of conflicts, they expose how violence extends beyond the battlefield, working as a deliberate force to erase identity, silence voices, and strip away agency. Yet, through literature, resistance takes shape. The narrative voice becomes a vessel for women long silenced, allowing them to reclaim their stories. Memory and history bind generations together, creating a legacy of survival and strength. Even in the smallest acts of escaping, seeking education, or quietly defying expectations, women assert agency in spaces designed to suppress them. These stories do not allow violence to have the last word. Instead, they insist on dignity where it has been denied.

In these twenty first century novels by women authors, clear patterns emerge, wherein dignity is not granted by institutions but reclaimed through memory, storytelling, and solidarity among women. As Martha C. Nussbaum opines, “Women do overcome the greatest of obstacles, showing an amazing courage and resourcefulness”(Sex). The structure of these narratives hence often mirrors trauma itself in the non-linear, fragmented, punctuated by silence kind of way, echoing the broken yet enduring paths of the women within them. Crucially, these works resist casting women solely as victims and rather reveal how power is forged in unlikely places. By shifting the focus of war from the battlefield to the body, these writers challenge traditional ideas of conflict and resolution, offering a powerful redefinition rooted in lived experience.

Thus, in war literature centred on women’s experiences, gender-based violence is not simply an individual tragedy, it is a systemic expression of power, control, and moral collapse. Through *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, *Under the Udala Trees*, *What Have You Left Behind?* and *Mornings In Jenin* we see how gender based violence attacks not only the body but the core of human dignity. These narratives also offer powerful counter-narratives of resistance, healing, and reclamation. Literature becomes a means not only to remember suffering, but to restore voice and dignity to those whom war and patriarchal mindsets have tried to silence.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Copyright: © 2025 by Sandra Joseph Author(s) retain the copyright of their original work while granting publication rights to the journal.

License: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, allowing others to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon it, even for commercial purposes, with proper attribution. Author(s) are also permitted to post their work in institutional repositories, social media, or other platforms.

Works Cited

Abulhawa, Susan. *Mornings in Jenin*. "Foreword." Bloomsbury, London, Kindle ed., 2024, p.16.

Al-Maqtari, Bushra. *What Have You Left Behind?*. Translated By Sawad Hussain, Fitzcarraldo Editions, London, 2022, pp.21, 34-45. Print.

Hashimi, Nadia. *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*. Harper Collins, Kindle ed., 2015, p.451.

Nussbaum, Martha C. *Sex and Social Justice*. "Victims and Agents." OUP, Kindle Ed., 2000, p. 110.

---. *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*. "Introduction." Cambridge UP, Kindle Ed., 2000.

Okparanta, Chinelo. *Under the Udala Trees*. Granta publications, London, Kindle Ed., 2015, p.322.