



Domestic Space as a Site of Dual Resistance: A Case Study of Sahar Khalifeh's *Wild Thorns*

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Abstract

Sahar Khalifeh's *Wild Thorns* remains one of the most powerful Palestinian novels because it does not allow national struggle to be a question of public confrontation only. Rather it demonstrates that the daily locations of the domestic, the courtyard, the kitchen, the sickroom and the family house are highly political locations in which the processes of occupation and patriarchy intersect. In this paper, it is suggested that domestic space in *Wild Thorns* serves as a space of two-fold resistance. It is a space where the characters react not only to Israeli settler-colonial domination, but also to the internal authoritarian structures of Palestinian patriarchal life. The paper demonstrates that Khalifeh shifts the home as a passive setting to the ideological arena by reading the novel through feminist geography, postcolonial feminism, and the Palestinian resistance criticism. The house in the novel is never just private. It is trained through fear, work, surveillance, kinship duty and gendered silence and also a space in which struggles of refusal are created. The emotional labour, moral intelligence and tactical discourse of the women disrupt the patriarchal power and the ultimate demolition of the house of the family reveals the irreducibility of the colonial violence and the domestic oppression. The paper concludes that the success of Khalifeh is that he puts forward the resistance as not complete without it being challenged by the outside occupier and the within household reproductions of the structures of domination.

Keywords: Sahar Khalifeh, *Wild Thorns*, domestic space, Palestinian literature, women resistance, patriarchy, occupation, postcolonial feminism.

Introduction

Sahar Khalifeh's *Wild Thorns*, originally published in Arabic in Jerusalem in 1976 and translated in English, is widely recognised as one of the first Palestinian novels to portray life under Israeli occupation in the West Bank in a social, political and psychological complexity. Rather than offering resistance in terms of a simple binary between heroism and betrayal, the novel explores labour, class, kinship, masculinity and gender in the occupied everyday. It has been repeatedly pointed out by critics that Khalifeh uses fiction to expand the concept of Palestinian resistance by considering its fractures, contradictions, and internal costs (Abu-Manneh, 2016; Cooke, 1987; Faqir, 1987; Mahmoud, 2019; Metres, 2010; Patterson, 2014; Salami, 2025). What has made the novel remain powerful in its own critical way is its insistence that the political does not exist in the checkpoints, in prisons, and in military confrontations. It is also produced in the home, in the rhythms of domestic labour, restrictions on speech imposed on women, fatherly control over marriage and movement, and the burden of holding family life together under occupation (Khalifeh, 2003).

A considerable amount of scholarship has already examined *Wild Thorns* through the frameworks of nationalism, postcolonial resistance, patriarchy, empathy and decolonial temporality. Abu-Manneh (2016) reads Khalifeh as a writer who raises radical questions about the topics of nationalism and feminism together. Patterson (2014) situates the novel in a wider context of borders and morality struggle. Mahmoud (2019) examines resistance as a key postcolonial category of the text, while Metres (2010) illustrates the novel's challenge of occupation and Palestinian nationalist certainties. Jarrad et al. (2024) emphasize the importance of empathy as one form of resistance more recently, whereas Salami (2025) claims that the temporal interruptions of the novel themselves do decolonial work. Other scholars have specifically discussed the issue of patriarchy and double colonisation in the novel and demonstrate that Khalifeh reveals both the domination of the Israelis and the male-centred power in the Palestinian society (Khresheh & Radwan, 2019; Mohamadi & Sadeghi, 2014). However, the domestic world warrants more discussion not only as a symbolic continuation of the nation, but, in reality, it serves as a material and emotional place where the forces intersect.

This paper argues that domestic space in *Wild Thorns* is not an apolitical place to hide from history. It is one of the main arenas through which historical life gets lived, suffered, and resisted. The domestic home, the ailing room of the father, the daily activities of the women, and even the endangered house are some of the locations on which colonial violence and patriarchy are brought out to coexist mutually. In this regard,

the novel enacts what can be termed as dual resistance resistance to occupation and resistance to domestic authoritarianism. Khalifeh does not put these struggles in competition. Instead, she demonstrates that one cannot be confronted without the other. The country cannot be cured by a family that breeds fear, silence, inequitable power and the family cannot be liberated when occupation keeps creeping, distorting and ultimately destroying the family.

This argument builds on a conceptual frame that brings together feminist geography, postcolonial feminism, and Palestinian resistance criticism. The study is informed by the work done on the social production of space, the gendering of domestic life, the politics of home, and the intimate relation between nation and family (Ahmed, 2006; Bhabha, 2012; Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Harlow, 1996, 2023; hooks, 2014, 2020; Johnson, 1990; Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 1994; Mohanty, 2003). It is also premised on research that interprets the writing of Palestinian women as an important site of reimagining the conditions of resistance, inserting oneself, and historiography (Abdel-Malek, 2005; Amireh, 2003; Ebileeni, 2017; Haj, 1992; Mir, 2013; Mogannam, 2024; Peteet, 1991; Saadi, 2015; Sabbagh, 1989). Through this approach, the paper illustrates that the house in *Wild Thorns* is never just a background setting. It is one of the major political arguments of the novel.

A Conceptual Frame of Domestic Space, Gender, and Resistance.

In order to take domestic space in *Wild Thorns* seriously, it is necessary to look beyond the notion that the home is naturally private, feminine, or politically secondary. Lefebvre (1991) claims that space is a social production rather than a natural one that is simply given. Domestic space, therefore, is affected by power, routine, labour and ideology. Feminist geographers took this insight further by demonstrating that the home was often portrayed as a safe and intimate place when in fact it is a place of gendered discipline, restricted movement and unequal labour (Johnson, 1990; Massey, 1994; Rose, 1993). Blunt and Dowling (2006) similarly describe home as lived place and spatial imaginary, that is, it is both material and symbolic. In Khalifeh's novel, this double nature is very important. The house is a literal building that is being inhabited, but it is also an emotional and ideological building where the notions of nation, masculinity, authority, sacrifice, and respectability are being structured.

This reading can be enriched with the help of postcolonial feminist thought. Mohanty (2003) cautions against abstract narratives of women's oppression that untether gender from history, colonialism, class and place. Spivak (2015) has made a similar reminder that the subaltern woman is commonly spoken for by dominant discourses, be they colonial or nationalist. In Palestinian contexts, this issue is especially acute

because the nation has often been envisioned using gendered metaphors. Amireh (2003) demonstrates how national discourses tend to feminise the land and maintain the male dominance on real women. According to Yuval-Davis (1997), women are the core of symbolic reproduction of the nation even though they do not have equal agency in making it. In *Wild Thorns*, Khalifeh reveals this contradiction with unusual clarity. The home is where the rhetoric of the nation encounters the real life of women that is limited by their bodies and desires and their own duties.

The politics of the home is also important here, as bell hooks notoriously considers homeplace as a place of resistance, not that it is not subject to domination, but because it can be a place where dignity and subjectivity can be defended against the dehumanizing power (hooks, 2014, 2020). This observation can be particularly helpful in reading Palestinian literature, in which home is laden with the burden of loss, revisiting, memory, and disruption. Sa'idi (2015) and Mir (2013) demonstrate that Palestinian writing continues to associate identity with dispossession and return, and Boym (2001) is reminding us that the desire to go home is not only an affective process but also a political one. In *Wild Thorns* however, the home is never idealised. Khalifeh is opposed to nostalgia of pure domestic origin. The coming back of Usama does not mean coming back to innocence but a clash with depleted labour regimes, weary kinship, and a family system of sickness and dictatorship. Neither is the domestic refuge, or false consciousness. It is a combat zone of meanings.

This is why it is useful to have Bhabha's idea of ambivalent space. For Bhabha (2012), cultural locations are seldom stable and pure. They are often interstitial, being conflict and re-signification. Ahmed (2006) adds that orientations within space determine what bodies can reach, inhabit or move towards. *Wild Thorns*: In domestic space, unequal orientations are used to organise it. Men go out to work, plot, or fight yet women are the ones who usually carry the burden of continuity within the home. Yet Khalifeh also plays with those orientations. The interior of the home will become where the political judgment is formed, where the male certitude is undermined, and where the female witnessing reveals the inadequacy of nationalism bravado and the male authority. In this sense the household in the novel is not just feminised space. It is contested space.

Reading Home in Wild Thorns

Khalifeh's novel is set in the occupied West Bank after the 1967 war in a world in which Palestinians are materially bound to the very structures that dominate them. Laborers enter Israel to earn a salary, families get by selling out, and opposition is disintegrated by practical necessity. When Usama comes back years

later, he anticipates people who remain landbound with nationalist belief. Instead, he experiences fatigue, accommodation and an everyday economy structured by occupation. This tension is central to the novel and several critics have noted that Khalifeh rejects romantic simplifications of resistance by bringing social contradiction and moral ambiguity to the fore (Abu-Manneh, 2016; Mahmoud, 2019; Metres, 2010; Patterson, 2014). What needs to be highlighted here is that these contradictions are constantly processed within the household. It is the house where men come back to shame themselves with hard work, where women take the emotional rubble of survival and where the justification of resistance and accommodation is bargained.

Wild Thorns domestic world can therefore not be separated with the colonial economy. The resistance literature work of Harlow emphasizes that literary texts that are produced in the situations of anti-colonialism tend to document struggle not just in the form of unconstrained militancy, but through the life forms of everyday oppression (Harlow, 1996, 2023). Khalifeh takes that principle to heart. Her domestic spaces reveal that occupation is introduced in the family via wage dependence, fear, exhaustion, surveillance and corporeal vulnerability. It is not just soldiers and prisons that enforce it is domination. It is also the way colonial rule reorders labour and sucks the life out of the social relations. The result of this is that the house is no longer a stable private unit. It is opened up to the economic and psychological violence of the occupation. Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2006) and Sousa et al. (2014) both show in different ways how Palestinian women's experience of home is marked by exactly this overlapping of intimacy and political violence. Khalifeh fictionalises that overlap with amazing precision.

Domestic Labour and the Political Economy of Survival

One of the most important aspects of Wild Thorns is the way it discusses labour as a domestic rather than simply public issue. The men's work in the factories in Israel is not simply economic choice. It restructures the moral life of the family. The income under occupation is used to nourish the household, to treat and to sustain basic survival, but it also further propagates shame, dependence, and division. This is why Usama's purist vision of resistance continually clashes with those who need to maintain domestic life. The moral compromises of the workers are inseparable from the obligation of the family. This observation by Khalifeh is delicate. She does not forgive teamwork, but she claims that resistance can never be explained outside the labour that sustains the household.

Adil's role in particular shows us the fusion of domestic and political. He works ceaselessly, not of ideological conviction, but because the survival of the family and the medical needs of the father require it

to do so. His labour is filial and economic and national at one and the same time. He is trapped between anti-colonial desire and domestic duty. Metres (2010) is correct in her statement that the novel problematizes heroic narratives of struggle, and Adil is the complication. He is not a cowardly person, nor a revolutionary icon. He is a man worn down by the burden of running a broken household in a broken political order. His labour to expose the limits of abstract nationalism. The country that Khalifeh constructs in his fiction is not maintained by slogans but gendered and classed work which in most cases is invisible.

This emphasis also leaves room for reading women's domestic labour politically. In many nationalist discourses, women's contribution is only acknowledged in cases of overtly sacrificial or symbolic contribution. Khalifeh rejects such a narrow script. Her women maintain memory, control emotional life, take in violence, and silently challenge the conditions of male power. Such work is not secondary. It is a type of survival labour without which neither family nor community could survive. Sabbagh (1989), Peteet (1991) and Mogannam (2024) all demonstrate that Palestinian women's political role historically has gone far beyond spectacular activism. Everyday organisation, care, endurance, and moral leadership is important. One such domain in *Wild Thorns* where that more general resistance can be discerned is the household.

The Sick Father, the House and Patriarchal Power

If the colonial system invades the home through labour and dependency, patriarchy organises the home from within through command, silence and emotional coercion. The father figure in *Wild Thorns* is therefore central. He is physically weak, dependent on care and increasingly ill, even so he still exercises authority over the household. Khalifeh's genius is not to agree with a binary opposition of strength and weakness. Patriarchal power does not end with the material dependency of the patriarch. In some ways it becomes even more visible, because the household has to continue to serve a symbolic authority that no longer keeps it alive. Khresheh and Radwan (2019) and Mohamadi and Sadeghi (2014) both comment on the novel's connection between the father of the family and larger systems of domination. It is a convincing reading, but the domestic frame enables us to observe something more precise, that the house itself is the machine by which patriarchal power is perpetuated even in decay.

This is why the family home in *Wild Thorns* is not a sentimental structure. It is a disciplinary one. Decisions concerning marriage, love, movement, reputation and obligation are mediated through the father's will. The desire of Nuwar is not respected as self-authorising. Basil's defiance is scandalous because he is challenging paternal ownership over the future of the family. Adil's submission is demanded even if it robs him. Here

Khalifeh comes close to what Young (2005) describes as the unjust structuring of embodied freedom. The bodies are unequally distributed in space. Some command, others serve and women are even more especially made to move in a narrower moral geography. Woolf's famous demand for a room of one's own refers back to the relation between space and agency; while Khalifeh reveals what happens when women are denied not only room, but also decision, speech, and legitimate desire (Woolf, 2014).

The father's authority also makes a deeper political point. The interview with Khalifeh by Johnson shows that the novelist did not just see the crisis of 1967 as a defeat by the military but a manifestation of internal rot in the Arab social systems (Johnson, 1990). Nazareth and Khalifeh (1980) also demonstrate how she did not want to decouple women liberation with social transformation. This idea pervades *Wild Thorns*. Patriarchal family life is not depicted as an issue that should be addressed after national liberation. It is part of the reason liberation is incomplete. Haj (1992) makes a similar point in her analysis of Palestinian patriarchal relationships, demonstrating the ways in which gender hierarchy can be used by colonial power. That logic is played out in fiction by Khalifeh. A family dominated by fear, silence and male privilege are not well suited to yield out true collective freedom.

Women Speech, Silence and Moral Agency.

One of the most striking features of *Wild Thorns* is that women's agency is not seen so much through public militancy but through intimate forms of judgement, endurance and interruption. This is important since Palestinian literature has often been read through male-centred models of martyrdom, exile and armed struggle. All of these authors demonstrate that Palestinian women writers restructure those frames by demanding other registers of experience: Abdel-Malek (2005), Amireh (2003), and Ebileeni (2017). And that is precisely what Khalifeh's fiction does. Her women are not politically insignificant because they speak in domestic settings. On the contrary, the domestic setting is the place where the contradiction between official rhetoric and lived truth is shown most clearly.

It is Nuwar's position that is especially revealing. Her desires are limited by patriarchal family authority and yet her emotional life cannot be confined to passive victimhood. She represents a type of resistance that is carried out through refusal to internalise the moral order of the father. This is important as the question of resistance in the novel is not just about direct confrontation with the occupier. It is also concerned with the maintenance of inner autonomy in the face of those who purport to be acting on behalf of family honour or national necessity. The question, which Spivak poses regarding the ability of the subaltern to speak is applicable to this case not the fact that Khalifeh makes women mute, but that the novel

demonstrates that the speech of women is frequently mediated by mechanisms that are discrediting, controlling, or preemptive (Spivak, 2015). Khalifeh works around this problem by making domestic tension itself narratively legible. Women may be constrained but their experience become interpretively central.

At the same time, the novel does not romanticise silence. Silence in *Wild Thorns* is not only tactical, but also dictated and frequent, and usually hurtful. Suleiman (2011) has shown the inseparable character of language and identity in the Palestine-Israel conflict from the questions of self-representation and boundary. In Khalifeh's fiction, that insight is extended to family space. Who is the speaker in the house, who is believed, whose experience is the name of reality, are all political questions. Jarrad et al. (2024) are right in drawing attention to empathy in the novel, because empathy here is not softness separated from politics. It is a way of perception that breaks violent simplifications. Women are inclined to see what ideological men are afraid to see; that survival without dignity degrades the self, but so does opposition that recreates domination at home. Their moral vision is therefore politically diagnostic.

Return, Memory, the Unhomely.

The coming back of Usama to Palestine is usually interpreted as a nationalistic coming back to a violated country, but Khalifeh turns the coming back to disorientation and not to a restoration. He returns from his absence, anticipating recognisable morality but encounters debased livelihoods, divided loyalties and changed domestic relationships. In this regard, the novel addresses what Sa'di (2015) defines as the key theme of exile and return in Palestinian literary imagination, but Khalifeh makes it even more complex by demonstrating that home has been altered by occupation itself. Boym's work on nostalgia is helpful here as *Wild Thorns* refuses a consoling longing for lost authenticity. The home returned to is not whole, and cannot simply be repossessed through memory (Boym, 2001).

This is one reason why Patterson's reading of the novel as a profound boundary problem is so useful (Patterson, 2014). The territorial boundaries in *Wild Thorns* are not limited to this. They are moral and domestic. The difference of home and workplace, family duty and political compromise, care and submission, fatherhood and tyranny, becomes shaky. Bhabha's idea of the unhomely is also seen, even when not called by name. The house is inhabited but unsettled. It is familiar, yet estranged. Occupation has put it materially; patriarchy has organized it symbolically. What seems to be a private interior is saturated by public violence. For this reason, the novel does not allow easy nationalist sentiment. The contradictions of national life are most intolerable at home.

House Demolition and the Denial of Inherited Tyranny

The culminating image of the novel, the destruction of the family house and Adil's refusal to save the father's dialysis machine, is one of the most powerful scenes in modern Palestinian fiction. On the nearest level, the fact of demolition reveals the savage reality of occupation: the state of colonization is able to conquer and destroy the material heart of family life. Shalhoub-Kevorkian's work on house demolition in Palestine demonstrates that such violence is never just architectural. It attacks memory, continuity, kinship and psychic stability (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2006). Sousa et al. (2014) also show that home under political violence is closely linked to mental health and resilience. So, Khalifeh looks forward to these insights fictionally. When the house is under threat and being destroyed, the political violence of occupation becomes intimate, bodily and immediate.

Yet there is another meaning to the scene as well. Adil's failure to save the dialysis machine is not merely despair. It is a morally charged act which indicates the rejection of inherited patriarchal burden. Such critics as Mohamadi and Sadeghi (2014) and Khresheh and Radwan (2019) see in it a symbolic separation with the oppressive power of the father, and the reading is still very strong. What is relevant for the purpose of this paper is that the break is taking place within domestic space itself. The house becomes the space into which anti-colonial victimhood and patriarchal power are dragged into relation. The father is vulnerable but he is also the bearer of an order of the household that has become exhausted by those who maintain it. The saving of the machine would be a saving of not only a life, but also a system of coercive continuity. Adil's hesitation and refusal registers the unbearable knowledge that not everything inherited should be allowed to survive.

Khalifeh's point is not cruelly anti-family. It is more historically and ethically cutting than that. She suggests that a society occupied by some power cannot afford to sentimentalise domestic authority. If the home is a reproduction of domination, then it prepares people for subjection instead of freedom. This is where the feminism of the novel is inextricably intertwined with its anti-colonial vision. Harlow (1996), Abu-Manneh (2016), and Salami (2025) each in their own ways demonstrate that Khalifeh is not only resistant to colonial narrative, but also complacent nationalist. The last demolition scene makes that resistance come together in one concentrated image. Colonial violence is responsible for destroying the house from outside, but the moral crisis within the house shows us that the domestic order was already unstable. Liberation, the novel suggests, does not require the restoration of the old home, but the formation of another kind of home entirely.

Table 1 Domestic Spaces and Forms of Dual Resistance in *Wild Thorns*

Domestic space / element	Narrative function in the novel	Resistance to occupation	Resistance to patriarchy	Key interpretive source(s)
Family house	Main site of everyday life under occupation	Reveals how colonial violence penetrates ordinary survival	Reveals hierarchy, fear, obedience, and generational conflict	Khalifeh (2003); Abu-Manneh (2016); Mahmoud (2019)
Father's sickroom	Space of care, illness, dependence, and control	Shows how occupation intensifies economic and emotional strain	Shows how patriarchal power survives even through male weakness	Khresheh & Radwan (2019); Mohamadi & Sadeghi (2014)
Women's domestic routines	Labour of survival and emotional continuity	Sustains family life despite economic domination	Exposes invisible gendered labour as political work	Peteet (1991); Sabbagh (1989); Mogannam (2024)
Nuwar's interior domestic world	Space of desire, restraint, and judgement	Preserves moral consciousness under occupation	Challenges paternal control over emotion and marriage	Amireh (2003); Spivak (2015); Suleiman (2011)
The threatened / demolished home	Climactic exposure of colonial violence	Demonstrates direct material assault on Palestinian dwelling	Symbolically breaks the continuity of tyrannical domestic order	Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2006); Sousa et al. (2014)
Dialysis machine	Burden of inherited dependence	Shows survival under occupation reduced to managed crisis	Represents the refusal to preserve a	Mohamadi & Sadeghi (2014); Salami (2025)

			decayed patriarchal order	
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Source: Prepared by the author on the basis of *Wild Thorns* and related scholarship (Abu-Manneh, 2016; Khalifeh, 2003; Mahmoud, 2019; Mohamadi & Sadeghi, 2014; Salami, 2025; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2006; Sousa et al., 2014).

Conclusion

Wild Thorns is still a fundamental Palestinian novel not merely in the sense that it is about occupation but where occupation is really practiced. The response to this question by Khalifeh is obvious: it is experienced in the field, the factory, the prison, the road, and most importantly, in the home. The political space in the novel is not supplanted by domestic space. It is where politics becomes normal, embodied and ethically charged. The domesticization of the slowness of wage dependence, the humiliation of survival under domination, the disruption of the nationalist consensus, and the unequal distribution of the weight between women and younger relatives are registered in the household. Read in this way, the novel does not divide the public resistance from the private life. It shows that the two are inseparable.

The paper has argued that the domestic in Wild Thorns is a site of dual resistance. First, it is a place where the impacts of the colonial occupation are revealed in their close-up forms. Secondly, it is a place where patriarchal power is challenged, strained, and at times symbolically rejected. Khalifeh's feminism does not undermine her anti-colonial politics. It deepens it. She extends the definition of resistance per se by demonstrating that liberation is unattainable through households that perpetuate domination. That is why her work is addressed not only to the history of Palestinian literature but to the greater feminist and postcolonial discussions of home, nation, and embodied freedom (Ahmed, 2006; hooks, 2014, 2020; Mohanty, 2003; Young, 2005; Yuval-Davis, 1997).

Finally, Khalifeh's treatment of domestic space is important because it is rejecting two comforting myths simultaneously. The first myth is that the country can be saved by means of masculine struggle only. The second is that the home is naturally innocent, outside power, and outside ideology. Wild Thorns dismantles both. The house is political in the sense that domination is reproduced in the house, however, the house is political in the sense that refusal starts in the house. By placing domestic space at the center of Palestinian resistance, Khalifeh provides an idea of freedom that is national, intimate, collective, gendered, historical and very human.

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