

## SAHAR KHALIFEH

### A PALESTINIAN NOVELIST

*Ghena Ismail*

Sahar Khalifeh was born to a conservative Palestinian family of eight girls and one boy. After the death of her two sisters in their childhood, she heard comments of relief among the women in the family that "the burden had eased." Khalifeh's adolescence was a very critical and intense period. She read, painted, danced, sang, and vividly expressed her emotions which worried her mother who eventually sent her to a nun's boarding school. Ever since Khalifeh was a child, teachers and nuns always expected her to

become a writer or artist. However, she, like most women in Palestine then, was deprived of the opportunity to develop her skills since there were no universities in the country then. "To join a university, meant that a woman had to travel which was considered a social taboo." Remarks such as "Death would come first" were the words she heard from her parents whenever she voiced her desire to become an artist or a writer.

The moment Khalifeh graduated from school, the "bridegroom was waiting for her." She told her parents that marriage was not among her plans at that stage because she wanted to pursue her education; however, their reply was that they would rather "bury her" than have her voice such opinions. At eighteen Khalifeh found herself entrapped in a marriage which she described later as a "nightmare". Her husband, an addicted gambler, was very different from her in character, thought, and emotion. Whenever Khalifeh wrote, she was confronted with her husband's violent reaction. "He tore my paintings and writings, but this did not stop me. I continued to write in his absence while my daughter kept watch." In the beginning, writing for Khalifeh was a means of escape from the misery she was living in: "When I wrote, I let free reign to my emotions and did not feel restricted in any way."

Khalifeh had written several short poems before she decided to focus on novel writing. The manuscript of her first novel, **After the Defeat**, (*Ba'da al-Hazimah*), based on her own experience as a Palestinian and a woman in the occupied territories, was confiscated at the bridge that divides Jordan from the West bank.

Her second novel, **We Are No Longer Your Slaves**, marked a transition from marital life to a new career. Acceptance of the novel for publication by Dār al-Ma'āref was a ray of hope amidst a world of despair that was about to lead her to suicide. Khalifeh clung to this hope and nourished it until she was eventually able to take the final decision of divorce. She found no difficulty getting the divorce since she had *al-'ishmah* (i.e. the legal right to divorce). For her, these experiences aroused many questions regarding other women who desperately



"Jericho Girls", 1971, oil on canvas. Jumana Hussein

want to divorce their husbands, but are hindered by innumerable legal obstacles.

Having a clear vision of what she wanted, Khalifeh enrolled in the English Department at Bir Zeit University. "Right from the beginning, I knew what I wanted - to become a writer who has a fixed income." After graduating with a B.A degree in English in 1977, Khalifeh worked as a supervisor of media affairs at Bir Zeit University and began collecting information for her next novel.

In her novels, we note a marked development in the role and status of women. Whereas, in her early writings, Khalifeh portrays the oppressed and passive type of woman, the liberal and assertive woman dominates her later novels, showing the development of Khalifeh's own feminist awareness.

In **We Are No Longer Your Slaves**, the women depicted are rebellious and aspire for liberation, but they lack a well-developed feminist awareness: "In the beginning, I wrote from the point of view of a woman whose experience did not go beyond the walls of her home." Even in the next novel **Wild Thorns** the only woman character is marginal, and her liberation comes through her brother. Does Khalifeh intend to imply then that woman's liberation could only be achieved through men? Khalifeh explains that she wrote this novel at a stage when she wanted to prove that she could be as involved in nationalistic issues as any man was: "My attention, then, was directed towards men, for I worked in factories side by side with men and hardly saw any women there." **Sunflower** a live account of the involvement of women in the "cause", marks a turning point in Khalifeh's writing: "My feminist awareness started to develop when I was writing **Sunflower**."

In her most recent novel, **The Inheritance**, Khalifeh narrates the story of a woman who comes back from New York to the West Bank in search of her roots and culture which she heard much about through her father's memories and nostalgic tears. The heroine comes to Wadi Al-Rayhan, a traditional Arab city, looking for generosity and compassion, but finds instead conflict and exploitation among members of the same family. In place of the materialistic western society, she finds a complicated and unhealthy socio-political reality. Unlike her previous novels that ended in a hopeful note, Khalifeh ends **The Inheritance** with a question.

For Khalifeh, feminism means justice, a revolt against old practices. It bridges gaps, mends them, and tries to understand them. Khalifeh has a very clear stand on feminist writing. The author stated, in a powerful speech on feminist writing, which she delivered at the Lebanese American University last year on the occasion of the International Women's Day, that time and again we have been asked whether feminist writing existed, and that very often our answers have been "evasive, apologetic, twisted, hidden, ambiguous, and dishonest." She concluded by asserting that "feminist writing of course exists to those who are sensitive to women's sufferings, to those who are not afraid,

to those who do not hesitate to hold the candle in the street, in darkness, and in the pathways of the people of the cave."

According to Khalifeh, the major obstacles facing her today as a writer are those imposed by the Arab regimes. "We had a misconception that the Palestinians will create a democratic system different from the existing other Arab regimes; however, the Palestinian system has proved to be one of the worst." Khalifeh's greatest aspiration is to continue writing despite all barriers.



IDENTIFICATION CARD

- Born in Nablus, Palestine in April, 1941.
- Holds a Ph.D. in the Modern Novel from the USA.
- Member of the International Book Program.
- Author of the following novels:

**We Are No Longer Your Slaves.** *Lam Na'ud Jawāri Lakum.* Beirut: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1974.

**Wild Thorns.** (*Al-Ṣabbār*). Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, new ed. Wild Thorns. - Trans. by Trevor Le Gassick and Elizabeth Fernea. London: Al Saqī Books, 1985.

**Sunflower.** *'Abbād al-Shams.* Beirut: The Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), 1980.

**Diary of an Unrealistic Woman.** *Mudhakkārāt Imra'ah Ghayr Wāqī'yyah.* Beirut: Dār al-'Ādāb, 1986.

**The Door of the Courtyard.** (*Bāb al-Saḥāh*) Beirut: Dār al-'Ādāb, 1990.

**The Inheritance.** (*Al-Mīrāth*). Beirut: Dār al-'Ādāb, 1997.