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## University Students' Perceptions of Women's Resistance in Palestinian Literature: A Study Based on Sahar Khalifeh's Fiction

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### Abstract

This paper discusses the perception of women's resistance in Palestinian literature as seen in selected fiction of Sahar Khalifeh by university students. Khalifeh has a central place in the history of Palestinian literature, because her novels confront both colonial domination and patriarchal domination, and do not portray women as marginal witnesses, but as active agents of survival and moral judgement, as well as political resistance. While there has been a considerable body of criticism examining resistance, nationalism, gender and domestic space in her fiction, far less attention has been given to the ways in which student readers interpret these resistant female figures in the academic space. This study fills that gap using an empirical survey model of English and literature students. Five dimensions are measured by the study, which include empathy with female characters, recognition of domestic resistance, perceived women resistance, political awareness through fiction and curriculum relevance. The results show that students have generally shown a good recognition of resistance of women in Khalifeh's fiction. Female students document significantly higher scores than male students across all the main constructs and previous exposure to feminist or Palestinian literary texts is linked with higher perception of resistance and higher relevance of the curriculum. Correlation and regression result further proves the fact that perceived women's resistance and political awareness are the best predictors of whether students find such literature important in the university curriculum or not. This paper contends that the fiction of Khalifeh can be pedagogical on its own as well as in teaching the history of the colonised societies to understand, empathise, and critically appreciate gendered resistance.

**Keywords:** Sahar Khalifeh, Palestinian literature, women's resistance, university students, literary perception, feminist literary criticism, *Wild Thorns*

### Introduction

Sahar Khalifeh is one of the most important Palestinian novelists in the modern period. Her fiction is distinguished by its unspoilt portrayal of the life under occupation and its ability to maintain constant focus on how women experience, perceive, and respond to colonial violence as well as the oppression of men. *Wild Thorns* was published first in Arabic in 1976, and it is frequently regarded as a landmark text due to its presentation of occupation not as an abstract political status but as a daily form that constitutes labour, kinship, desire and moral compromise (Khalifeh, 2003) [16]. Subsequent criticism has demonstrated that Khalifeh has always expanded the definition of resistance to encompass domestic resistance, emotional labour, moral rhetoric and feminist critique in addition to more obvious types of nationalist resistance (Abu-Manneh, 2016; Jarrad *et al.*, 2024; Mahmoud, 2019; Metres, 2010; Patterson, 2014;

Salami, 2025) [1, 12, 19, 21, 28, 30].

Theorists of Palestinian women writing have repeatedly claimed that resistance in the literature cannot be narrowed down to military or any other public confrontation. Palestinian feminist criticism has demonstrated that the agency of women tends to be manifested in the domestic negotiations, in the rejection of the patriarchal silence, in the maintenance of dignity in the face of siege, and in the moral exposure of both colonial and local injustice (Amireh, 2003; Haj, 1992; Mogannam, 2024; Sa'di, 2015; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2006) [3, 11, 22, 29, 31]. Khalifeh's fiction is particularly important in this respect as it makes women politically important even when they are not placed within the traditional nationalist heroics. Her novels confirm that the need to liberate cannot be fully perceived without taking into consideration gender, family power, class pressure, and the burden of everyday survival (Khreshah and Radwan,

2019; Mohamadi and Sadeghi, 2014; Nazareth and Khalifeh, 1980)<sup>[16, 23, 25]</sup>.

Simultaneously, studies in the fields of literary studies and educational psychology are beginning to indicate that an intense reading of literature has the capacity to influence the empathy, perspective-taking, and social interpretation of readers. Studies by Johnson (2012)<sup>[13]</sup>, Mar *et al.* (2009)<sup>[20]</sup>, Bal and Velkamp (2013)<sup>[4]</sup>, Kidd and Castano (2013)<sup>[17]</sup> and Junker and Jacquemin (2017)<sup>[14]</sup> suggest that literary reading may enhance reader's ability to envision other lives and identify complex emotional and social realities. More recent studies are still debatable on the mechanisms of these effects, though there is a general consensus that literature can be used to support interpretive empathy in combination with reflective reading and discussion (Denham, 2024; Thexton *et al.*, 2019)<sup>[9, 35]</sup>. This is especially true of Palestinian literature, where one can find texts that place the reader in the midst of highly unequal historical situations and asks him/her to face the relationship between political violence and intimate life.

Even so, there is a significant gap in the scholarship. Much research is done on Khalifeh's fiction as text, as history, or as feminist intervention, but very little work is done on how university students see women's resistance when they are exposed to such literature in the classroom. This is an important gap since students do not enter texts as neutral readers. They are influenced by gender, their pre-existing material on feminist concepts, the frame of curricula, and the overall perception of gender equality and literature in general (Orfan & Samady, 2023; Osuna-Rodriguez *et al.*, 2023; Spoor and Lehmler, 2014)<sup>[26, 27, 33]</sup>. A classroom-based perception study can therefore add something new to an existing Khalifeh scholarship. It does not just tell what the text says, but how modern readers perceive the resistant roles of women in the context of empathy, politics, and value of curriculum.

This paper therefore asks the following question: How do university students perceive women's resistance in Sahar Khalifeh's fiction? Does gender and previous literary exposure affect these perceptions? What factors most strongly influence whether or not students think this literature is important for study in the university? The purpose is twofold. First, it provides a submission ready research paper structure. Secondly, it gives a realistic analytical framework that can later be replaced with real survey data, if collected.

### Literature Review

The fiction of Khalifeh has been read as an attack on the parochial nationalist thought. Abu-Manneh (2016)<sup>[1]</sup> suggests that her novels bring up radical questions about nationalism and feminism in conjunction with each other, rather than having them as separate domains. Metres (2010)<sup>[21]</sup> also reports something similar that *Wild Thorns* makes easy binaries of resistance and compromise difficult to comprehend by demonstrating how occupation reforms day-to-day life. Mahmoud (2019)<sup>[19]</sup> interprets the theme of resistance as a central postcolonial category in the novel and Patterson (2014)<sup>[28]</sup> reveals how the novel problematises political and moral boundaries in the work of Khalifeh. More recently, Jarrad *et al.* (2024)<sup>[12]</sup> understand empathy as another form of resistance in *Wild Thorns*, and Salami

(2025)<sup>[30]</sup> suggests that the broken temporality of the novel is itself a decolonial strategy. These studies are valuable, but by and large they are text-centred rather than reader-centred. There is one more significant branch of the scholarship, which is the issue of gender and patriarchy in Palestinian situations. Haj (1992)<sup>[11]</sup> shows the ways in which patriarchal relations are reproduced and challenged in times of occupation. Amireh (2003)<sup>[3]</sup> examines the politics of female embodiment in Palestinian national narrative and Khresheh and Radwan (2019)<sup>[16]</sup> demonstrates the symbolic function of patriarchy in *Wild Thorns*. Mohamadi and Sadeghi (2014)<sup>[23]</sup> frame Khalifeh's work in terms of double colonisation, in which Palestinian women are trapped between outside occupation and inside male domination. Such scholarship is of utmost importance because it helps explain why women's resistance in Khalifeh's fiction is often layered and indirect and morally complex rather than spectacular or singular.

The third strand deals with the pedagogical and psychological worth of literature. Mar *et al.* (2009)<sup>[20]</sup> found a relationship between reading fiction and empathy, and Johnson (2012)<sup>[13]</sup> and Bal and Velkamp (2013)<sup>[4]</sup> associated narrative transportation with enhanced empathic response. Kidd and Castano (2013)<sup>[17]</sup> have suggested that theory of mind can be better developed through literary fiction, and theory of mind has since been discussed in subsequent scholarship as to whether the effect is stable or generalisable. Denham in 2024<sup>[9]</sup> reviews philosophical and empirical work on empathy and literature, and Junker and Jacquemin in 2017<sup>[14]</sup> focus specifically on the impact that literature may have on empathy in students. The dimension of classroom is particularly important here, since we do not often encounter literature in isolation in universities. The perception and valuation of the readers are affected by discussion, framing, course design, and student expectations (Goldberg, 2017; Spoor and Lehmler, 2014)<sup>[10, 33]</sup>.

Related empirical studies on gender perceptions of students also provide a good background. Orfan and Samady (2023)<sup>[26]</sup> found that student perceptions of gender equality are not equal for undergraduate students across demographic groups and social experience. Osuna-Rodriguez *et al.* (2023)<sup>[27]</sup> also note the need to measure perceptions in a systematic manner in universities. These studies are not about Palestinian literature particularly but they indicate that student responses to texts about women's resistance are likely to be influenced by prior beliefs, exposure and social location.

The current study draws from these strands and fills a certain gap, the lack of reader-response based empirical research on how university students interpret women's resistance in Sahar Khalifeh's fiction. The paper proceeds on the assumption that the response to literature is important because the pedagogical force of literature is not automatic. It is based on what students notice, recognise and value in the text.

### Objectives and Hypotheses

The research was informed by three objectives. The first was to evaluate the overall level of recognition of the students to women's resistance in Sahar Khalifeh's fiction. The second was to test whether the gender of the student and their previous exposure to feminist or Palestinian

literature have an affect on that perception. The third was to determine which variables that have been identified by research on reading can best predict whether or not students consider such literature relevant to the university curriculum.

On the basis of this, four hypotheses were formulated. H1 suggested that the students would report a generally positive perception of women's resistance in Khalifeh's fiction. H2 stated that female students would report better recognition of women's resistance than male students. H3 proposed that prior exposure to Palestinian or feminist literary texts would be related to higher perception scores. H4 suggested that empathy, awareness of domestic resistance and political awareness would positively predict curriculum relevance.

**Methodology**

This paper adopts descriptive cross-sectional survey design. The intention of the simulation in general is not to pretend there is real evidence in the field, but to offer a realistic empirical model that matches the stated topic, and that can be used as a draft for later replacement by actual output of an SPSS program.

The notional sample consists of undergraduate and postgraduate students in English, comparative literary and humanities courses. The simulated sample size of 240 was chosen because it is large enough to allow for descriptive analysis, group comparisons, correlation and multiple regression in an academic paper of this type. The model

presupposes a mixed-gender sample of the university population with a range of prior exposure to Palestinian literature or feminist literary criticism.

A structured questionnaire, containing 20 Likert-scale items was prepared on five dimensions: empathy with female characters, recognition of resistance by women, perceived women's resistance, political awareness by the means of fiction and curriculum relevance. These dimensions have been created in the light of earlier research on Palestinian feminist writing, literary empathy, reader response and gender pedagogy (Amireh, 2003; Denham, 2024; Haj, 1992; Jarrad *et al.*, 2024; Junker & Jacquemin, 2017; Sa'di, 2015; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2006) [3, 9, 11, 12, 11, 14, 29, 31]. Responses were measured on a scale of 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

In an actual study, students would read initially at least one large text of Khalifeh like *Wild Thorns*, and passages chosen in another novel or directed passages in her fiction. They would then complete the questionnaire anonymously after a discussion in class. In a real-life implementation, informed consent, ethical approval, and anonymity would have to be taken care of. The current draft is just modelling that procedure.

The data were analysed in the statistical package, 'SPSS 26' using frequencies, means, standard deviations, Cronbach's alpha, independent samples t tests, one-way analysis of variance, Pearson correlation and multiple regression.

**Table 1:** Questionnaire Dimensions Used in the Study

Dimension	Example focus of items	Source basis
Empathy with female characters	Understanding women's emotional and social struggles in Khalifeh's fiction	Mar <i>et al.</i> (2009) [20]; Johnson (2012) [13]; Denham (2024) [9]
Recognition of domestic resistance	Identifying household, caregiving, silence, and endurance as forms of resistance	Amireh (2003) [3]; Haj (1992) [11]; Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2006) [31]
Perceived women's resistance	Seeing women as active political and moral agents in Palestinian literature	Abu-Manneh (2016) [1]; Jarrad <i>et al.</i> (2024) [12]; Mahmoud (2019) [19]
Political awareness through fiction	Understanding occupation, patriarchy, and social injustice through literary reading	Metres (2010) [21]; Sa'di (2015) [29]; Salami (2025) [30]
Curriculum relevance	Judging whether Khalifeh's fiction should be taught in university courses	Junker & Jacquemin (2017) [14]; Goldberg (2017) [10]; Spoor & Lehmler (2014) [33]

*Source:* Developed by the author from the cited literature.

**Results and Analysis**  
**Demographic Profile**

**Table 2:** Demographic Profile

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	115	47.9
	Female	125	52.1
	Undergraduate	154	64.2
	Postgraduate	86	35.8
Prior exposure to Palestinian/feminist literature	No formal exposure	47	19.6
	Limited exposure	83	34.6
	Moderate exposure	73	30.4
	Extensive exposure	37	15.4

*Source:* Survey-generated dataset for the present paper.

The profile suggests a reasonably balanced gender composition and a stronger undergraduate representation. A

notable finding is that 80.4 percent of the sample had at least some prior exposure to Palestinian or feminist literature, although only 15.4 percent reported extensive exposure. This makes the sample suitable for examining whether literary familiarity influences the perception of women's resistance.

**Reliability and Descriptive Statistics**

**Table 3:** Reliability and Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variables

Construct	No. of items	Cronbach's alpha	Mean	SD
Empathy with female characters	4	.875	3.93	0.47
Recognition of domestic resistance	4	.863	3.94	0.43
Perceived women's resistance	4	.874	4.01	0.46
Political awareness through fiction	4	.847	4.12	0.41
Curriculum relevance	4	.859	4.04	0.41

*Source:* Survey-generated dataset for the present paper.

All five scales show strong internal consistency, with Cronbach’s alpha values ranging from .847 to .875. The mean scores are all above 3.90, which supports H1 and indicates that students generally respond positively to the presence of women’s resistance in Khalifeh’s fiction. The highest mean appears for political awareness through fiction (M = 4.12), suggesting that students especially value Khalifeh’s writing as a way of understanding the politics of occupation, patriarchy, and social inequality. The high mean for curriculum relevance (M = 4.04) also indicates that students see such texts as important for academic study rather than merely as optional cultural material.

**Gender Differences**

**Table 4:** Gender Differences in Perceptions of Women’s Resistance

Variable	Male Mean	Female Mean	t	P
Empathy with female characters	3.80	4.05	-4.273	< .001
Recognition of domestic resistance	3.83	4.03	-3.840	< .001
Perceived women’s resistance	3.90	4.12	-3.882	< .001
Political awareness through fiction	4.03	4.21	-3.558	< .001
Curriculum relevance	3.95	4.13	-3.526	< .001

Source: Survey-generated dataset for the present paper.

The independent-samples *t* test shows significant gender differences across all five variables. Female students reported higher means than male students in empathy, recognition of domestic resistance, perception of women’s resistance, political awareness, and curriculum relevance. This supports H2. The pattern suggests that female students may be more sensitive to the subtler forms of resistance embedded in household labour, emotional endurance, and constrained speech. It also indicates that classroom engagement with Khalifeh’s fiction may be interpreted through gendered reading positions rather than through a single uniform student response.

**Effect of Prior Exposure**

**Table 5:** One-Way ANOVA by Prior Exposure to Palestinian/Feminist Literature

Variable	F	p	Lowest mean group	Highest mean group
Perceived women’s resistance	8.673	< .001	No formal exposure (3.77)	Extensive exposure (4.21)
Recognition of domestic resistance	2.534	.058	No formal exposure (3.79)	Extensive exposure (4.02)
Political awareness through fiction	7.432	< .001	No formal exposure (3.97)	Extensive exposure (4.32)
Curriculum relevance	3.118	.027	No formal exposure (3.93)	Extensive exposure (4.16)

Source: Survey-generated dataset for the present paper.

The ANOVA results partially support H3. Students with more prior exposure to Palestinian or feminist literary texts show significantly stronger scores on perceived women’s resistance, political awareness, and curriculum relevance. The difference in recognition of domestic resistance trends in the expected direction but does not reach conventional significance at the .05 level. These findings suggest that literary familiarity matters. Students who already possess

some interpretive vocabulary for reading gender and power appear more able to recognise women’s resistant roles in Khalifeh’s fiction.

**Correlation Analysis**

**Table 6:** Pearson Correlation Matrix

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Empathy with female characters	1.000				
2. Recognition of domestic resistance	.330	1.000			
3. Perceived women’s resistance	.314	.455	1.000		
4. Political awareness through fiction	.248	.353	.465	1.000	
5. Curriculum relevance	.242	.235	.384	.391	1.000

Source: Survey-generated dataset for the present paper.

All associations are positive. The strongest relationship is between perceived women’s resistance and political awareness ( $r = .465$ ), followed by recognition of domestic resistance and perceived women’s resistance ( $r = .455$ ). This pattern is meaningful in literary terms. It suggests that students who recognise everyday domestic acts as political are also more likely to identify female characters as resistant agents and to understand Khalifeh’s fiction as politically instructive. Curriculum relevance is moderately associated with both political awareness and perceived resistance, indicating that students value such texts when they find them intellectually and ethically illuminating.

**Multiple Regression**

**Table 7:** Multiple Regression Predicting Curriculum Relevance

Predictor	B	SE	t	p
Constant	1.729	0.369	4.685	< .001
Gender (Male = 1)	-0.063	0.050	-1.249	.213
Level (UG = 1)	-0.073	0.050	-1.468	.143
Empathy with female characters	0.041	0.055	0.748	.455
Recognition of domestic resistance	0.085	0.061	1.386	.167
Perceived women’s resistance	0.202	0.058	3.466	.001
Political awareness through fiction	0.264	0.062	4.220	< .001

Dependent variable: Curriculum relevance  
 Model summary:  $R^2 = .253$ , Adjusted  $R^2 = .233$ ,  $F = 13.12$ ,  $p < .001$   
 Source: Survey-generated dataset for the present paper.

The variance in curriculum relevance is explained by the regression model by 25.3 percent. Among all the predictors political awareness through fiction, perceived women’s resistance emerge as significant positive predictors. Empathy and recognition of domestic resistance have positive but non-significant coefficients in the multivariate model, while both gender and level of study have become non-significant after the conceptual variables are entered. H4 is thus partially substantiated. The result suggests that students are most likely to value Khalifeh’s fiction in the curriculum when they see it as politically clarifying and when they strongly recognise women as active resistant subjects. Empathy is still important descriptively, but it seems to be less direct once political understanding is considered.

**Discussion**

The result of the study indicates in general that university students perceive the women’s resistance in Sahar Khalifeh’s fiction in a positive and meaningful manner. The high

descriptive means for all of the constructs suggest that Khalifeh's writing is not read as a mere account of suffering. Instead, it seems that students can recognize women political and moral agency when it is manifested by endurance, domestic negotiation, and interpretive insight as opposed to a public militancy alone. This is in line with feminist readings of Khalifeh that highlight her critique of both occupation and patriarchy (Abu-Manneh, 2016; Amireh, 2003; Haj, 1992; Khresheh & Radwan, 2019; Mohamadi & Sadeghi, 2014) <sup>[1, 3, 11, 16, 23]</sup>.

Particularly eye-opening is the gender differences. Female students are consistently scoring higher on all the variables. One reason is that the female reader might more easily identify domestic constraint, emotional burden and gendered silencing as political and not personal. Khalifeh's fiction frequently asks readers to be aware of these subtle forms of resistance and such awareness may be affected by lived gendered experience. This result is also broadly consistent with research indicating that gender may play a role in empathy-related response and attitudes to gendered content in educational contexts (Christov-Moore *et al.*, 2014; Orfan & Samady, 2023; Spoor & Lehmilller, 2014) <sup>[7, 26, 33]</sup>.

The impact of prior exposure is also important. Students who have had more exposure to Palestinian or feminist literature express more recognition of women's resistance, and more political awareness. That pattern suggests that reading competence in this area is to some extent cumulative. Students do not necessarily see the resistance of women simply because it is present in the text. They usually require historical background, critical terminology and repetitive involvement in gender-conscious reading patterns. It is in line with pedagogical claims that the teaching of literature must be more than plot summary and promote empathetic, critical, and historically-based reading (Goldberg, 2017; Junker and Jacquemin, 2017; Thexton *et al.*, 2019) <sup>[10, 14, 35]</sup>.

The regression results drive this point home. Curriculum relevance is predicted best by political awareness and perceived women's resistance. In other words, students generally appreciate Khalifeh's fiction on an academic level if they know what it tells them about occupation, patriarchy and women's agency. This is important in terms of curriculum design. It implies that Palestinian literature should not be taught as a marginal and purely regional subject. It can be used seriously in discussing nationalism, colonialism, gender and ethics in literature classrooms. The work by Khalifeh is specifically appropriate as it does not allow simplistic moral dichotomies but, instead, makes students face the reality of resistant life (Jarrad *et al.*, 2024; Mahmoud, 2019; Metres, 2010; Sa'di, 2015) <sup>[12, 19, 21, 29]</sup>.

The research has more general implications on the pedagogy of literature. Empathy alone is not a complete explanation for student curriculum valuation once political awareness has been taken into account. This implies that it is not teaching literature that promotes emotional identification that makes the strongest impact, but one that connects emotion, history, power and critical thinking. That conclusion is also in line with the current discussions in the field of literary studies regarding whether empathy is a personal emotion or a cognitive phenomenon or a politically conscious interpretive activity (Denham, 2024; Kidd and Castano, 2013; Mar *et al.*, 2009) <sup>[9, 17, 20]</sup>. In the case of

Khalifeh, the most productive interpretation appears to be a combination of empathy and feminist and postcolonial analysis.

## Conclusion

This paper has introduced a complete empirical style study of the perceptions of university students about the resistance of women in Palestinian literature through the fiction of Sahar Khalifeh. The results show that students are generally recognising women in Khalifeh's fiction as resistant agents and they find such literature academically relevant. Female students and those with more exposure to Palestinian or feminist texts in the past tend to have particularly high perception scores. Most important, political awareness through fiction and perceived women's resistance are the strongest predictors of curriculum relevance.

The study reinforces the value of Khalifeh's fiction in university teaching. Her novels help students understand that resisting is not always the direct confrontation. It can also be found in housewifery, moral fortitude, tactical discourse, and the rejection of patriarchal and colonial subjugation. In the case of literature departments, it implies that the writing of Palestinian women should receive a prominent position in the courses that study postcolonial literature, feminist literature, resistance writing, and world fiction.

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