

Book Review

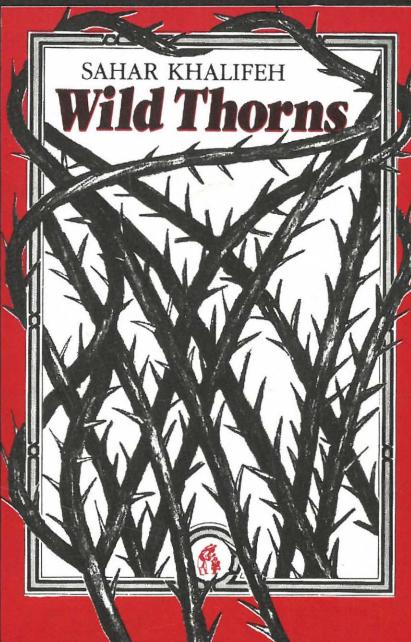
«Wild Thorns»

In her novel *Wild Thorns*, Sahar Khalifeh takes us on a journey into occupied Palestine. At first we enter Nablus (incidentally Sahar Khalifeh's home town) with Usama who is returning after a number of years working outside his homeland. We experience his shock at the changes wrought by the occupation, from the rough treatment meted out by Israeli soldiers at the border, to the fact that some of those nearest him are now working in 'Israel'. As the story unfolds, it is borne along by series of characters of all ages and positions, adding up to a vivid mosaic of life in the occupied West Bank.

We are with the children taunting the occupation troops in the streets during a curfew, with cries of "PLO... Fatah... Popular Front... Democratic Front... Revolution Until Victory." We are in the jail with the student who has been detained for shouting revolutionary slogans, and with the worker arrested for getting into a fist fight with his 'fellow worker' - an Israeli. We walk the streets of Nablus, smell the smells of its market, visit its coffee houses and the homes of its citizens.

Sahar Khalifeh skillfully chronicles daily life under occupation, employing a simple, direct style. She relies on dialogue, actions and concise impressions, rather than lengthy description. Yet, from the first pages, it is obvious that something more than a general picture is being conveyed. What the author is really getting at is the Palestinian response to occupation. She examines how this varies according to the person's age group, class, sex, educational level and degree of religious feelings.

Among these factors, the one most persistently addressed is class. Sahar Khalifeh does not moralize or speak in dogmas. Rather she lets the 'little people' speak out. One example is when Usama visits the farm of his well-to-do uncle who is now an invalid. He finds that it has fallen into disuse; the younger men have gone to work in 'Israel'. Only Abu Shahada, the peasant who has always worked on the uncle's land, remains. When Usama taunts him about the state of the land, he finally blurts out: "Why are you so angry with me? I'm just a hired hand. I've been here all my life. I don't own any land. I don't own anything.



My son Shahada was a hired hand too. And he still is. The land isn't mine or Shahada's, so why should we care about it? Why should we die for it? Don't give me that! Nobody ever came and asked about us when we were nearly dying of starvation. But now you come!"

The younger generation's growing consciousness of what is going on is also recorded. As one teenager tells his friends: "In high school they force an obsolete curriculum on us and our families begin pressuring us to get the highest grades so we can become doctors and engineers. Once we've actually become doctors and engineers, they demand that we pay them back for the cost of our studies. And our parents don't work their fingers to the bone paying for our education so that we'll return and work for peanuts at home. So the only solution is emigration... Educated people leave the country, and only workers and peasants remain. And that's exactly what Israel wants to happen."

In another incident, Usama challenges a street vendor for selling Israeli bread. He tells the man it is a disgrace, and gets an ear-full in return: "A disgrace, is it? They called it a disgrace when I took a job 'inside'. So I stayed at home like the women, and they called that a disgrace! And here you are in your fashionable trousers and smart shirt, telling me it's a disgrace. Look, friend,

we're not the first to work with them. While we were still wandering the streets of Nablus looking for bread to eat, your kind were running around Tel Aviv looking for companies to award you franchises so you could sell their products..."

The question of working in 'Israel' is a dominant theme throughout the story. Is it treachery as Usama thinks? Is it a necessity as others are convinced? Is there a chance for solidarity with Israeli workers as a few philosophize over? The book doesn't give direct answers but shows the realities to provoke thought, recording the factors that had driven Palestinians into the Israeli factories and the effects this has on the society under occupation at large. By raising this question, along with the class question, Sahar Khalifeh obviously intended to do more than tell a story. She is first and foremost writing for her own people, raising issues which are highly relevant for the future of the Palestinian national movement, and of special interest to its left-wing forces. The unstated question permeating the novel is: Will the Palestinian society rise to the challenge and formulate the alternative for successfully resisting occupation?

Because *Wild Thorns* is a novel, it would be unfair to demand that the author answer all the questions she raises. However, we do take exception to the book's unrealistic handling of the armed resistance. This stands in stark contrast to the warm, human, down-to-earth approach applied in all other aspects of the book. Most disturbing is that the characters who are somehow connected to the armed resistance are presented in a very stereotyped manner, whereas the other characters are generally multidimensional.

Having stated this one reservation, we highly recommend this book which has already become famous and much discussed in Palestinian and Arab circles, as well as having been translated into French and Hebrew. We thank Al Saqi Books for having made *Wild Thorns* available to English readers.

Wild Thorns was first published in Jerusalem as *Al Subar* in 1976. The English edition was published in 1985, by Al Saqi Books, 26 Westbourne Grove, London W2, England.