

Remembering Trauma of War in Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin*

SITI HAWA MUHAMAD
Kolej Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Selangor
sitihawa.m@kuis.edu.my

ABSTRACT

Trauma is the consequence of any tragic event such as displacement, war, or accident that often leaves psychological imprint on the mind of the sufferer. This paper attempts to analyse how two different characters in Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin* (2010), Dalia and Amal remember their trauma which comes as a result of Israeli's assaults on *el Nakba* or "the catastrophe" (Palestine war in 1948, resulting in Palestinian exodus) and *el Naksa* or "the disaster" (Six Day War in 1967). This analysis is appropriating Dominick LaCapra's notion of melancholia as a form of 'acting out' and mourning as a form of 'working through' (2001) for the conceptual framework to analyse both Dalia's and Amal's remembering their traumatic experiences. While Dalia suffers from melancholia, a form of 'acting out', and grieving for a loss she is unable to fully comprehend, Amal deals with the grief of losing consciously and tries to overcome her traumatic experiences.

Keywords: Traumatic experiences, acting out, working through

INTRODUCTION

Trauma is the response to a deeply distressing or disturbing event that overwhelms an individual's ability to cope, causes feelings of helplessness, diminishes their sense of self and their ability to feel the full range of emotions and experiences (Onderko, 2019). Trauma originated from ancient Greek word meaning "wound" though precise definition varies according to context and discipline (Marder, 2006). Trauma studies explore the impact of trauma, in literature and society by analyzing its psychological, rhetorical and cultural experience (Mambrol, 2018).

In the narrative tradition of Arab anglophone writers, trauma is one of the issues that becomes the central idea of their writings; more so if the writers originated from war-torn or occupied countries such Palestine, Syria and Iraq. As mentioned in a study, Arab anglophone writings explore the Arab world and hold a mirror before everyone, the trauma they are being subjected to (Kavitha, 2019). When exploring this issue in their writings, they would usually write from their personal recollection of family history or experience. This paper then attempts to analyse how characters in Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin* (2010) reacted to the trauma of war. Susan Abulhawa is a first-generation Arab-American writer of Palestinian origin. She is born to refugees of Six Day War in 1967. A political commentator as well as a human rights activist, *Mornings in Jenin* is her debut novel. The horror she witnessed at a refugee camp in Jenin in the aftermath of a massacre in 2002 (during the Second *Intifada*) gave her the urgency to write this novel (Abulhawa, 2010).

It takes into consideration that the war experienced by the characters in this novel is causing trauma in their lives. They are displaced from their homes due to war and occupation

of Palestine, and have to live through the aftermath of traumatic experiences such as death of family members.

LITERATURE REVIEW

War causes immeasurable repercussion both physically and psychologically. For example, exposure to war and political conflict has been found to cause internalized disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD), anxiety and depression on adults and children in a study conducted in the Gaza Strip (Thabet, Abu Tawahina, El Sarraj, & Vostanis, 2008). In another example, exposure to shelling or combat, displacement, extreme poverty and witnessing violent acts were the most common traumatic experiences faced by Lebanese children (Macksoud, 1992).

The psychological and emotional after-effects such as PTSD often last longer and leave more damage. As Cathy Caruth suggested in her introductory essay to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), for the survivor of trauma, the truth of the traumatic event is not only in its brutal facts, but also in the way their occurrence defies simple comprehension (Caruth, 1995). The damage here is traumatic events fracture the very experience of time for the person to whom they “happen” (Marder, 2006). Not only a traumatic event is cruel, but also incomprehensible whereby a traumatized person may narrate a “slightly different story” of the event or the capacity to remember it is simply distorted (Caruth, 1995). In short, it meddles with the mind.

Jean Martin Charcot, a French neurologist and physician first investigated the relationship between trauma and mental illness while working with traumatized women patients (Ringel, 2011). Sigmund Freud, an Austrian neurologist and the founder of psychoanalysis, influenced by Charcot, did acknowledge that it was possible for external trauma to influence the patient’s state of mind (Diamond, 2004). The concept of trauma then focuses on external disruptive experiences, often severe, such as war, that left profound impacts on self’s emotion and perception towards the external world (Mambrol, 2018). The process of memory is central in the depiction of trauma’s impact; if memory is viewed as fluid and reconstructive (Mambrol, 2018), for the Arab-Americans, especially those who originated from war-torn countries, trauma could be created and recreated through moments of recollection.

There are two ways on how a person remembers his or her trauma. These ways are in the form of two kinds of memory, ‘acting out’ and ‘working through’ (Mehni, 2016). Freud uses the terms mourning and melancholia in his 1918 work to describe the traumatic after-effects. He argues that mourning and melancholia are similar but different responses to loss. Mourning refers to the grief of losing a specific love object and is considered to be healthy as it takes place in the conscious mind, while melancholy is the grieve for a loss one is unable to fully comprehend or identify, and is considered to be unreasonable as it takes place in the unconscious mind (Freud, 1958). Freud in his paper *Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through* published in 1914 first introduced the terms ‘acting out’ and ‘working through’. Freud introduced a systematic definition of ‘acting out’,

...the patient does not remember anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but acts it out. He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he repeats it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it.
(Freud, 1958)

Flashbacks, nightmares and compulsive behaviours are some of the common ways trauma victims used when ‘acting out’ traumas (Mehni, 2016). As cited in Mehni (2016), LaCapra stated that victims of trauma tend to relieve occurrences, or at least find that those

occurrences intrude on their present life, for example in flashbacks or nightmares, or in behaviours or words that are compulsively repeated which do not have their ordinary meaning, as they are taking on different connotations from another situation.

Meanwhile, LaCapra (as cited by Rubenstein, 2003) views 'working through' as a process in which a person tries to gain "critical distance on a problem". 'Working through' means confronting the trauma as well as its details and critically engaging the tendency to act out the past, and even to recognize why it may be necessary and in certain aspects desirable (Mehni, 2016). 'Working through' enables a traumatized individual to distinguish between the experience that devastated him and his present life, thus he is never wholly trapped in the past (Rubenstein, 2003).

Dominick LaCapra's notion of melancholia as a form of 'acting out' and mourning as a form of 'working through' (2001) is used as the conceptual framework to analyse the characters' remembering their traumatic experiences. LaCapra takes psychoanalysis in a more political and ethical directions. In his book, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001), he states that the terms – mourning, acting out, melancholia and working through are not synonymous; rather mourning can be seen as a form of 'working through' while melancholia can be seen as a form of 'acting out' (Mehni, 2016).

METHODOLOGY

The study aims to examine the issue of remembering trauma of war in Susan Abulhawa's fictions, *Mornings in Jenin* (2010) through textual analysis, specifically focusing on character analysis. Argument will be supported with discussion from the selected fiction and relevant journal articles.

DISCUSSION

The discussion will begin with the analysis on how Dalia responds to and remembers her traumatic experience. It will then proceed with the analysis on the second character, Amal.

Dalia's Melancholy as A Form of 'Acting Out'

Dalia in *Mornings in Jenin* is the mother of the novel's protagonist, Amal. During the Palestine War, or what is known as *el Nakbah* (the catastrophe) among the displaced Palestinians in 1948, she lost her second son, Ismael who was kidnapped by an Israeli soldier when the Israeli attacked her village. This is the beginning of a traumatic memory for Dalia:

One instant, six-month-old Ismael was at her chest, in her motherly arms. In the next, Ismael was gone. An instant can crush a brain and change the course of life, the course of history (Abulhawa, 2010, p.32).

Dalia's responses to her traumatic experience is called melancholy. Melancholy is pathological as it takes place in the unconscious mind (Freud, 1958). A traumatized person who has melancholy grieves for a loss he or she is unable to fully understand or recognize (Freud, 1958). Utilizing LaCapra's notion of melancholy as a form of 'acting out', Dalia's melancholy can be seen as a form of her 'acting out' her traumas (Mehni, 2016). As aforementioned earlier in the Literature Review, one of the ways a trauma victim remembers his or her trauma is through 'acting out' such as flashbacks (Mehni, 2016). As in the case of Dalia, she kept having flashbacks of the day she lost her infant son. These occurrences intruded her present life. She lost her ability to distinguish between the past and the present. She was trapped in her past and lost her lucidity:

It was an infinitesimal flash of time that Dalia would revisit in her mind, over and over for many years, searching for some clue, some hint of what might have happened to her son. Even after she became lost in an eclipsed reality, she would search the fleeing crowd in her mind for Ismael (Abulhawa, 2010, p.32).

Dalia also displayed repetitive compulsive behaviour, another example of how she remembered her trauma. This creates a further intrusion to her present life. When Six Day War or *el Naksa* (the disaster) happened in 1967, Dalia's husband disappeared and never returned home. She started to display repetitive compulsive behaviour. She kept praying and refused the desire to live by not eating and taking care of her well-being:

The war changed us, Mama most of all. It withered Mama. Her essential fiber unraveled, leaving her body a mere shell that often filled with hallucination. Following the occupation and the disappearance of my brother and father, Mama hardly left her prayer mat. She had no desire for food and refused even the paltry rations that arrived on the charity truck. The cotton of her gown grew dark with the stench of her unbathed body, and her breath soured. She smelled of fermented misery. Her lips hardened into a web of cracks and her body shrank, while she prayed. And prayed (Abulhawa, 2010, p.86).

This repetitive and compulsive behaviour echoes Freud's systematic definition of 'acting out' whereby a traumatized person does not remember anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but reproduces it as an action instead of a memory (Freud, 1958). The person repeats it without knowing that he is repeating it, as it happens in the unconscious mind. This is exemplified by Dalia:

And while her body lost mass, I watched her eyes grow more vacant, betraying a mind that would henceforth slowly forfeit its charge of reality (Abulhawa, 2010, p.86).

Unfortunately for Dalia, she never recovered from her melancholy until she drew her last breath. Towards the end, she shrank further into her memory and unconscious mind:

Baba was gone forever. My mother kept waiting for him until the day she died, just as she waited to return home, just as she searched her mind for Ismael (Abulhawa, 2010, p.88).

Amal's Mourning as A Form of 'Working Through'

Amal's responses to her traumatic experience meanwhile is called mourning. As mourning takes place in the conscious mind, this grief of losing a specific love object is considered as healthy (Freud, 1958). Amal's skin was scarred as a result of being shot by an Israeli soldier. She also lost her father, Baba, whom she was close to during the Six Day War. While her mother Dalia was lost in her melancholia and waited for him to return until the day she died, Amal believed that her father had passed away and struggled to keep her memory of him as a strong, proud and loving father.

I needed to believe Baba was dead. I could not bear the thought of him suffering away from us and I chose to know he was in heaven wearing his dishdashe and kaffiyeh proudly, the tip of his pipe at his lips, a cup of coffee at his fingers, and a beloved book in his hands. I struggled all my life to keep that image of him – a strong, proud, and loving father (Abulhawa, 2010, p.88).

This corresponds to the definition of ‘working through’ proposed by LaCapra in which the trauma victims relieved their memories by confronting the trauma (as cited by Rubenstein, 2003). Amal confronted her trauma by accepting that her father who disappeared during the war had died. She struggled to engage in the inclination to act out the past, in this case, remembering how proud, strong and loving her father, as it is necessary and desirable for her to do so as she could not stand the thought of him suffering.

Yet, she is also able to distinguish between the experience that devastated her, and her present life. This is especially evident, when years later as an adult, she moved to America to study. She acknowledged and hid her past, putting a critical distance from her traumatic memory, and lived her present life:

What I recall most vividly of my first night in the United States was sleeping for the first time in a real bed...As if to brace myself with the context in that big bed, I reached to the past, moving my hand over the mangled skin of my belly. Snuggled in luxury on the threshold of a world that brimmed with as much promise as uncertainty, I was starting a new life. But like the scar beneath my hand, the past was still with me (Abulhawa, 2010, p. 171).

I spun in cultural vicissitude, wandering in and out of the American ethos until I lost my way. I fell in love with Americans and even felt that love reciprocated. I lived in the present, keeping the past hidden away (Abulhawa, 2010, p.173).

CONCLUSION

Mornings in Jenin gave a glimpse to the readers, through characters such as Dalia and Amal, how traumatized victims of war respond to their predicament and remember their traumatic memories. These forms of responding and remembering – melancholia as a form of ‘acting out’ and mourning as a form of ‘working through’ show that different trauma victims will have different ways of remembering their traumas. Yet, for all that matters, it shows that trauma do have a long-lasting psychological impact to its sufferers.

References

- Abulhawa, S. (2010). *Mornings in Jenin*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Caruth, C. (1995). Introduction. In C. Caruth (Ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (pp. 3-9). Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Diamond, D. (2004). Attachment Disorganization: The Reunion of Attachment Theory and Psychoanalysis. *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 21(2), 276-299.
- Freud, S. (1958). Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through. In S. Freud, *The Standard Edition of Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (J. Strachey, Trans., Vol. 12, pp. 145-156). London: The Hogarth Press.

Kavitha, P. K. (2019). Contemporary Arab Women Writings in English: An Ethnographic Probe into Society, Culture and Literature of the Arab World. *American College Journal of English Language and Literature (ACJELL)*, 8, 47-50.

Macksoud, M. S. (1992). Assessing War Trauma in Children: A Case Study of Lebanese Children. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 5(1), 1-15.

Mambrol, N. (2018, December 19). *Trauma Studies*. Retrieved from Literary Theory and Criticism: <https://literariness.org/2018/12/19/trauma-studies/>

Marder, E. (2006). Trauma and Literary Studies: Some "Enabling Questions". *Reading On*, 1(1), 1-6.

Mehni, M. (2016). Trauma of Displacement in V.S. Naipaul's Selected Fictions (Doctoral thesis, Universiti Putra Malaysia). Retrieved from <http://psasir.upm.edu.my/>

Onderko, K. (2019). *What is Trauma?* Retrieved from Integrated Listening Systems: <https://integratedlistening.com/what-is-trauma/>

Ringel, S. (2011). Chapter 1: Overview. In S. Ringel, & J. Brandell (Eds.), *Trauma: Contemporary Directions in Theory, Practice, and Research* (pp. 1-12). California: SAGE Publications.

Rubenstein, R. L. (2003). Writing History, Writing Trauma (review). *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 17(1), 158-161.

Thabet, A. A., Abu Tawahina, A., El Sarraj, E., & Vostanis, P. (2008). Exposure to war trauma and PTSD among parents and children in the Gaza strip. *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 17(191), 1-10.