



## Narratives of Ruins and Renewal: Trauma and Recovery in selected Palestinian Novels

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| <b>Article History:</b><br>Received: April 15, 2025<br>Revised: May 16, 2025<br>Accepted: May 26, 2025<br>Available Online: May 30, 2025  | <i>Palestinian literature is testament to the enduring human spirit, weaving together stories of love, loss and resilience in the face of trauma and ongoing conflict. The present study aims to explore the different dimensions of trauma along with the process of recovery in selected Palestinian fiction The Blue Between Sky and Water (2015) and Against the Loveless World (2020) penned by Susan Abulhawa. It yearns to elaborate that personal trauma when exposed to long period of time especially, at time of war or captivity does not only remain to one person rather extends at communal level by using the theoretical lens of Judith Herman (2015). Therefore, trauma along with its various episodes of remembrance and reconnection proceeds the process of restoration. The catastrophe of Al-Nakba (1948) forced huge masses of Palestinians, the real residents of land to move from their own homeland, resulting in widespread destruction, massacre, and enduring psychological and social turmoil at both personal and collective levels. This study profoundly focuses on trauma and road to resilience to recuperate the voices of the voiceless or silenced victims.</i> |
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## Introduction

The word “trauma” has its deep roots in Greek vocabulary, where it originally describes literal scars and injuries. The ancient Greek word *traûma* means “wound” or “a physical injury that requires medical treatment” (Davis & Meretoja, 2020 p. 1). Till 15th century, the concept and idea about trauma remained the same but after 19 century, many researchers tried to manifest it’s direction beyond physical scars and bruises. Freud (1920) was the first one who used the word trauma directly to indicate invisible psychological scars. The 20th century made human beings conscious and alert about the danger and significance of collective trauma in the face of WWI, WWII, Holocaust and Israel-Palestine conflict.

Many literary figures are inherently exploring the deep rooted agony and multiple kinds of trauma in their works, examining how trauma shapes the lives of different characters. Hartman (2003)

clearly validates the relationship between “words and wounds” regarding psychological turmoil and states that the primary “focus is on words”(p. 259). He suggests that traumatic survivors often seek solace in sharing their terrible experiences through words. Caruth (1996) mentions Freud concept of “repetition compulsion” and how it can be analyzed from different literary texts. (p. 2) The victims of catastrophe often seek solace in remembering the past and mourning the loss. Butler (2003) examines mourning as a coping mechanism against the violence and terror, a phenomenon to rethink and rebuild connections. He illustrates that mourning is considered as a nonviolent technique to understand the political terror and violence upon silenced communities and to summarize with them more empathically. The instances of overwhelming experiences like extreme terror, war displacement exile and abuse can trigger the pain of trauma and increase the emotional upheaval. To deeply understand these situations, the researcher has selected two novels contemporary Palestinian fiction named *The Blue Between Sky and Water* (2015) and *Against the Loveless World* (2020) penned by Susan Abulhawa. The first novel narrates the story of Palestinian woman “Nazmiyeh” and her family, who were brutally exiled in 1948 along with other Palestinians, the coming traumas and difficulties both at individual and collective level. The plot further chases the life of her brothers granddaughter “Nur” who grew in a different, difficult and abandoned environment. Hamdi (2011) views that Abulhawa has profoundly portrayed and given a clear picture of Palestinian unspeakable past, which has been deliberately silenced by dominant history.

The second novel follows the life and journey and ongoing struggles of young woman “Nahr” whose folks were exiled from their homeland Palestine in 1967, during the catastrophe of Al-Naksa, she lived a life of pain, struggles and constant turmoil, survived multiple traumas later ended up in Israeli prison which the author named as “the cube” Berger et al. (1997) elucidates that trauma is such a harrowing and terrible experience that has multiple ways to control the survivors psyche.

### **Statement of the problem**

Psychological issues are one of the most growing challenges in the contemporary era. Researches regarding traumatic experience and psychological agony have been explored in multiple ways that probe into social, cultural, political and physical factors reflecting the deep connection between trauma and literature. However, the influence of various harrowing experiences like abuse, rape, massacre, massive displacement and forced exile from one’s own land is mostly underrated. Despite of the emerging Palestinian-Arab literature, there is lack of critical evaluation on how the female Palestinian writers portray the deep-rooted psychological and physical trauma both at personal and collective level. This research will profoundly explore the impact of trauma on individuals, and how the role of reconnection, social support leads to the process of recovery. The main objective of this paper is to analyze the deep rooted trauma in Palestinian people and how the process of recovery works at communal level. Moreover, this study also investigates how the selected Palestinian texts portray the experience of trauma and journey towards recovery?

### **Significance of the study**

The present study is significant because of it’s critical evaluation of trauma in regard to the process of recovery. This article aims to contribute to a profound analysis of how Palestinian authors articulate the diverse effects of war occupation to navigate trauma and it’s aftermaths by portraying different characters. This study delves deeper in understanding the pain and loss experienced by Palestinian women, as the author herself emphasized the female sufferings and traumas that have been silenced in face of war, occupation and exile, thus contributing to a more

nuanced understanding of Palestinian culture and history. As Palestinian writings and voices are mostly overshadowed by other imperial narratives, this study serves as an academic effort to preserve Palestinian identity and to amplify with their writings.

## **Literature Review**

This part of the research overtly examines the existing body of studies conducted in the field of trauma. The current age is ripe with various geographical, social, and political conflicts

Khan et al., (2021) conducted a study on trauma, identity and narrative in fiction that aims to explore how the theme of trauma is incorporated in a narrative. For this purpose, the researchers selected *The Blind Man's Garden* by Nadeem Aslam as a fictional base within the theoretical framework of *Trauma Fiction* by Ann Whitehead (2004) the emotional condition and trauma of Pakistani natives after the war on terror was analysed.

The research conducted by Patiño-Lakatos (2019) discusses that there is a deep connection between traumatic events and disturbing memories. The intermingling of physical, psychological and personal traces of trauma are analyzed to understand their impact on overall control and behavior on individual. He concluded that memory works chronologically, it arranges, rearranges certain parts of memory to make them palatable for traumatic sufferers. Van der Kolk (1998) has examined the role of amnesia, intrusive and fragmented thoughts regarding traumatic memory. He explored that by the articulation and manifestation of memories about overwhelming and heartbreaking events, we can transform them into regular memories to share with others, thus lessening the traumatic pain.

SCHICK (2011) analysed that the after effects of trauma and catastrophic incidents have been deliberately silenced by International security studies or grand narratives. Specially, when traumatic incidents are related to marginalised communities. But trauma has a deep relation to global security Add individual insecurity. As trauma is solely a political imposition that complicates to understand the power structures and those who indirectly facilitate the collective loss. LaCapra (2014) gave detailed analysis about psychological turmoil and trauma in his book. He analyzed that the pain and agony of trauma and its aftershocks cause severe problems for historical narratives their representation and understanding. LaCapra (2014) adopted psychoanalytic approach to interpret historical events.

The research conducted by Edkins (2003) shows the endless and constant relationship among trauma memory and power. He elucidates that to fully understand trauma at the time of its occurring is nearly impossible rather it preserved in the back of the mind to be experienced later in life. He states that the “production of memory” is a collective and performative act. (Edkins, 2003, p. 54). Danieli (1984) elucidates the effect of numbness and “conspiracy of silence” analyzes that traumatic survivors often choose to remain silent as they don't feel any sympathetic or understanding environment around them neither from family or friends nor from therapists. De Vries (1996) examines that the healing relationship or the process of restoration can be obtained only when there is strong and positive influence by the community or social support system. He further asserts that the process of recovery can only take place when society reorganizes the suffering, “rendering it into meaningful mode of action and identity” within broader social network (De Vries, 1996, p. 402).

The study conducted by Ahmed (2022) demonstrates the struggles, turmoils and difficulties of being a refugee and the troubles regarding gender roles and political violence in Abulhawa's

novels. He states that everyone is affected by the conflicts and pains of political occupation, organized terrorism but women are the one's who badly devastated and traumatized in such situations. The real difficulties faced by Palestinian in the constant time of terror or surviving as a refugee in their homeland are health problems, homophobia, hunger, lack of safety and poor medication (Ahmed, 2022).

## **Theoretical Framework**

The present research uses the theocratical framework of Judith Herman (2015) presented in her book "Trauma and Recovery: The aftermath of violence from domestic abuse to political Terror. Herman (2015) examines the lasting impacts of trauma and regression on individual and communities. She asserts that trauma disrupts the ordinary psychological functioning, which further makes a victim more vulnerable and snatches his sense of identity, agency and belonging. She demonstrates that traumatic sufferers are always in high alert mood or state of "acute hyper arousal" (Herman, 2015, p. 36). Additionally, Herman (2015) views that "traumatic memories" are having several aspects, whether those of ordinary thoughts or having "unusual qualities" (p. 37).

Moreover, Herman (2015) explored that trauma eventually leads to detached relationship or continue "disconnection" (p. 51). She implores that societal responses and connection play an important part for increasing or reducing traumatic pain. A good, positive, sympathetic and supportive environment can eventually leads to sense of safety and security. Herman (2015) deeply examined the process of recovery in her book, as she herself is a psychologist and a clinical psychiatrist. Recovery can only take place by the "empowerment of the survivor" and establishing "new connections" (p. 133). She claims that recovery always "unfolds in three stages", the first stage is "safety", then "remembrance and mourning" and third stage is "reconnection" (Herman, 2015, p. 155).

## **Methods and Materials**

The present research is qualitative in nature. The qualitative research applies a natural and interpretive approach for quality data interpretation, making it perfectly designed for the research. (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Furthermore, the interpretive research paradigm has been chosen for the current study. This selected paradigm is considered well-suited for this paper as it helps the researcher in interpreting and analyzing data and assigning specific meanings to the selected texts. Moreover, content analysis has been adopted for this article as a research design. It has been chosen for this research as it critically examines the textual material and lines thus, uncovering deeper meanings (Smith, 2015)

The data for this paper has been collected from contemporary Palestinian literary canon. The novels are *The Blue Between Sky and Water* (2015) and *Against the Loveless World* (2020) written by Palestinian-American diasporic writer Susan Abulhawa. The reason behind choosing these novels is because they belong to Palestinian contemporary writings and share a similar theme. Both of the novels are set in the backdrop of Al-Nakba (1948) and Al-Naksa (1967) which clearly depicts the sufferings, trauma and turmoil in broader Palestine-Israel context. The researcher has picked a non-random purposive sampling technique to evaluate the data from the selected literary texts. Eight excerpts from each novel has been chosen and are analyzed by using the theocratical framework of Trauma and Recovery (2015) by Judith Herman.

## **Results and Discussion**

These selected texts openly discusses the effects of exile, displacement and political violence on people living in Palestine or those who were permanently exiled from their own country. The analysis of both of the novels is given below

### **The Blue Between Sky and Water**

**She'd have happily doused herself in a burqa like the women in the Gulf so she could always be alone in darkness and in memory... But mostly, it festered in her body. (Abulhawa, 2015, p.166)**

These lines profoundly symbolise harmans concept of traumatic pain and how it induces construction upon the traumatic victims. Here's protagonist's mother Alwan respond to trauma in phase of her husband death and her sons paralysis signifies a of traumatic syndrome or PTSD, a state of construction or a strange feeling of numbness. Alwans pain was so depressed and internalised in herself that she often wanted to take it on others in form of regression and anger but most of the times she remained it to herself deep inside her heart and body. Herman (2015) asserts that traumatised people experience the intense feeling of shame grief and despair all at a same time. According to Herman (2015) all these feelings are intermingled, repressed and long resided in Alwan as she covered herself in black thobe to hide her pain from others.

**She checked his urine bag first, then bent to kiss his forehead. As her lips touched the cold surface of his skin, her hand felt the stiffness of his arm. She didn't move, Her eyes trembled,... then her whole body. She was afraid to straighten up, ...If she stood up, she would have to face her son's death and her daughter's broken heart. (Abulhawa, 2015, p. 218)**

This pivotal point in the novel illustrates with vivid imagery reflects the intense influence of trauma to freeze the body stops the time and taken away the ability to speak. Herman (2015) associates "flight, fright or freeze" response in such conditions where Psychologically wounded victims often suffer from dissociative and paralysed state (p. 257). Alwan immobilization demonstrates that how trauma disrupts temporal continuity thus affecting victim psyche in the present of loss and grief. The physical actions gestures and the mental state of Alwan underscores the destructive nature of trauma. Herman (2015) examines that the shock and stillness after experiencing some heart wrenching incident, the victim or witness may stay still or locked in silence, these symptoms are at the heart of "constriction or numbness" (p. 42). As Alwan, stopped, shocked, trembled, partially paralyzed and went in state of stillness after seeing her son permanently still and dead.

**As Nur turned to leave, the beekeeper's widow continued. "And then we are going to talk about what is making you sad, okay?"...**

**Nur liked the sound of our child and managed a small smile as she took the picture instructions in one hand and Rhet Shel in the other. (Abulhawa, 2015, p. 225)**

The above mentioned textual lines from the novel clearly validates that the process of restoration always occur in regard to relationship or community fellows, it can never take place in isolation. Here two elderly matriarchs, Nazmiyeh and beekeepers widow word talking to Nur who deliberately called Nur our child this little phrase made Nur feeling comfort and solace, in her own land as it aligns with collective care, affection and responsibility that Nur craved for throughout

her life. Nur's survived the life of constant troubles, turmoils, exiles and trauma including sexual abuse also. It was the first time in her life that she felt home. Herman (2015) believes that's social support at collective level is important in mitigating trauma and imposing recuperation from long term trauma. What matters to most of the traumatic "survivors is social validation" (p. 265).

**Tears glistened on Hajje Nazmiyeh's wrinkled brown face. "Damn money! You should have been raised here with your family, ...**

**Nur felt her own tears, but they got stuck in her throat and she choked when she tried to speak. (Abulhawa, 2015, p. 211)**

The above scene analysis Herman (2015) idea that trauma reflects and converts memory into intrusive and persistent connection to present. Abulhawa (2015) deliberately ensures to reflect trauma not solely an individual affliction rather and inherited and troubling wound that passed on in generations. The phenomenon of remembering past days and we collecting memories is both a sorrowful and redemptive experience. Herman (2015) incorporates the importance of "narrative story telling" and "interpersonal relations" to address the issues regarding "self-care, emotion regulation and relationships in the present" (p. 270). Nazmiyeh's deep regret that why she left Nur and couldn't bring her back parallels Herman (2015) concept of guilt and pain embedded in familial and national histories. Herman (2015) claims that "once safety is established" then the second stage of recovery "remembering and mourning" can take place, as here Nazmiyeh is remembering her past mourning the loss and sharing it with Nur. Nur couldn't utter anything in return as she choked and felt a lump of tears in her throat. The language and "dialectic of trauma" is self-perpetuating (Herman, 2015, p. 47). Nur burrowed Nazmiyeh's "hands in the sand and closed them around the warm grains, feeling them slide between her fingers" (Abulhawa, 2015, p. 211).

**At first the two hajjes talked of meaningless pleasantries, of which Hajje Nazmiyeh would quickly tire. But soon the memories and old stories crawled from the sediments in their bones. Ghosts of Mamdouh and Yasmine and others they loved breezed through their words... Sometimes tears fell. They both regretted the day Mamdouh and Yasmine had left Gaza. (Abulhawa, 2015, p. 230)**

These lines identify the paramount importance of memory and remembering in reconnection and to recuperate trauma. Herman (2015) views that the process of healing can be gained through the phenomenon of storytelling remembering past and narrative construction. As the beekeeper's widow had no direct relation to Nazmiyeh but sufferings brought them together, as the "community women did equally well as home visitors" (Herman, 2015, p. 262). The mingling of cries and laughter of the two women validates that integrating past and reinforcing it into present is crucial in constructing cohesive narrative that made sense of their pain and agony. Herman (2015) elaborates that the liberation about the process of recovery is "both ordinary and miraculous" (p. 276).

### **Against the Loveless World**

**I LVE IN the Cube. I write on its glossy gray cinder-block walls however I can—with my nails before,... I am fond of the spiders and ants, which have set up separate dominions and manage to avoid each other in our shared nine-square-meter universe. (Abulhawa, 2020, p. 2)**

Abulhawa (2020) starts her novel by giving the vivid description and clearly about the cell which she named as “the cube”. Here, the protagonist of the story was being imprisoned by Israeli government. The start of the novel profoundly parallels with Herman (2015) concept of captivity and imprisonment. She believed that long-term “repeated trauma” only occurs in “circumstances of captivity” (p. 74) Furthermore, Nahr’s connection and behaviour with crawling creatures or insects like spiders and ants clearly exemplifies Herman’s (2015) viewpoint that trauma survivors need to make attachment even in captivity would being poisoned to have any form of relational stability. The whole picture of the cube demonstrates the traumatic imposition on psychological destruction. In long term captivity or political imprisonment, the preparator seeks comfort in destroying “victims sense of autonomy” (Herman, 2015, p. 77).

**I had already been rejected and abandoned by my husband before I was twenty. “I hadn’t even had a proper wedding, ... Maybe I turned to Um Buraq because I thought she could understand the shock and heartache of my fall from grace. (Abulhawa, 2020, p. 33)**

The above mentioned textual lines showcases the terrible reality of society and the horrifying experiences of psychological trauma in Nahr’s life. Herman (2015) discusses interpersonal trauma in detail and suggests that sometimes trauma is caused by the betrayal of some close relation as Nahr husband abandoned her after a few months of their marriage from lift without any particular reason which scatters or sense of identity safety and self worth. Her returning back to Um Buraq exemplifies the dual nature of trauma as she knew that Um Buraq would ultimately turn her life into filthy world of prostitution but she wanted to seek solace and comfort with someone who had experienced the same pain. As Um Buraq was also rejected by husband. Nahr always dreamed about a grand and magnificent wedding but her wedding was a silent marriage contract with a few family members and a simple wedding gown that ashamed her eyes of other people especially her friends. The themes of “shame and isolation” are the salient features of trauma (Herman, 2015, p. 253).

**Now, alone in the Cube, I laugh at the memory, and it’s as if the silver fillings I remember are my own ... But the way memory animates the past is more real than the present. (Abulhawa, 2020, p. 17)**

Herman (2015) Illustrates that trauma shatters normal temporality thus, past experiences feel as clear and immediate as present. Nahr’s act of recollecting memories and interaction with past elaborates her psychological state. That she was well aware of her surroundings, her imprisonment, her isolation yet clinged to past as a living entity has conversation with false ceiling proof as a sign of her deep isolation and darkness it also depicts as a coping mechanism. Herman (2015) examines that storytelling is important in regaining identity and a pathway to restoration. The protagonist tried to lessen her psychological burden and turmoil by remembering her beloved mother’s laughter which implies her attempt to regain identity and agency by reenacting past memories and integrating into herself within the four walls of “the cube”. As Herman (2015) claimed that traumatic memory is “wordless or static” (p. 176)

**It was disorienting in the beginning, because I didn’t know how to be in such openness. I found myself breathing deeply ... even though I knew I would be here at least a couple of months. (Abulhawa, 2020, p. 115)**

The above mentioned scene from the novel captures what Harman (2015) believed about homecoming and the process of restoration. Nahr’s initial disturbance in that setting and new openness symbolises the lingering effects of her long term captivity and imprisonment. Herman

(2015) profoundly explores the gradual journey of recovery. Nahr's sense of freedom, her act of breathing deeply, exercises, reaction to Adan signifies her renewal her reorientation, in a new environment in her own homeland. Nahr didn't know herself, but she was secretly contended in Palestine. "Palestine suits you," Jihad whispered. "You look the most radiant and alive I've ever seen you." (Abulhawa, p. 216).

**They were all there to greet me, enfolding me in the embrace of our collective dislocation from this place where all our stories go and return...The adan sounded from unseen minarets... and inhale the call to prayer. (Abulhawa, 2020, p. 109-110)**

The aforementioned lines highlights the healing power and restoring energy in a sympathetic and supportive environment. Herman (2015) Implores that trauma is not specifically a personal experience rather it has political and cultural dimensions, here Nuh's return to Palestine her real land after being exiled from so many countries and places, From Kuwait to Jordan and Jordan to Egypt. Although she was not born here but her mother father and grandmother always yearned for Palestine. And Nuhre felt safe here, which parallels with Herman's (2015) idea that "recovery" always begins with "safety" (p. 266). By closing her eyes add inhaling the essence of her land she significantly reclaims her sense of belonging identity agency and safety. Herman (2015) further asserts that "safety always begins with the body" (p. 269)

## **Findings and Conclusion**

The above-mentioned analysis of the selected Palestinian novels evaluated that trauma has profound effects on individual psyche not only for the time being but also had lingering effects that perpetuate in traumatic victims. The lives of Nazmiyeh, Nur and Alwan reflects the drastic effects of trauma, which shatters the normal psychological functioning at collective level. The Palestinians were discarded and brutally exiled from their own homes after the catastrophe of Al-Nakba 1948.

A sort of comparative analysis of both novels give deeper insight into individual and collective sufferings of Palestinian people and the aftermaths of war and displacement that were brought by political invasions and inflicted upon the marginalized communities. As, Herman (2015) claimed trauma has a direct connection to "forgotten history" (p. 7). Alwan's son Khaled died in front of her eyes after being paralyzed and silenced for so many months, suffering from C-PTSD due to being injured in Israeli shelling and blasts. Patients suffering from complex post-traumatic stress disorder "feel they have lost themselves" (Herman, 2015, p. 158). Everyone has their own story of trauma and level of pain that can be reduced by collective appreciation, remembrance and reconnection to land and loved ones. Nur faced constant turmoils and survived many traumas in her life, she was abandoned by her own mother but after coming to Palestine she felt home somewhere for the first time in life.

Many contextual and thematic similarities have been explored as the novels are penned by the same author Susan Abulhawa to profoundly portray the silenced sufferings of people specially women and children in the dark and constricted environment of war and political terrorism. Both texts elaborate the levels of sufferings inflicted upon Palestinian after the terrible and life-altering incidents of Al-Nakba 1948 in first novel and the catastrophe of Al-Naksa 1967, in the second novel. The protagonists of both of the novels are strong, ambitious and highly protective about their family and loved ones. They navigate trauma in their own sphere of lives Nazmiyeh suffering in refugee camps in Palestine, and Nuhr being exiled and abused many times in the face of surviving double colonization while living in Kuwait and Jordan. The phenomenon of recovery takes place when Nazmiyeh reunited with her brother's lost granddaughter Nur, and in other novel when



Nuhr came to Palestine, and felt freedom, sense of belonging and autonomy in her true land and roots.

This article discussed and elaborated how trauma navigates in connection to memory, leaves lasting scars and invisible wounds on individual psyche, that can only be healed or recuperate in connection to community. It illustrated various types of trauma faced by Palestinian people specially women due to political invasions and terror. These novels highlighted the multiple effects of trauma, pain and repressed memories on silenced survivors and marginalized communities in broader Palestine-Israel context. The sufferings of women continued, those who remained in Palestine as in the first novel *The Blue Between Sky and Water* (2015) and those who were exiled from their country as in the second text *Against the Loveless World* (2020). The researcher has employed the theocratical lens of Judith Herman to elaborate the connection of trauma at individual and collective level and importance of reconnection, remembrance and safety as the pathway to restoration.

### **Future Implications**

This research is significant in the field of psychology, trauma studies and for literary scholar to manifest different dimensions of trauma in their writings. It can also help them by issuing certain writings that are sustainable and do not harm or badly influence the readers.

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