Trauma and Memory: The Impact of Political Turmoil on Individual Lives in Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin*

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Abstract:

This research paper explores the intricate interplay between trauma, memory, and identity in the context of political conflict, as depicted in Susan Abulhawa's novel *Mornings in Jenin*. Abulhawa's works provide a profound narrative lens through which the Palestinian experience of displacement, violence, and resistance is articulated, making her novels rich sites for examining the psychological and emotional impacts of political turmoil. In *Mornings in Jenin,* the narrative of the Abulheja family, spanning several generations, offers insights into the persistent trauma inflicted by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The novel shows how collective memory and personal trauma are intertwined, shaping the identities of individuals and communities. By analysing this text, this paper argues that Abulhawa not only captures the historical and cultural essence of the Palestinian plight but also delves into the psychological dimensions of trauma. The study utilises a multidisciplinary approach, drawing on theories from trauma studies, memory studies, and postcolonial literature to discuss how memory and trauma are negotiated in Abulhawa's narratives. The paper reveals how Abulhawa's portrayal of these themes serves as a powerful commentary on the impacts of political conflict on individual lives, proposing that memory can serve as a means of resistance and survival in the face of ongoing turmoil.

Keywords: Palestinian conflict, trauma, memory, postcolonial, etc.

In contemporary literature, few subjects garner as deep an emotional and scholarly response as the impact of political conflict on individual lives. Susan Abulhawa's novel *Mornings in Jenin* (2010) provides a poignant narrative window into the Palestinian experience of displacement, resistance, and survival under oppressive conditions. The novel, rich with historical detail and emotional depth, offers fertile ground for exploring the intersection of trauma, memory, and identity. This paper examines how Abulhawa's literary constructions of trauma and memory help articulate a collective narrative of Palestinian endurance and resilience in the face of prolonged geopolitical strife.

The personal is indeed political in Abulhawa's works. Her characters do not merely experience historical events; rather, they are formed and malformed by these events, which in turn become central to their personal narratives and collective memory. Tahrir Hamdi rightly writes that Abulhawa, like many of her predecessors, has taken it upon herself to "bear witness to an unspeakable past, something which dominant History has been bent on silencing" (23). The novel weaves a complex tapestry of loss and love, wherein memory acts both as a burden and a tool of resistance against the erasure of identity. This study employs a multidisciplinary approach, drawing from trauma theory and memory studies, to delve into how Abulhawa's characters navigate their disrupted lives. Insights from scholars such as Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman on trauma, along with Maurice Halbwachs's and Pierre Nora's seminal work on memory, provide the theoretical underpinnings for this analysis. By examining how trauma is manifested and dealt with through the generations within Abulhawa's novel, we can look into the broader psychological impacts of conflict on individuals and communities. Such an examination is crucial not only for understanding the specific context of the Palestinian struggle but also for appreciating the universal themes of human suffering and resilience in literature. Through this lens, it becomes evident to locate the dual role of memory in Abulhawa's works: as a source of pain and a means of survival, continually shaping and reshaping personal and collective identities under the shadow of ongoing conflict.

A rich field of scholarly inquiry, the study of trauma in literature has grown significantly with the advent of trauma theory, particularly through the influential work of Cathy Caruth in "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History" (1996) and Judith Herman in "Trauma and Recovery" (1992). These foundational texts argue that trauma, while historically situated, has a timeless and universal dimension that is often represented through narrative. Literature, as argued by Caruth, serves as a vehicle to articulate the unspeakable, the language of trauma, through symbols, metaphors, and narrative structures (Caruth 23). These images are foundational in understanding how individuals and communities represent and process traumatic experiences through literature. Literature becomes a medium to show the unassimilated nature of traumatic experiences, which are repeatedly lived in the present until they can be articulated and integrated into one's history. In the context of Abulhawa's work, trauma theory helps elucidate how her characters grapple with personal and collective traumas of displacement, loss, and violence. This theoretical lens allows us to examine how narrative techniques and character development in Abulhawa's novels portray the struggle to articulate traumatic memories and the ways these memories shape personal and collective identities.

Memory studies intersect with trauma literature by examining how collective and individual memories shape cultural and personal identities. Scholars like Maurice Halbwachs in "On Collective Memory" (1992) and Pierre Nora in "Realms of Memory" (1996) discuss the social frameworks of memory, suggesting that memory is not an inert repository of facts but an active process of meaning-making influenced by contemporary social contexts. Maurice Halbwachs's concept of collective memory elucidates how groups remember their past in ways that reinforce their group identity (50). Pierre Nora's notion of "lieux de mémoire" (sites of memory) further illustrates how certain moments, places, or symbols become focal points for the memory of communal experiences (93-94). These theories assist in analysing how Abulhawa's narratives act as sites of memory, contesting official histories and fostering a shared sense of the past among Palestinians. Postcolonial literature provides a critical framework for examining the narratives of communities disrupted by colonial and neocolonial conflicts. Authors like Edward Said in "Culture and Imperialism" (1993) and Homi Bhabha in "The Location

of Culture" (1994) provide insights into how narratives of the oppressed can challenge the historical and cultural narratives imposed by colonial and neocolonial rule. Said's concept of "narrative authority" is particularly relevant in examining how Palestinian voices reclaim their history and identity through storytelling (25). Bhabha's ideas on cultural hybridity and the third space are useful for exploring the nuanced identities of Abulhawa's characters, who navigate between cultures, histories, and geographies.

Mornings in Jenin by Susan Abulhawa provides us with a vivid peek into the Palestinian experience, marked by displacement, loss, and resistance. The concepts above of trauma theory, memory studies, and postcolonial theory can be used as a working tool to analyse how the novel portrays these themes through its characters and narrative structure. The novel's structure itself mirrors the fragmented and cyclical nature of trauma. The narrative moves across generations, from the 1948 Nakba to the early 21st century, reflecting the ongoing impact of historical traumas on successive generations. According to Cathy Caruth, trauma is not simply experienced by individuals once but is repeatedly relived until it can be articulated and integrated into one's history (42). In the novel, the characters frequently relive their traumas, both through their memories and through the novel's retelling of their past. The initial displacement of the Abulheja family during the Nakba (the catastrophe of 1948) sets a foundational trauma that affects subsequent generations. The loss of their ancestral home in Ein Hod and the forced relocation to the Jenin refugee camp marks the beginning of an ongoing cycle of loss and displacement. This loss is not just physical but symbolic, representing a severing of ties with their past and a profound identity disruption. Amal's mother, Dalia, experiences profound grief when her daughter, Huda, dies. Huda's death from a snakebite, under conditions exacerbated by the family's living conditions in the refugee camp, displays the physical and emotional dangers that the family faces due to their displacement. Dalia's reaction to Huda's death—a mix of numbing grief and persistent mourning—exemplifies the traumatic impact of losing a child, especially in an already vulnerable situation. One of the most heart-wrenching moments in the novel is when Ismael, Amal's brother, is taken by an Israeli soldier during the chaos of the 1948 war. This event haunts the family for decades. For Dalia, Ismael's abduction represents an unresolved traumatic

event that affects her ability to connect fully with her remaining family, embodying a grief that is both personal and collective.

In the novel, Dalia is experiencing what Freud refers to as 'melancholia.' According to Freud, melancholia occurs when a person shows an inability to mourn (237). He believes this inability can arise from various situations; the traumatic loss might be overwhelming, the emotional impact could detach them from reality, or the trauma could be continuous (Volkan 35). Dalia's trauma is too severe to be processed. Her suffering stems from a sequence of traumatic events, starting with the loss of her sisters during the initial days of the El-Nakba. She also witnessed the deaths of her brother-in-law, Darweesh, and his wife. "The soldier fired his pistol twice, once between Fatooma's eyes and once at her white streak, killing her instantly. Another shot through Darweesh's chest" (Abulhawa 32). These tragedies occurred in rapid succession. The most harrowing event was the loss of her child, Ismael. "In a fleeting moment, which Dalia would replay in her mind repeatedly for many years, she searched for any sign or clue of what might have happened to her son. Even as she drifted into a distorted reality, she continued to scour the vanishing crowd in her mind for Ismael" (Abulhawa 32).

Yousef, Amal's brother, becomes a fighter for the Palestinian cause and is subsequently captured and tortured by Israeli forces. The physical and psychological scars from his torture mark him deeply, affecting his personality and actions. His eventual death in battle is both a culmination of his life's traumas and a profound point of grief for the family, especially for Amal, who sees in her brother the embodiment of Palestinian resistance and suffering. Amal herself is not spared from traumatic experiences. Her life in America exposes her to a different kind of cultural and existential struggle, which becomes particularly acute when she loses her American husband and child in a car accident. This tragedy compels her to return to Palestine, where she confronts her past traumas and those of her people. These memories are a clear sign of unresolved trauma that creeps into her consciousness. Trauma is "painful remembering as deferred action that constitutes trauma" (Visser 273). According to Caruth, "painful repetition of the flashbacks can only be understood as the absolute inability of the mind to avoid an unpleasant event that has not been given psychic meaning in any way" (59). Amal's present situation triggers her memories. Her efforts to begin a new life in

America free of her traumatic past and its memories fail because the past is "still with me [her]" (Abulhawa 174).

The reunion of Amal with her brother Ismael, now David, who has been raised as an Israeli soldier, is another deeply traumatic encounter for her. This reunion brings to the forefront the complexities of identity and allegiance that have been shaped under the weight of ongoing conflict. The encounter is emotionally charged and fraught with unresolved pain, highlighting the profound impacts of the forced separation. Amal grapples with feelings of alienation, betrayal, and loss as she faces her brother, who represents both the lost family member and the opposing side of the conflict. This reunion forces both siblings to confront their shared past and the divergent paths their lives have taken, which is a source of significant psychological pain and cognitive dissonance.

These examples illustrate how trauma in *Mornings in Jenin* is woven through the fabric of both individual lives and the collective Palestinian experience. Each traumatic event is depicted not just as a personal tragedy but as part of a larger historical and political context, affecting generations and shaping the narrative of identity and resistance within the Palestinian community. The novel uses these personal stories to reflect broader themes of displacement, loss, and the struggle for self-determination, making the trauma both intimate and universal.

Memory in *Mornings in Jenin* serves as a counter-narrative to the Israeli national narrative, which often marginalises Palestinian histories. Drawing on Maurice Halbwachs's theory of collective memory, the novel showcases how memories are maintained through communal practices, stories, and physical remnants, such as keys to homes lost in 1948. These memories are not static; they evolve with each retelling, serving both as a record of loss and a form of resistance against the erasure of Palestinian identity. Pierre Nora's notion of "lieux de mémoire" is particularly relevant in analysing how specific events and symbols in the novel, such as the Deir Yassin massacre and the keys of the houses in Ein Hod, become focal points for collective memory. These symbols and events are revisited throughout the novel, reinforcing their significance as part of the Palestinian collective consciousness and identity. Throughout the novel, the memory of the village of Ein Hod, from which the Abulheja family was displaced, symbolises the

lost Palestinian homeland. The characters frequently recall their life in Ein Hod before the 1948 displacement, cherishing memories of their home, land, and community life. These memories are recounted to younger generations, ensuring that the connection to their origins persists despite the physical dislocation.

An ancient olive tree in the refugee camp becomes a symbol of resilience and continuity. It is under this tree that the family and community members gather to share stories of their past, their struggles, and their dreams. This olive tree is a literal and metaphorical site of memory, anchoring the community to its cultural and agricultural roots. The key to the family's original home in Ein Hod is a powerful symbol of memory and return. Kept by the family matriarch, the key represents the hope of someday returning to their home and reclaiming their land. It is more than a physical object; it is a symbol of their unyielding attachment to their land and identity. Throughout the novel, photographs and letters serve as tangible connections to the past. These items help the characters remember loved ones and moments of joy and sorrow.

For instance, Amal keeps photographs of her family and friends, which help her bridge her life across continents and cultures. Ismael, raised as David, has fragmented memories of his early childhood with his biological family. These memories occasionally surface, confusing and distressing him, as they contradict his upbringing in an Israeli family. His struggle with these memories reflects his inner conflict over his identity and the broader historical narrative of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Amal often reflects on her childhood and early adult years in the refugee camp. Her memories are a mix of pain and nostalgia, reflecting the loss of her homeland and the simpler joys of family and community. These personal recollections are integral to her narrative, helping her make sense of her displaced identity and reinforcing her connection to her Palestinian roots. These instances show how memory in *Mornings in Jenin* is not merely about the past but is actively used by the characters to construct and affirm their identities, cope with loss, and inspire hopes for the future. Memory acts as a form of resistance against the erasure of their history and as a tool for preserving their cultural heritage.

The novel also reflects Edward Said’s concepts of exile and narrative authority, where the act of narration becomes a means to reclaim history and identity from colonial and neocolonial narratives (45). The characters of *Mornings in Jenin* are in a constant state

of narrative struggle, reclaiming their personal and national histories through their stories. This narrative act challenges the dominant historical discourses and asserts a Palestinian perspective that resists marginalisation and silencing. Homi Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity (34) can be applied to the character of Amal, who navigates multiple identities — as a Palestinian, an American, and a refugee. Her experiences in the United States and upon her return to Palestine illustrate the complex negotiation of identity in postcolonial contexts. Her experiences in America expose her to a world vastly different from the Jenin refugee camp, shaping her perspectives and reactions to both Western and Palestinian societies. This hybrid identity is reflective of Homi Bhabha's concept of the "third space", where cultural identities are negotiated, and new meanings are created beyond the binaries of the coloniser and colonised. Ismael, kidnapped as a child and raised as David by an Israeli family, epitomises the postcolonial identity conflict. His life represents a literal narrative of colonisation, where a new Israeli identity overwrites his original identity. His struggle to reconcile his past with his present mirrors the broader postcolonial struggle of reclaiming and reconstructing identity from the fragments left by colonial disruption. The novel highlights the power of language and narrative in shaping identity and historical memory. The characters' stories and the language they use serve as acts of reclaiming narrative authority from the dominant Israeli accounts of history. This is aligned with Edward Said's views on narrative authority and the importance of storytelling in postcolonial contexts as a means to resist cultural domination and rewrite the subaltern narratives. The characters in the novel frequently engage in acts of cultural resistance simply by preserving and passing down their memories, stories, and traditions. This resistance is crucial in a postcolonial context as it helps maintain a sense of identity and continuity amid the pressures of assimilation and erasure. The repeated references to Palestinian food, music, and traditional practices in the refugee camp act as anchors to their identity and heritage, challenging the narrative of displacement imposed by the Israeli state. The novel also touches on themes of global solidarity and identity through characters like Amal, who connect with international supporters of the Palestinian cause. These interactions highlight the interconnectedness of postcolonial struggles and the shared experiences of displacement and resistance among colonised peoples worldwide. This has broader implications for postcolonial

studies, suggesting that the narrative reclaiming of history is crucial for decolonising minds and restoring dignity to oppressed peoples.

One can also realise the importance of cultural memory in maintaining and reinforcing cultural identities under threat. In environments where history is contested and subjected to erasure, preserving memory through stories becomes a key form of cultural and historical documentation. This insight is vital for communities worldwide facing similar threats to their cultural and historical narratives, emphasising literature's role in sustaining these narratives. The themes explored in *Mornings in Jenin* have significant implications for educational contexts, particularly in how history and conflicts are taught. Incorporating such literary works into curricula can enhance students' understanding of historical complexities and the human aspects behind political conflicts. This approach can foster empathy, critical thinking, and a more nuanced understanding of global issues among students.

To conclude, the study of Abulhawa's novel within these theoretical frameworks contributes to global discourses on human rights and conflict resolution. By highlighting the human costs of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through the lens of literature, it advocates for a more empathetic and informed approach to conflict resolution and peace negotiations. Literature thus emerges not only as a reflection of society but also as an active participant in shaping societal values and international understanding.

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