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## INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH (IJAR)

Article DOI:10.21474/IJAR01/20154  
DOI URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.21474/IJAR01/20154>



### RESEARCH ARTICLE

#### TRAUMA AND HISTORY IN SUSAN ABULHAWA'S 'THE BLUE BETWEEN SKY AND WATER'

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#### Manuscript Info

##### Manuscript History

Received: 28 October 2024

Final Accepted: 30 November 2024

Published: December 2024

##### Key words:-

Trauma, History, Narrative,  
Unspeakable Quality, Freedom

#### Abstract

The present research paper deals with trauma and history in Susan Abulhawa's novel *The Blue Between Sky and Water*. In the wake of current political conditions, literature has a responsibility to record history when history itself falls short. The middle-east has probably seen more political upheavals than any other region in the world. The Palestinian dilemma has become a matter of international concern. In the midst of it, writers like Susan Abulhawa have done a remarkable job of chronicling the trauma and suffering of the Palestinians. The fictional elements of her book embrace actual historical tragedies and portrays its consequences on the marginalized voices of the region. The psychological depth of her characters is explored through omniscient point of view in her novel *The Blue Between Sky and Water*.

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#### Introduction:-

Trauma is an event in a person's life that is deeply disturbing or distressing. Initially, trauma was associated with only physical injury but with advancements in psychological studies trauma came to be associated with psychology. Cambridge dictionary describes trauma as: severe and lasting emotional shock and pain caused by an extremely upsetting experience, or a case of such shock happening (Trauma)

Sigmund Freud wrote extensively about trauma in his theories of *Studies in Hysteria* after being influenced by Martin Charcot who studied trauma of war veterans. Freud explored the effects of trauma which later developed into modern trauma theory which is a multidisciplinary framework that examines psychological, emotional and social effects of trauma.

Newer generation of intellectuals began to explore trauma into literary and cultural spheres in the 90s. Cathy Caruth pioneered the studies in Trauma Theory in her 1996 book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. Caruth describes trauma as- "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurred is often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena." (Caruth 11)

In her works Caruth focused on establishing certain characteristics of trauma such as trauma's capacity to break the psyche which causes narratives of trauma to be fragmented and dissociative. She also focused on the bifurcation of individual and collective trauma and trauma's quality of being trans-historical and inter-generational. Few, who were dissatisfied by Caruth's singular approach started writing about Trauma Studies pluralistically. Thus Trauma Studies emerged as a comprehensive field with theories of Roger Lockhurst, Geoffrey Hartman, Shoshana

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Felman and Dori Laub. In literature and cultural studies, theories of these intellectuals were used to analyse Trauma fiction. These were the works of fiction that conveyed profound loss or intense fear on individual or collective levels. In the Middle-East, the most politically volatile region in the world, such fictional works are written by, Atiq Rahimi, Naguib Mahfouz, Abdul Rahman Munif, Inaam Kachachi, Marjan Kamali, Susan Abulhawa, etc. The present article uses Susan Abulhawa's novel *The Blue Between Sky and Water* as a reference to understand trauma and its narrative representation.

The PTSD faced by veterans of the Vietnam War forced the American Psychological Association and other officialdoms to recognize the authenticity of studies in trauma. Soon literary texts and other narratives, especially by trauma survivors came to be examined for representations of trauma. Michael Rothberg's *Traumatic Realism* examined trauma narratives in Holocaust literature and other war novels. These studies concluded that survivors of war, Holocaust, mass murder, genocide and extreme political upheavals are symptomatic of psychological, cultural and collective trauma. Sometimes the traumas faced by these individuals can be inter-generational and inter-racial i.e. historical trauma, which produces literature that is imbued with extremely horrendous situations, like African American literature recounting narratives of slavery and racism:

The historical traumas experienced by African Americans have profoundly influenced their cultural identity and literary expression. African American literature serves as a powerful vehicle to document process and resist these traumas...(M Mustafa)

For example, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, that has given unfettered account of slavery. Morrison's character Sethe's haunting past literally becomes a ghost, leaving her unable to escape her past. Sethe's trauma is represented as a ghost because her reality (or actual traumatic events) was unrepresentable. This "unspeakable" quality of trauma was initially recorded by Caruth in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. According to Caruth, the survivors of trauma "become themselves the symptom of a history." (Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*) So even though the narration of trauma is unreliable it is still legit as it involves the listener or reader to reconstruct the actual memory of the event from the bits and pieces given by the survivor. These combinations of trauma, history and broken narration can also be found in the works of Palestinian-American author Susan Abulhawa.

The story of *The Blue Between Sky and Water* revolves around Hajje Nazmiyeh Baraka and her family. In 1948 when Nazmiyeh was a young newly married girl Israel attacked Palestine and seized almost all of its land. Nazmiyeh's mother Um Mamdouh (Mother of Mamdouh) used to get possessed by a djinn named Sulayman. Her sister Mariam with mismatched eyes could see auras around others. These family gifts keep Nazmiyeh's family alive when their village Beit Daras is attacked. But both Mariam and Um Mamdouh perish and Nazmiyeh and her brother suffer trauma, her of being gang-raped and him of being shot by the enemy soldiers. In the coming years as their family grows, they are separated and completely lose touch with each other. The story spans around the countries of Palestine, Egypt, Kuwait and America and characters go through horrendous trials and sufferings. A sheer turn of events, coincidences and pure magic brings the family together again only to discover that their future generations inherit the supernatural family gifts.

Khaled, a ten year old character in the novel and the omniscient narrator of the entire tale. He is the grandson of Hajje Nazmiyeh, son of her daughter Alwan. Had he not been the narrator, Khaled would have been a very minor character in the novel. Nazmiyeh and her family are exiled to Gaza, which is attacked again and again even after being declared a safe zone. Susan Abulhawa has operated the incident of 27 December, 2008 in the plot of her story. In this attack, Israel drops white phosphorus bombs on Gaza, and Khaled (due to psychological trauma) suffers a shock leaving his body permanently paralyzed. In that trance, Khaled could communicate with the djinn Sulayman that used to possess his great grandmother in a limbo location (Beit Daras) who tells him the entire story of his family. Thus Khaled narrates the events of years before he was born, the events of the present (even in his locked-in syndrome) and events after his death. He even witnesses the life of his mother's cousin, Nur, who lives in America with whom the family has lost touch. However contrary to the unreliable narrators used in many fictional works, Khaled's memories are meant to be taken as the truth. Michelle Balaev in her article "Trauma Studies" writes:

Since traumatic experience enters the psyche differently than normal experience and creates an abnormal memory that resists narrative representation, the unique process of this remembering results in an approximate recall but never determinate knowledge. (364)

Thus Khaled's memories might not be the absolute truth but are an accurate rendering of the collective Palestinian trauma.

Before the Naqba, the family lived peacefully in Beit Daras with secrets of supernatural gift. Hajje Um Mamdouh hosted a djinn, a fearsome creature who was also the protector of the family. Mariam, years younger than her siblings could see people's aura, their mood and even their intentions, which helped the family avoid many a deceits (although the gift faded away after a few years). Mariam also had a friend name Khaled (her future grand-nephew) who nobody could see, who taught her to read and write (at that time only boys were taught to read and write). For years the family thought that Mariam was self-taught, and Khaled was her imaginary friend until a boy with white streak of hair appeared in the family photograph though nobody had noticed him there. When Israeli soldiers first started the expansion of their country on Palestinian lands, the elders of villages visited Um Mamdouh to get Sulayman's advice, who warned them of their neighbour's intentions. Abulhawa has done an accurate portrayal of the Palestinian frenzy and the brutality of Haganah in some earlier chapters.

"In Safsaf, after the inhabitants had hoisted the white flag, [the soldiers] gathered the men and women into separate groups, bound the hands of 50 or 60 villagers, shot them, then buried them all in the same pit. They also raped several women from the village. Where did they learn such behaviour, as cruel as that of the Nazis? [...]... One officer told me that the most ferocious were those who had escaped the camps." ("The Crimes of 1948")

When the attacks came, the women fled to Gaza for safety, while the men stayed behind. Nazmiyeh (came back to the village to try and save Mariam) but was captured and gang-raped. The soldiers kill Mariam to make Nazmiyeh suffer more. After her death Mariam appears as a vision to Nazmiyeh and asks her to name her daughter Alwan. Nazmiyeh's trauma manifests as dreams, hallucination and temporary paralysis which manifests from time to time even years later every time some calamity befalls the family like- Mamdouh's death or attack on Khaled, etc. Nazmiyeh dreams of a girl who is very much like her sister, who also has her sister's gifts after her death, which prophesises of Nazmiyeh's grand-niece Nur, who was born years later in America and could see colours around people just like Mariam. After every calamity Nazmiyeh tries to summon her sister's help to no avail (she even tries to summon Sulayman, the djinn). But she just does not have the gifts.

Nur inherits Mariam's gifts though and her mismatched eyes. Mamdouh informs his sister of Nur's connection to Mariam after his son Mhammad's (Nur's father) death:

From the photographs he had sent Nazmiyeh had been astonished to see that Nur had inherited Mariam's eyes... Mamdouh had also confided that he thought Nur saw colors in the way their sister had years earlier...(Abulhawa 117)

Mamdouh loses his wife and son within a year of each other and fights for the custody of Nur. After giving Nur's greedy mother all of his money, he finally gets her custody. But before he could take Nur home to Gaza, he dies and Nur ends up with her narcissistic mother who only takes her in for Mamdouh's insurance money. Nzinga, an African refugee working for child services and Nur's Uncle Santiago helps protect Nur when she discovers that Nur is being sexually abused by her stepfather under her mother's custody. Because Nur's trauma as a child abused is so indescribable, Susan Abulhawa parallel's her sufferings with that of Nazmiyeh's through magic realism to validate Nur's feeling throughout the novel and to make us readers aware of them. While Nur is in her personal hell Nazmiyeh dreams about her-

In her caverns of sleep, she had walked back to Beit Daras, this time in search of Nur... A woman appeared next to her, seated with a phone receiver at her ear, and a man came to undress Nur, fondling her indecently. In the dream Nazmiyeh instinctively leapt across the distance from wall to field, to save Nur. But the soldiers hidden in memory entered, re-enacting an old trauma. She sat up in bed when the gun rang out and Mariam fell.(Abulhawa 87)

Thus the author has protected us from experiencing the trauma through a child's perspective. But the abuse through an adult's (Nazmiyeh's) eyes is horrible just the same, thus maintain the authenticity of trauma, all the while drawing similarities between the sufferings of the two characters.

Nur's survival in foster homes and orphanage is challenging and child-welfare classifies her as a case of "neglect and sexual abuse without possibility of reunification" (Abulhawa 100). Nur later on becomes a child psychologist to help the children who have gone through experiences similar to hers. But she is never whole. Throughout the novel we see her trying to get approval and love from all around her to regain some semblance of the unconditional love that she had once received from her grandfather, Mamdouh. As a child, she behaves well to get approval of her

mother, even enduring abuse from her stepfather silently. She also seeks the same approval from her peers, Nzinga and then years later from Jamal. Nur's hunger for love even degrades her into having an affair with a married man Jamal, a psychiatrist from Palestine. It isn't until Nur is in the embrace of her family again and through their show of unwavering support (even as she gets pregnant out of wedlock in Gaza) that we see a healing arc in her. Nur's meeting with the family and her arrival in Gaza is a chronology of coincidences and magic. In the years to come Nur had forgotten all the Arabic that her grandfather had taught her and stories of her Palestinian family had also faded away. In her dreams however, she sees a boy and a girl named Khaled and Mariam who become her guiding hand. Through their insistence Nur takes on Arabic studies in college and later on psychotherapy. When she is made aware of a boy named Khaled who is in a locked-in trance, with the help of Dr Jamal Mumsar she come to Gaza to help and study the boy, not know that he is basically her own nephew. After months of being acquainted with the family, when Nur is finally comfortable enough to remove her contacts and show her mismatched eyes, Nazmiyeh is overjoyed and emotional as she recognizes Mariam's eyes in her grandniece. After Khaled's death Nur's childhood dream reappears and she finally recognizes the boy who had always been her guide in her childhood had actually been her nephew.

Khaled's reality is different than everyone else in the novel. When he was born, Nazmiyeh notices his streak of white hair and is immediately reminded of Mariam's friend. She advises Alwan to name him 'Khaled'. On his tenth birthday, Israel attacked Gaza with a particular brutality. This (December 2008) attack had garnered worldwide criticism because Israel had used the banned white phosphorus. Once an active boy Khaled then suddenly suffers a paralytic attack and in his condition thinks that his birthday is being celebrated by Israel. He later comes to know of the devastation left on Gaza through snippets of conversations that he could hear when his mother describes the tragic story of his own condition and his father's death. In the locked-in state he visits the peaceful village of Beit Daras, the way it existed when his Teta Nazmiyeh was a girl, "It was a quiet place of refuge, deep inside him. A place of blue"(Abulhawa 150). This is the place from where the boy is able to travel in the past, present and future of his family. He appears in the dreams of those who are close to him (Mariam and Nur), and even Nazmiyeh to some extent. Khaled's life was short, he would not have been a major character in the novel had it not been for his powers. But Abulhawa has constructed this character in such a way that he becomes a bridge where time flows in all directions. He could go into any timelines to witness the events of his family, know the secrets and hidden details about them, break down the truth and assimilate the reality of the entire tale. The use of magic realism has enabled Susan Abulhawa to tell the story of *The Blue Between Sky and Water*, which otherwise would have been a very fragmented saga.

### **Conclusion:-**

*The Blue Between the Sky and Water* throws light on the very marginalized community. Whereas the narratives of Holocaust, colonialism, African American slavery and racism has found its space in mainstream literary narratives long ago, Palestinian voices are still struggling to do so. For peace and stability in the world it is necessary to have such a representation of this war torn region and Susan Abulhawa has done a remarkable job of it. Abulhawa uses her story to shed light on the traumatic history of the country and the struggle of these people against oppression. The character in the novel all work through historic trauma towards a better future. Mariam and Nazmiyeh represent freedom through their death and life respectively, Nur as an American citizen is free to come and go wherever she pleases and Khaled finds freedom in his locked-in syndrome as he says,

There is love in every space here and I struggle to understand the reality, because I remember that they are not living. How do I tell Mama of this freedom? That there is a Beit Daras in a Palestine without soldiers where we can all go?(Abulhawa 178)

Inculcation of little real-life incidents like the killing of Rachel Corrie (after whom Khaled's sister Rhet Shel is named) makes the novel all the more realistic, even with all the fantastical elements in it. *The Blue Between Sky and Water*, depicts Susan Abulhawa's personal struggle as a Palestinian refugee. The incidents recorded in the novel are based on historical facts and collective traumatic narratives of the Naqba survivors. This makes the trauma and history in the novel more realistic than fictional.

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