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Representation of Trauma in Susan Abulhawa's 'Mornings in Jenin'

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Abstract

Following the events of *al-Nakba* (1948), that rendered thousands of Palestinians homeless, pain and trauma have become a dark reality pervading every aspect of their lives. Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin* is a lucid account of the devastating impacts of *al-Nakba* on the psyche of the characters both on individual and collective level. This paper makes an attempt to highlight the fact that the characters are not dealing with a single traumatic event, but a series of them due to the fact that the Palestinian *al-Nakba* is still going on. It will also examine impact of the *al-Nakba* trauma not only on the first generation of victims but also on their offspring. Last but not the least, this paper will explore the process of healing and its feasibility in the context of Palestine given the continuous nature of trauma in the Palestinian context.

Key words: Traumatic Memories, Vomik Volkan, *Mornings in Jenin*, Melancholia, Palestine

INTRODUCTION

Written by a Palestinian refugee now living in the United States, *Mornings in Jenin* attempts to offer a thorough account of traumatic history of Palestine that started with the occupation of Palestine in 1948 and continues to the date. The writing of the novel was inspired by the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the massacre that was carried out in the Jenin refugee camp. Abulhawa visited Jenin refugee camp shortly after the massacre, which occurred during a huge Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Extremely impacted at the sight of horrors she witnessed in the camp Abulhawa vowed to bear testimony to the evil she had witnessed in the Jenin following the massacre. The outcome was opposed to what Abulhawa initially intended to write. Instead of writing an essay she ended up writing a novel. Her novel is a harrowing account of traumatic experience of a Palestinian family across four generations fused with the pain and suffering imposed on them as a result of Israeli occupation. She says, "I wanted the world to know what happened in Jenin. But as I wrote, the characters

started to come to life, to fill out, and eventually being true to these characters and telling their story honestly became the only focus" (Qualey).

Trauma according to Siti Hawa Muhamad, is a defining feature in the works of Arab Anglophone writers especially those writers that hail from war-torn countries or occupied territories such as Palestine, Syria, and Iraq (167). As someone who was born to a refugee family and spent a major part of her life in an orphanage, Abulhawa is no stranger to trauma and suffering. In fact, for Abulhawa and her counterparts such as Ghassan Kanafani and Sahar Khalifeh who have been personally affected by the experience of war, writing about the historical and collective trauma of *al-Nakba* is also a reflection of their personal trauma. Abulhawa's personal trauma is voiced through the character of Amal, protagonist of the novel who is born after the *al-Nakba*. Reading the life story of the writer might lead the readers to believe that *Mornings in Jenin* is nothing but the personal story of Abulhawa but the reality is that that the story of the novel is the collective story of all Palestinian that have been through decades of war and occupation. It is the traumatic tale of Palestine ravaged by decades of violence and conflict, a tale that has been pushed to the margins of the history by the dominant and victorious Israeli narrative.

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" (Hamdi 23). Abulhawa starts her narrative by drawing a contrast between the life in pre-*Nakba* Palestine, and that of the post-*Nakba* Palestine.

The pre-*Nakba* account starts the peaceful lives of the Palestinian farmers in 1941. Men and women are working shoulder by shoulder on their farms. The women are singing "the ballads of past centuries, men on the other hand are getting ready for the olive harvest. "The sons worked on opposite sides of each tree as their mothers trailed them, hauling away blankets of fresh olives to be

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pressed later that day” (Abulhawa 4). The Abulhejas have an amicable rivalry with their neighbor Haj Saalem in their harvesting, trying to get a head start over him this year. Basimeh the matriarch of the family is preparing food and sharing it with family members and “migrant helpers” (Abulhawa 5). There is a close friendship between Hassan Abulheja and Ari Perlstein, son of a German professor who had fled Nazism and settled in Jerusalem. The reality of Palestinian lives is marked by stability and predictability and this is clear in the mundane activities described by the writer. However, this stability swiftly comes to an end as the tension between the Jews and Palestinian grows over the years. The post-Nakba narration takes us to a time when, Ein Hod a “small village east of Haifa lived quietly on figs and olives, open frontiers and sunshine” is attacked (Abulhawa 3).

The first attack occurred on the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah, December 12, 1947. An explosion rocked the air and Dalia ran screaming from the cemetery. Hassan hurried home when he reached home when he heard the blast. Not finding his wife, He raced towards the cemetery and met Dalia along the way...crying the Jews are coming. Hassan led Dalia toward their home as plumes of smoke rose from the adjacent village, al-Tira, and the curious and frightened residents of Ein Hod gathered in the square to watch” (Abulawa 25). This description of rootlessness and instability is in total contrast with the stability of the land before the occupation. Abulhawa highlights the trauma associated with having known stability, regularity, and predictability and then having it snatched away violently. *Mornings in Jenin* becomes writer’s ‘Guernica’, a horrific picture of the horrors of war. Iman El Sayed Raslan also considers *Mornings in Jenin* by Susan Abulhawa as a ‘trauma novel’ as the author uses trauma as “a powerful signifier of oppressive cultural regimes and practices” (186). According to her, various types of trauma are fused to portrait Palestinian life (El Sayed 186).

“One instance can crush a brain and change the course of life, the course of history” (Abulhawa 32). This sentence by Abulhawa perfectly captures the essence of trauma imposed on Palestinian people post *al-Nakba* events. This paper will analyze Abulhawa’s *Mornings in Jenin* to expose the trauma of displacement, losing one’s home and ending up living as a refugee. It reveals the devastating impacts of *Al-Nakba* on the lives of different generations of Palestinians both on an individual and collective level. The purpose of this article will be to

reveal how Palestinians’ lives are overshadowed with trauma and its ghostlike legacy.

SUMMARY OF THE NOVEL

Mornings in Jenin a tale of Palestinian trauma and displacement was published in 2010. The original title of the book was the *Scar of David*, published in 2006 by a small publishing house in the United States that went out of business shortly after. It failed to garner any success at the time. It was only after being translated to other languages including French and Italian and selling well, that the book took on a life of its own. Bloomsbury publication published it again, which became an international bestseller upon its release. As a novel grounded in historical facts it tells the story of the Abulheja family in the wake of *al-Nakba*. The family is leading a peaceful life in Ein Hod village when Israel launches a heavy aerial bombardment of the villages. The village is reduced to rubbles as the bombs rain and leave corpses of defenseless people behind. Anticipating more attacks and Fearful for their lives, Abulhejas, along with thousands of other Palestinians flee their village until they end up in the Jenin refugee camp, which becomes the setting for most of the book. Their world is turned upside down in a matter of hours. In addition, Dalia the young mother of the family has her eldest son snatched away during the escape. He is taken by an Israeli soldier (Moshe) who takes him as a gift for her barren wife (Jolanta), a Holocaust survivor. Little Ismael grows up to be David, an Israeli soldier who would unknowingly fight against his people in future battles. The novel is mainly from the point of view of Amal, the youngest child of the family who is born in the refugee camp. Through her eyes, we are taken into a world characterized by a chain of traumatic events. To escape the harsh reality of the camp Amal takes refuge in his father’s love as he (Hassan) pampers her and teaches her poetry as he believes education is the best legacy he can leave for his children. As Amal and her family are trying to recreate a new life in the camp-despite their never-ending hope for return, another tragedy hits them. Six-Day War of 1967, (*al-Naksa*) takes away Amal’s father. Yousef, Amal’s brother who has survived the war, leaves Jenin and joins the Palestinian resistance following the loss of his father. To fulfil her father’s dream of getting his children educated, Amal goes to an orphanage where he receives a scholarship and eventually set out for the US to pursue her studies. Years later Amal receives a call from her bother Yousef who is now living in exile with his wife Fatima

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and their daughter Falasteen. After returning to Lebanon, she falls in love with Majid, his brother's friend and begins a new life; however, this new beginning soon comes to an end with the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Israeli attacks on Sabra and Shatilla camps lead to the death of her husband and the entire family of Yousef. Following the death of her husband Amal who is pregnant at the time returns to the US and gives birth to her daughter Sara. Toward the end of the Novel Amal receives a call from her lost brother David. Her reunion with her brother sparks nostalgia for the homeland, prompting her return to Palestine. Amal travels to Jenin along with her daughter Sara. She meets her death as she tries to take a bullet for her daughter exposed to snipers.

TRAUMA OF AL-NAKBA

Trauma comes from the ancient Greek meaning "wound" although the precise definition of the modern concept of trauma varies according to context and discipline (Marder1). It was not until the 1980s, following the war in Vietnam, that Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) became the common diagnosis for people struggling with the after-effects of traumatic events.

While first used to signify physical damage, the term has increasingly come to refer to psychological rather than physical injury, particularly over the second half of the twentieth century troops returning home after World Wars I and II, pushed for a diagnosis for the mental damage they carried with them. The usual diagnosis for these traumatized soldiers was 'shell shock,' which was defined as a condition characterized by an obsessive return to the anguish and horror of horrific war scenes in both waking and dream states. Freud defines trauma as "an extensive breach being made in the protective shield against stimuli ... by lack of any preparedness for anxiety" (31). This radical intrusion creates a break in the continuity of the self, and it is this continuity that is coveted by the human mind (Volkan 57). The opposite of continuity is change and, from this viewpoint, trauma may be understood to be a dramatic change, such that the subject cannot quickly comprehend and integrate the pre-traumatic and post-traumatic elements of identity. Cathy Caruth defines trauma as an overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena'(94). Historically, trauma occurs when human beings are exposed to sudden and unexpected

overwhelming negative events, including natural phenomena such as earthquakes or man-made phenomena, such as wars, domestic violence, and forced migration (Altawil et al.,1). At an individual level, a traumatic event may also involve migration to a new location, anxiety, death of a friend, family member, and separation from parents, etc (Levetown148). As a result, one can argue that, in a general sense, trauma pertains to occurrences or experiences that disrupt the normal flow of events in people's everyday life. During the Nakba, the Palestinian population was exposed to a wide range of stress factors; the massacres and loss of relatives, extreme violence, serious threats to their lives, and being uprooted from their villages and being disempowered exposed them to numerous traumatic experiences. "They suffered great losses of family members and personal resources, the separation of family and community relationships, and existential, economic, and social hardship that has endured for many years since and has led to feelings of grief, hopelessness, and helplessness" (Abu El Hija 106). Trauma can cause a wide range of physical and emotional symptoms including flashbacks, nightmares and compulsive behaviours are some of the common ways trauma victims used when 'acting out' traumas (Mehni 1). Feelings of despair, humiliation, abandonment, fear, and uncertainty plague them at various times during the novel. The 'uspeakability' of trauma is also expressed via flashbacks and recollections. *Mornings in Jenin* not only provide us with examples of damaged individuals, but it also skillfully conveys this suffering to the reader through the use of flashbacks, recollections, and recurring images in its storytelling approach.

In Palestinian history, *al-Nakba* has been described as a "watershed moment" that led to the creation of the state of Israel and the subsequent displacement of 700,000 Palestinians. It brought about the "destruction of over 500 Palestinian towns and villages and the exodus of three-quarters of a million Palestinians through direct intimidation or fear" (Rolston 42).

At least 80 percent of the Palestinians who lived in the major part of Palestine upon which Israel was established— more than 77 percent of Palestine's territory became refugees (Sa'di and Abu Lughod 3). Since Nakba, Palestinian history has been that of "massacres, land expropriation, dispossession, expulsion, and assassination" (Hamdi 22). Abulhawa's literary representation of the Palestinian catastrophe demonstrates a deep understanding

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of the traumatic effects of *al-Nakba* on its survivors. She describes *al-Nakba* as an event that “shattered present and future”, a gusting wind “that grabbed the land at one corner and shook it of its name and character” (Abulhawa 3).

It was an event that started in 1948 and despite the common belief has never ended. The recent events in Sheikh Jarrah are yet another example of the long-standing Israeli policy of land confiscation, displacement, and violence that has left Palestinian society in tatters. It was in May 2021 that Israel resumed its policy of ethnic cleansing and tried to forcefully remove about 2,000 Palestinians from the Sheikh Jarrah and Al-Bustan areas. As locals stood up to defend their lives, and homes, the Israeli state reacted violently, assaulting Palestinians in the streets and their places of worship. These events are a testimony to the fact that in situations defined by death, displacement and violence, trauma becomes a ghost whose shadow looms over the survivors.

DALIA’S TRAUMA

There are countless traumatizing incidents in *Mornings in Jenin*, throughout the book that will deeply impact the psyche of the characters. The first traumatic event is the Israel bombing of Ein Hod which leaves the village in ruins:

“The village was laid to ruin and Dalia lost all but two sisters that day”. “The father who had burned her hand lay charred in the same square town” (Abulhawa 28). Her husband, Hassan who is running from one corner to another to collect the family in finds Dalia in a state of eerie shock and silence. “Her rigid posture, unblinking eyes, and the tight clutch around Ismail frightened him” (Abulhawa 29). The experience of witnessing the Israeli bombing of Ein Hod coupled with the loss of several family members in a blink of an eye causes a breach in her mind. This breach, according to Freud prevents the survivor’s consciousness from processing the incoming stimuli, and the latter are immediately integrated into the mental apparatus without there being a full realization of what occurred, i.e. the reality of the distressing incident is repressed (23). The mental apparatus responds to the traumatic incident by entering a state of silence, which Freud calls the “incubation period,” during which the victim does not interact with the traumatic event and no post-trauma symptoms can be relocated. According to Freud, this trauma occurs as a result of the survivor’s “lack

of any readiness for [the] anxiety” that consumes him during the traumatic incident (Freud 23). The events of the war are too quick and too overwhelming that the Dali doesn’t have time to reflect on them, as surviving the situation and saving her children) is the only thing on her mind.

For Abulhejas and Dalia, in particular, the physical blow of forcefully being driven out of their homeland and ending up in a refugee camp, coupled with the psychological blow of losing their little child Ismael is something that causes her withdrawal from the external world. The terrible uncertainty and turbulence that Dalia has experienced as a result of her displacement to Jenin Camp, and has been exacerbated by the death of her son, adds to her incapability to respond to life’s events and do her daily activities. Amal describes her mother’s withdrawal from the real world, saying:

Following the occupation and the loss of my brother and father, Mama hardly left the prayer mat. She had no desire for food and refused even the paltry ration that arrived on the charity truck. The cotton of her gown grew dark with the stench of her sunbathed body, and her breath soured” (86).

This “quiet detachment” also affects her relationship with her daughter Amal who is born in the camp. As a mother, she fails to establish a secure bond with Amal, or express her love except during the child’s sleep. Dalia’s ‘quiet detachment’ can be interpreted as a “reaction to the loss of a loved one or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, and ideal, and so on” (Freud 243). She experiences a “profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, [and] inhibition of all activity” (Freud 244). Drawing on Freud’s observation, Dalia’s withdrawal from the real world is nothing but a natural and expected response to the ongoing traumatic experiences that she endures during her lifetime. As a mother, she is expected to establish a strong bond with her daughter but the bond between her and Amal is broken. This is due to the occupation as well as the loss of her son, both of which have rendered Dalia’s maternal bond, which should ideally serve as a source of protection for her daughter, ineffective.

She hasn’t overcome the old traumas that the 1967 War deals yet another blow to her sanity. Following the Israeli attacks on Jenin Camp during the Six-Day War

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El-Naksa), Amal sees her mother in a treatment tent. She narrates:

“She sat motionless in a corner, just as I had seen her sitting on the ground when I had stood up to in the kitchen hole. I stopped. Her spacious empty eyes didn’t see me standing before her. She seemed to see nothing (Abulhawa 73). The Enduring trauma of exile coupled with the loss of several family members can be the most devastating blow to one’s psyche. Amal reflects on the effects on her mother and states, “war changed us, mama most of all. It withered Mama. Her essential fibre unravelled, leaving her body a mere shell that often filled with hallucination” (Abulhawa 86).

Dalia is suffering from what Freud Calls ‘melancholia’. According to Freud a person with ‘melancholia’ is someone who demonstrates an inability to mourn (237). He believes, this inability can come from various circumstances; the traumatic loss may be too great, the emotional effect may cause them to lose grip on reality or the trauma may be ongoing (Volkan 35). Dalia’s trauma is too great in magnitude to be mourned. She is suffering from a series of traumas, which began with the loss from the loss of her sisters on the first days of the El-Nakba. She was also a witness to the death of her brother in law, Darweesh and his wife all at the same time. “The soldier fired his pistol twice. One shot between Fatooma’s eyes, one her white streak. She fell instantly dead. One though Darweesh’s chest” (32). All these events happened successively within a short period. The most devastating of all was the loss of her child Ismael. “It was infinitesimal flash of time that Dalia would revisit in her mind, over and over for many tears, searching for some clue, some hint of what might have happened to her so. Even after she became lost in an eclipsed reality, she would search the fleeing crown in her mind for Ismael” (32)

Ibni! Ibni! She scanned the ground, looked up; Hassan’s tall figure was not there. Ibni! Ibni! Some people tried to help her but gunshots tolled and Dalia has shoved along. Is this a dream? Nothing seemed real because was unbelievable. She looked at her arms to be sure. Maybe he crawled into my thobe. No Ismael. Her son was Gone (33). This is a scene that repeatedly gets replayed in the minds of Dalia. Her trauma is visible in the constant flashbacks to the moment she lost her child. Such flashbacks revive traumatic memories and demonstrate that the victim or survivor is still haunted by the initial

traumatic event. The unresolved traumatic experience begins to haunt the traumatized person in the form of nightmares, re-enactments, or flashbacks, all of which are unconscious reactions. Furthermore, these symptoms are exacerbated by repetition: the survivor is “repeatedly” brought back to “the situation of [the] situation” in their dreams. In such instances, the victims go back with their memories to moments when they wish the events had never happened or that they had not survived. Trauma is defined as “painful remembering as deferred action that constitutes trauma” (Visser 273). Dalia’s constant flashbacks are a testimony to a series of traumatic events caused by the Israeli occupation of trauma.

Hit by an unending series of traumatic incidents Dalia is incapable of making sense of what happened. When a traumatic event occurs” the natural reaction is to mourn the event to work through the trauma and return to a level of psychological coherence; this can be described as the ‘normal’ course of mourning, but Dalia fails to mourn her trauma (Volkan 110). The obsession with the traumatic loss leads the individual, or group, to turn away from the present towards their pre-traumatic past and leave them unable to live a psychologically healthy life (Volkan 47). Dalia is unable to follow the course of mourning and therefore not able to work through her trauma and achieve psychological coherence.

AMAL’S TRAUMA

The traumatic effects of occupation and war spare no one in the camp. Amal is another character who is suffering from multiples traumatic incidents from her childhood through her adult life. The first traumatic event in Amal’s life goes back to her childhood when she is only twelve years old and the Six-Day war (El-Naksa) takes place. Amal and her friend Huda are asked by Dalia to take refuge in an underground kitchen hole to escape the Israeli bombings. A long time passes by, Amal’s mother returns and hands them a baby. They can hear “the expulsion and the panic above”, (Abulhawa 68). But both of them are too scared to “remove the tiled cover or move at all”. Days pass by and Dalia doesn’t return. They remain in “the hole for what seemed like an eternity of ghostly quiet” Amal says: the baby was inconsolable at the time. Huda and I joined her, the two of us sobbing in terror with the child. The baby screamed until she could cry no more (Abulhawa 69). Suddenly a loud explosion blew off the tile cover. Suddenly there was light and were covered with dust and debris. My ear rang with a blast. I was screaming and

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crying, but I could not hear myself...my tears landed on her face, streaking the filth on her cheek. Her abdomen was a gaping hole cradling a small piece of shrapnel. The whole world squeezed itself into my heartbeat as I took the bloodied metal in my hand. So small and light, how could it have cut her open like that? How could it have taken a life with such ease? (Abulhawa 69).

Amal and Huda are both devastated by the experience of war. The traumatic event—in this case, the six-day war—is “experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness” (Caruth 4). Such an event Caruth believes “overwhelms consciousness’ ability to capture it in its entirety, the event circumvents the mental apparatus’ cortical layer without being “registered” in the victim’s consciousness (Caruth 4). They can’t comprehend the gravity of what has happened so they remain silent. Amal narrates: to remain silent was to accommodate the possibility that it all was merely a nightmare (Abulhawa 75).

Abulhawa shows the firm grip of trauma on Amal’s life through the use of flashbacks. Flashbacks keep the terrible memories alive in the traumatized individual’s mind, and they are an indicator that the traumatized individual is still suffering from the traumatic experience that caused it in the first place. Flashbacks and nightmares are all indicators of repressed trauma. Due to the brain’s failure to integrate traumatic memories, the individual experiences psychological distress including “flashbacks and nightmares [and] altered states of consciousness in which the trauma is relived” (Van Der Kolk 11). During Amal’s life in America where she wants to escape the past, the time that she spent in the camp, but every incident revives memories of the past. She says: “I wanted to be an American. I wanted to pack away my baggage of past and tragedy and try on Amy for size” (Abulhawa 186). She refers to her traumatic past as “the abyss separating me [her] from my [her] surrounding” (Abulhawa 174). She past keeps raising its ugly head in her life and one such event is the sewage incident:

During the sewage incident that gave our college house its nickname, the commotion provoked memories of Jenin, where the open sewers sometimes overflowed and we would scramble, gathering old clothes and towels to plug the joints of our dwellings. Vile as the experience and subsequent cleanup were, Huda and I could not contain our

excitement and anticipation at being allowed to sleep on the roof to escape the foul odour... We were naively full of dreams and hope then, blessedly unaware that we were the world’s rubbish, left to tread in its misery and excrement (174). These memories are a clear sign of unresolved trauma that creeps on 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). She cannot control these harrowing flashes of memory, which spoil her new life in the United States even as they blur her native past and present (Al Soud 49).

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). She cannot control these harrowing flashes of memory, which spoil her new life in the United States even as they blur her native past and present (Al Soud 49).

“I walked outside, freshly fallen leaves crackling under the weight of my steps. I overpowered my tears with a tight clench of my jaw (same expression as her mother), I was afraid to cry, lest I feel a storm inside my brother. Whatever you feel keep it inside. Oh, Dalia, Mother! I understand. The tragedy is so huge in its magnitude that she is incapable of showing any reaction. The emotional numbness is the only reaction as she tries to remember her mother’s words who asked her to be strong and not show any emotion. Following the killing of her husband, Majid, by the Israeli forces, Amal loses touch with life as well as her daughter, Sara who is born after the incident. She is grappling with the feelings of “self-punishment, of contrition and apology for living” (Abulawa 229). She feels guilty that she is alive while her loving husband is dead. Nothing can pull her out of the pit of suffering and hopelessness, not even the birth of her daughter. She says:

I kept my distance, going only through the mechanics of caring for a newborn. This fragile infant had forced upon me the will to live, and I resented her for that, for all I really wanted then was to die. (Abulhawa 229). She feels guilty and wants to punish herself for surviving.

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According to Caruth, this sense of guilt exemplifies how “survival itself...can be a crisis” (9). As a survivor of trauma, he is overridden with guilt, which in trauma literature is described as “the syndrome of the survivor of extreme situations” These feelings of guilt and shame drive her toward a life where she has been deliberately deprived of the pleasures of life.

Emotional detachment is another symptom of a traumatized victim. According to Mayra Mendez, Emotional detachment also known as “Emotional blunting is the mental and emotional process of shutting out feelings and may be experienced as deficits of emotional responses or reactivity” (Lindberg).

It can also refer to a situation in which the traumatized person shows the difficulty in creating and maintaining a bond with people or family members. Amal’s emotional detachment is nowhere more evident than her relationship or lack thereof with her daughter, Sara. She finds it difficult to express her emotions or be affectionate toward her daughter, a trait that she inherited from her mother. Years after her mother is dead, still, the words of her stoic mother ring in her ear telling her: “Whatever you feel, keep it inside. Be strong like I’ve taught you to be, no matter what happens” (228). She replicates her mother’s emotional numbness as a coping mechanism in her own life. She avoided her daughter, trying to douse that burning love, that dancing tenderness with its spangled promises” (Abulhawa 254).

The fact that Abulhawa’s characters are all caught in a chain of traumas is nothing but an indicator of the ongoing nature of Palestinian historical and cultural trauma *al-Nakba*. Palestinian’s trauma is unique because is still going on. So to use the term PTSD in the context of Palestine would be an inaccurate characterization of the ongoing nature of their trauma because *al-Nakba* is neither ‘past’, nor post’. The obsession with the traumatic loss leads the individual, or group, to turn away from the present towards their pre-traumatic past and leave them unable to live a psychologically healthy life (Freud 243). Therefore, it is fair to say that the best solution to overcome this ongoing trauma is to address the root of the problem which is the ongoing Israeli occupation and its devastating impacts on the lives of the Palestinian refugees.

Conclusion

The novel combines painful stories to convey the magnitude of the *al-Nakba* and the events that followed, which have plagued the Palestinians for years. War, loss of loved ones, displacement, loss of the land and identity, all bring back memories of a life tinted with pain and suffering. Abulhawa’s novel highlights the necessity of mourning and reconstruction in the resolution of traumatic life events. Failure to complete the normal process of grieving perpetuates the suffering of the victims, and this suffering not only impacts the personal lives of the characters but it will also influence the mental health of their children and other family members. The *al-Nakba* might have been a single incident but its impacts are still reverberating across different generations of Palestinians even after seven decades.

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